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|  Brent | Corporate Parenting Committee 3 rd February 2021 |
| | Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People |
| Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 3: 1st October to 31st December 2020 | |

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| Wards Affected: | All |
| Key or Non-Key Decision: | N/A |
| Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act) | Open |
| No. of Appendices: | N/A |
| Background Papers: | N/A |
| Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details) | Onder Beter, Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency Nigel Chapman Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes |

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 October – 31st December 2020.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

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

3.0 Background

3.1 Service Priorities

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

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

3.2 Staffing Arrangements

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

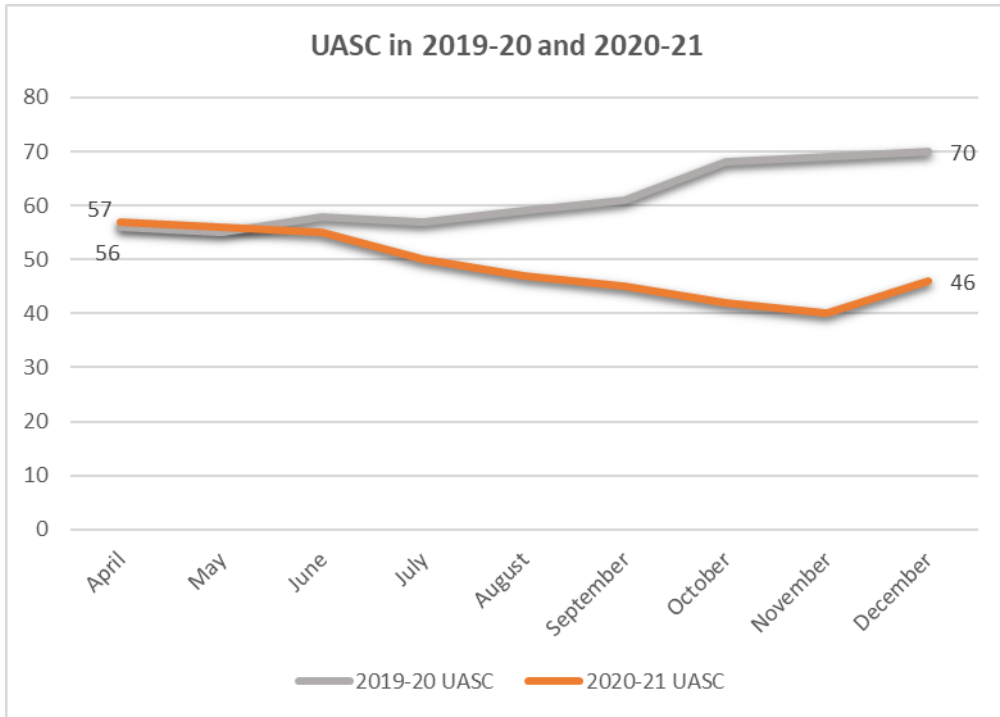
4.0 Placement Activity

- 4.1** The number of looked after children has been relatively stable compared to the previous quarter. The total number of looked after children as at 31st December 2020 was 296, which is a decrease by 2 children from Q2 2020-2021 (298 children) and a decrease of 9 children from the same period in 2019 (305 children).

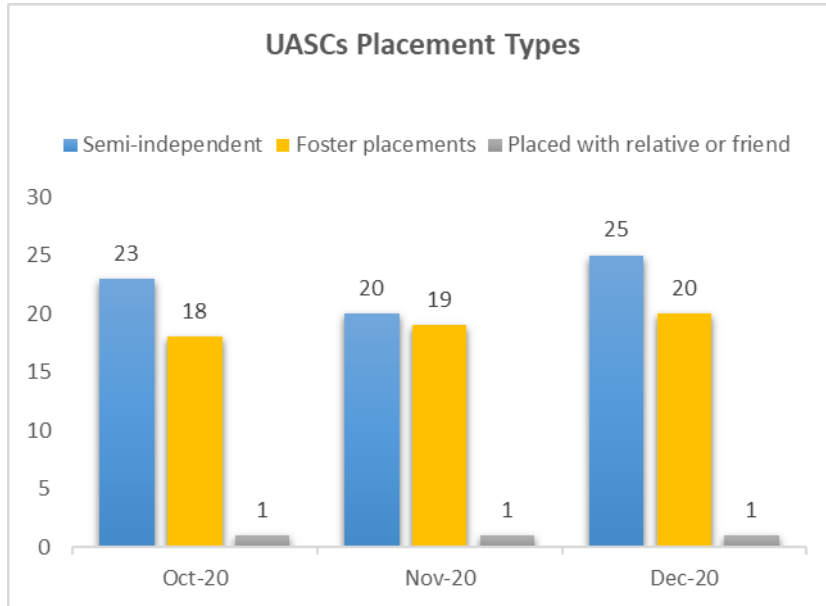
- 4.2** The corporate performance targets for 2020/2021 are as below:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 20.6% (61 children), a decrease by 2.9% from the previous quarter Q2 of 2020-2021, 23.5% (70 children).
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 13.5% (40 children), a decrease by 0.6% from Q2 of 2020-2021 (14.1%, 42 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 31st December 2020 was 27.7% (82 children); an increase by 1.2% from Q2 of 2020-2021 (26.5%, 79 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 31st December 2020 was 61.8% (183 children), a decrease by 2.3% Q2 of 2020-2021 (191 children, 64.1%). This was primarily related to older teenagers becoming looked after in this reporting period and the challenges in finding foster placements for this cohort of young people, related to a regional placement sufficiency issue.
- There were 57 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 31st December 2020, which represents 19.3% of all looked after children. This is an increase of 2.5% at the end of Q2, 2020-2021 (16.8%, 50 children). This is related to the age profile of children becoming looked after as explained in the above bullet point.

4.3 As of 31st December 2020, there were 46 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), 1 more than at the end of Q2 of 2020-2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a nationwide reduction in the number of UASC presenting for assistance from local authorities. Additionally, Brent had 16 referrals from adult asylum seekers, placed in one of the local hotels in Brent by the Home Office, who claimed to be unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Social Work Teams have been involved in undertaking age assessments and associated legal procedures i.e. judicial review proceedings.



4.4 The majority of UASC are placed in semi-independent accommodation (25, 2 more than at the end of Q2, 2020-21 and 25 are in foster placements.



5.0 Recruitment and Assessment

5.1 Brent's Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) has continued to focus 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

fostering information evening. On the contrary, there has been a slight increase in the number of people expressing an interest to foster.

- 5.2** All marketing activity during this period has been carried out online through the Brent Council website, the Brent Council magazine, the fostering newsletter, and social media, and offline via a local radio station. Interested parties made enquiries by phone or online and the team carried out initial visits and assessments virtually, via 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, post-pandemic.
- 5.3** In addition to online recruitment activities, a media partnership with 'The Beat London Radio', a local radio station based in Harlesden, was signed. As a result, two representatives from the fostering team and a foster carer were invited to attend a live radio show in December 2020, focused on fostering. A foster carer for Brent of five years, was the speaker, and had an in-depth conversation about fostering with the presenter of the show. In addition to the live show, as part of this agreement, Brent benefits from eight 'live reads' during four radio shows held between 20th December 2020 and 31st January 2021. Live reads are advertorials on fostering, devised by Brent's MRO, that the show presenter reads throughout the show to capture the attention of the audience, to raise awareness about fostering and to encourage people to apply to become foster carers.
- 5.4** During this period a new type of recruitment event was trialled – an online fostering coffee morning. It took place on 1st October 2020 on Zoom in place of the usual evening information session. 14 people booked to attend the event and five people attended on the day. The number of participants was smaller compared to an evening fostering information evening, possibly because the event took place in the morning when people are busier. As such, this will be an additional event in future, to complement the information evenings rather than substitute for them.
- 5.5** 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 has reached 2,600, compared to the previous reporting period when there were recorded 2,140 recipients. The focus has also been on creating informative blog articles to populate media channels (with the aim of Brent Fostering being at the top of Google searches for the word 'fostering') and to educate potential applicants on certain aspects of fostering in order to inspire and empower them to apply for fostering. The content was written in collaboration

with a freelance qualified social worker as part of a guest blogging arrangement. The topics included 'how to make an informed decision'; 'why and how to practice emotional intelligence, 'how to manage expectations to lead a more fulfilling life' and 'recognising strength, courage and resilience in yourself and in others'. These are not topics strictly related to fostering, however they are aimed at educating people about care and wellbeing, which are core topics in foster care and of particular relevance at challenging times, such as the present. The content produced has generated over 50% of the total traffic to the fostering pages in the reporting period.

- 5.6** 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 organic posts and by sharing information about fostering in small community groups. The MRO has continued to develop the service's Instagram presence, which resulted in an increase in the number of followers; Brent's Fostering page is currently counting 113 followers, up from 84 in June 2020.
- 5.7** The marketing activity produced 35 information evening bookings (for the November and December sessions only; the October event was replaced by the coffee morning). These resulted in 25 enquiries and 4 initial visits taking place during the reporting period.
- 5.8** Of the 4 initial visits undertaken:
- 1 resulted in the applicant being recommended for stage 1 of the assessment process, but subsequently withdrew due to the ill health of a family member;
 - 3 ended in a negative outcome due to not being suitable – 1 for personal reasons and the other 2 lacking suitable accommodation.
- 5.9** 1 applicant was fast tracked from an Independent Fostering Agency to stage 2, as they had a Brent child already in placement and wished to transfer to Brent, believing that this would offer her more support.
- 5.10** Of the 7 assessments reported in the last reporting period as being in stage 1:
- 4 assessments have progressed to stage 2, 2 of which are due to be presented to the fostering panel in February 2021 and the other 2 in March 2021;
 - 2 assessments ceased in stage 1 – 1 due to a lack of English language ability and the other due to a lack of engagement with the assessment; and
 - 1 remains in stage 1.
- 5.11** Of the 2 assessments reported as being in stage 2 in the last quarter, 1 was recommended for approved at panel in November 2020 and the other remains in stage 2 but is on hold due to the family being affected by Covid-19.

5.12 In this reporting period there are 7 assessments underway:

- 1 assessment remains in stage 1 due to changes in their personal circumstances that require further exploration;
- 6 assessments are in stage 2.

6.0 Fostering Panel

6.1 Brent 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. With experience, panels now run more smoothly and do not take longer than face-to-face panels any more, as was previously reported.

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 October – 31st December 2020, 4 panels were held with 17 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:

- 1 new fostering household was recommended for approval;
- 1 new 'family and friends' fostering household was recommended for approval;
- 7 fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;
- 3 'family and friends' fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;

- the approval of 1 fostering household was terminated due to standards of care concerns;
- 1 assessment was ended in stage 2;
- 3 fostering households resigned from their fostering role. 2 of these cited a natural end to their fostering career (after 13 and 28 years respectively). The third resigned following a Standards of Care investigation.

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

7.0 Training and Support for Foster Carers

7.1 The Learning and Development Programme

The Quality Assurance Learning Officer, who arranges training for foster carers, reports that only one face-to-face training session was offered to carers during this period due to adhering to safe Covid-19 working practices. This was “First Aid”, as it was felt it could be offered safely via social distancing but would be less effective as a virtual session.

7.1.1 Eight courses were offered virtually during the period under review using Zoom:

- Professional Boundaries
- Digital Safety
- Advanced Safeguarding
- Safer Caring
- Health and Safety for Social Workers
- Health and Safety for foster Carers
- First Aid
- Managing Challenging Behaviour
- Equality, and Diversity

7.1.2 The feedback in relation to these courses was extremely positive:

“All of the [Advanced Safeguarding and Safer Caring Training] course will help to improve and give me a better understanding about how to protect the children in my care. The training provided useful information also about legal barriers I was previously unaware of having lived in the Philippines until recently.”

“I think the [Digital Safety] trainings will help me to improve my skills and knowledge in internet based platforms.”

“The [Managing Challenging Behaviour] course has equipped me with the understanding of how managing behaviour relates to child development i.e. how old a child is when they empathise.”

7.1.3 All carers additionally have access to an online training package provided by an external provider, AC Education. The training courses offered range in topics from ‘Positive parenting skills’ to therapeutic courses such as ‘Play Therapy’ 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 and sign up has increased.

7.1.4 Supervising social workers continue to emphasise the importance of attending training to foster carers in their visits. The Quality Assurance Learning Officer regularly advertises the training brochure of courses on offer via email, in the fostering newsletter, and at foster carer support groups.

7.1.5 Uptake regarding the online training has been positive. As such, Brent have agreed to an additional 150 places providing access to online courses under a new agreement with AC Education from September 2020. Carers have access to the same courses, but can now complete up to four per person instead of two, as was the case previously.

7.1.6 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.

7.1.7 During the current lockdown period foster carers are being consistently reminded and encouraged to ensure the children in their care physically attend school. They are receiving support from their supervising social worker and the Virtual School for LAC to achieve this.

7.2 Support from supervising social workers

7.2.1 Alongside recruitment, 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 according to a survey conducted by St. Christopher’s Fellowship, as noted in point **9.1** below. 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 health conditions. Despite this, they have continued to support the children and young people in their care by agreeing to take additional placements, sometimes at very short notice, despite multiple bereavements and the increased risk of introducing more people to their households. The support offered to the carers has therefore never been more crucial or appreciated. The compliments continue towards the Supervising social workers, Team manager and MRO in keeping spirits high and reassurance concerning Covid-19.

“During this very difficult time, I am really grateful for the work undertaken by members of the fostering team and their managers. It has been invaluable and reassuring.”

S, currently fostering five children.

“Without the support and knowhow of the MRO, we would not be able to manage the technical side of fostering in Brent, for example training and group sessions, using different platforms... It helps us stay connected and strong as we cannot see each other in person.”

A group of foster carers at December’s support group

7.2.2 The impact of fostering on the birth children of foster carers has long been appreciated by Brent’s fostering teams. The Fostering Network launched a national initiative called 'Sons and Daughters of Foster Carers Month' which took place in October 2020. The MRO carried out a variety of activities as part of this initiative: certificates of appreciation and digital gift vouchers were sent to the children of Brent foster carers. The recipients said that they appreciated the fact that their contribution to fostering was valued and acknowledged. The parents of the children were impressed by this initiative as well, and the feedback was positive from both the foster carers and their sons and daughters. We are looking forward to creative ways to support this initiative next year.

7.2.3 Apart from regular online calls, emails and mobile text messaging have been two main communication channels to keep foster carers engaged and informed. 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 Brent schools remaining open for vulnerable children, and support with home schooling from the Virtual School. All email messages are followed up by a 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.

- 7.2.4** Brent fostering is also constantly rewarding its foster carers whenever they are a guest speaker at information evenings, present at the Skills to Foster training before fostering applicants, or take part in other recruitment activities. Foster carers have been very appreciative of this and as a result they have engaged more and have become more proactive in supporting the service needs. Those carers who have felt able to volunteer have shared their experience at support groups, thus encouraging others to do the same.
- 7.2.5** During the reporting period, the MRO carried out an exercise with a focus group, including: foster children and their foster carers; Care in Action; and Junior Care in Action members, to get feedback on the proposed new fostering guides for children and young people. As part of this exercise, the MRO received helpful constructive feedback and the fostering guides were amended according to their input.
- 7.2.6** In December 2020, all foster carers switched from using the Brent carer emails to SharePoint, which is a secure information-sharing platform. Foster carers have been offered three training sessions during October and November 2020 to prepare them for using the platform starting 1st December. The feedback from the foster carers has been varied, with some users enjoying the platform while others need more time to adjust to it. The service will monitor how SharePoint is received and make changes and improvements accordingly. The MRO is always on hand to offer support where needed.
- 7.2.7** 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 on a wealth of topics ranging from 'current digital transformations within the department', to 'the annual foster carers' celebration'. Foster carers lead 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 unknown to them.
- 7.2.8** The topic of the virtual support meeting held in October focused on finalising plans for the end of year celebration. The foster carers welcomed the idea of having their achievements celebrated, however they also expressed their concern about attending the event in person due to Covid-19. Changes in government guidance in relation to the Tier system also prevented a face-to-face event. A virtual get-together was considered, but carers consistently felt

that with coping with the additional emotional requirements of Covid-safe practice, a simple thank you message from senior managers and a small financial 'thank you' would suffice. As such, each fostering household received a £50 digital gift voucher and a certificate was prepared to go alongside this. In order to send a message of appreciation, videos are being recorded by the Lead Member, the Strategic Director of Children and Young People, and the Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, to be shared in January 2021, thus starting the New Year on a positive note.

7.2.9 At the support group in November 2020, participants were given a platform where they could find support in the time of Covid-19. Attendees at the event were happy to see one another and share advice and information regarding aspects such as Shared Platform, training, Staying Put, filing Income Tax, and looking after the children's and their own health and wellbeing. Like many other sessions, this one as very well attended and participants felt that a wealth of important information was shared.

7.2.10 The support group in December 2020 was another meeting the participants found invaluable. Several topics were discussed and issues were raised with the facilitating social workers to take to management. The main topics of discussion included the fact that some foster carers do not have a smart personal device, which is a hindrance when it comes to viewing email, opening documents or attending video meetings. This led on to a discussion about children, how they use the internet, and promoting digital safety. Finally, a lengthy conversation was had about financial matters, including: opening bank accounts for children and young people in care, and whether a council tax discount was being considered for foster carers as is in existence in other local authorities. At the same event, the service also launched a call for volunteers to support recruitment and to talk at the Skills to Foster training sessions in 2021.

8.0 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

8.1 A total of 19 foster carer annual review meetings were conducted during the period. All reviews were held within timescales.

8.2 During this quarter, there were no complaints made by or against any Brent foster carers.

9.0 New Developments

9.1 Update on Joint Fostering Feasibility Project

The Department for Education (DfE) did not allocate further funding for this project to move to the next stage. As such, the focus remains on developing

closer working arrangements with interested neighbouring local authorities to improve placement stability and choice to reduce the likelihood of 11 – 15 year olds with challenging behaviour from being placed in residential care. To this end, the Heads of Service in Brent and Ealing have remained in communication. Hounslow has confirmed they will not continue with further collaborative discussions. However, senior Leaders in Harrow have expressed an interest in joining the project. Further updates will be provided to the Committee as this progresses.

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