	<p align="center">Corporate Parenting Committee 28 April 2021</p>
	<p align="center">Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People</p>
<p>Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 4: 1st January to 31st March 2021</p>	

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)	<p>Onder Beter, Onder.Beter@brent.gov.uk Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency</p> <p>Nigel Chapman Nigel.Chapman@brent.gov.uk Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes</p>

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 January – 31st March 2021.

2. 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. 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

This remains the same as reported in the previous update to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

4. Placement Activity

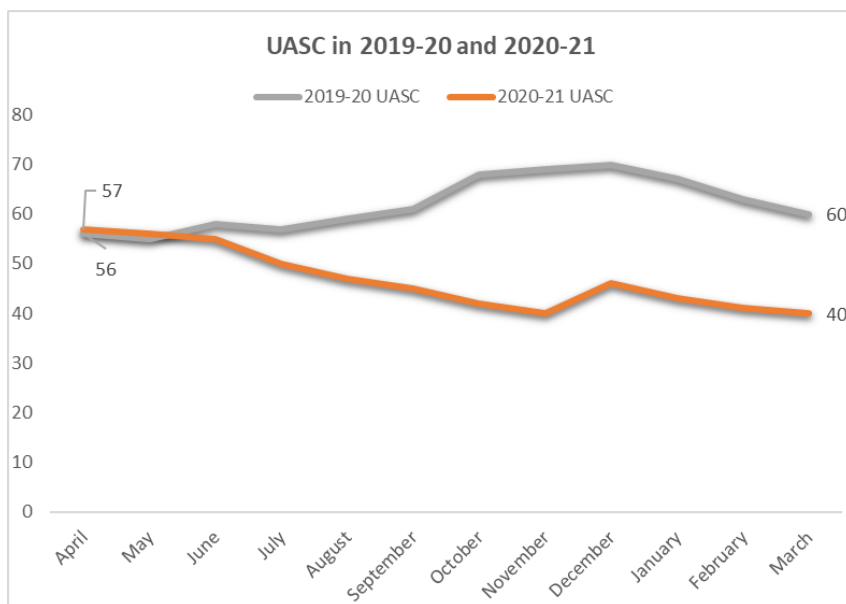
4.1. The total number of looked after children as at 31st March 2021 was 285, which is a decrease by 11 children from Q3, 2020-2021 (296 children) and a decrease of 9 children from the same period in 2020 (294 children).

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

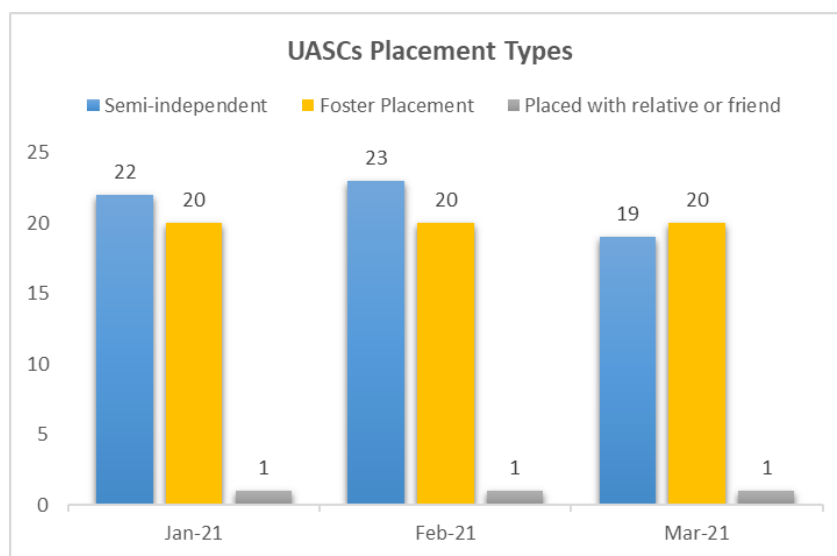
- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 31st March 2021 was 20.4% (58 children), a decrease by 0.2% from the previous quarter Q3 of 2020-2021, 20.6% (61 children).
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 31st March 2021 was 13.3% (38 children), a decrease by 0.2% from Q3 of 2020-2021 (13.5%, 40 children).

- Percentage of looked after children placed in independent fostering agencies – annual target 25% - the actual percentage as of 31st March 2021 was 30.2% (86 children); an increase by 2.5% from Q3 of 2020-2021 (27.7%, 82 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 31st March 2021 was 63.9% (182 children), an increase by 2.1% Q3 of 2020-2021(183 children, 61.8%).
- There were 41 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children’s Home Regulations) as at 31st March 2021, which represents 14.4% of all looked after children. This is a drop of 4.9% from the end of Q3, 2020-2021 (19.3%, 57 children)

4.3. As of 31st March 2021, there were 40 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), 6 fewer than at the end of Q3 2020-2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a nationwide reduction in the number of UASC presenting for assistance from local authorities.



4.4. The number of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation is 19, 6 fewer than at the end of Q3, 2020-21, none are placed in residential children’s homes and there are the same number of UASC placed in foster placements as at Q3 (20 UASCs).



5. Recruitment and Assessment

- 5.1. Marketing and recruitment activities continues to take place successfully online. The efforts of Brent's Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) have been generating enquiries and information evening sign-ups every month. During every month of the reporting period, a constant number of approximately 15 people signed up to attend each event, with participants varying between five and 10 for each session.
- 5.2. All marketing activity during this period has been carried out online through the Brent Council website, the Brent Council e-newsletter, the fostering newsletter, and social media, and offline via articles in local publications. 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 for prospective carers was '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. The consistent positive feedback has led to plans for these virtual events to continue post-pandemic.
- 5.3. In addition to online recruitment activities, Brent Fostering has appeared in The Brent Magazine and the Brent and Kilburn Times. The story about a baby's transition to adoption from fostering mid-lockdown was featured in the Brent magazine, while Brent and Kilburn Times wrote an article about the need for foster carers after noticing a press release published by the MRO regarding a drop in the number of fostering enquiries nationwide and a spike in referrals. The two articles rose the profile of Brent Fostering and provided free media coverage for the service. These efforts generated at least two direct enquiries, which cited 'Advert in newspaper/magazine' as their source.
- 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 has increased

to 3,400 from 2,600 during the previous reporting period. With a very low unsubscribe rate of around five users per email, we can confirm that subscribers are finding the information useful. Each of the newsletters sent out during the reporting period has recorded an open rate of around 20% and a click-through rate of between 8% and 9%. In March, a new information campaign was launched to educate readers on aspects of fostering such as the application and assessment, the type of service to choose, and the relation with the supervising social workers. So far, the two emails sent in the last two weeks of March recorded unexpected success.

- 5.5. More content is constantly being created to satisfy the need of the audience for useful fostering-related information that will eventually convert readers into fostering applicants. A new article about the impact of fostering on carers' lives was created, which recorded 53 views since its publishing date on 19 March.
- 5.6. The MRO also repurposed the content generated by our carers during interviews and fostering events and published it anonymously and with the permission of the speakers on other channels like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
- 5.7. 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 Facebook page is counting 260 followers and the Instagram account 131 followers, up from 113 in December 2020. While social media is rarely generating direct enquiries, it is providing visibility for the service and recommendations from members of the public to friends and family who meet the fostering requirements to apply for fostering. During the last quarter, five enquiries had 'Friends/family' as their source and two had 'Internet search'.
- 5.8. This marketing activity has produced 32 enquiries, up from 22 in the same period last year, and 38 information evening bookings, three more compared to the previous period. 22 people attended the information evenings, up by eight during the previous quarter. This led to 5 initial visits taking place during the reporting period, one more than in the previous three months.
- 5.9. Of the 5 initial visits undertaken:
 - 3 resulted in the applicant being recommended for stage 1 of the assessment process, with 1 subsequent withdrawal for personal reasons.
 - 2 ended in a negative outcome due to not being suitable.
- 5.10. The 1 applicant identified in last quarter's report who is transferring from an Independent Fostering Agency remains in stage 2 and their application will be presented to Brent's Fostering Panel in the first quarter of this reporting year.

- 5.11. The assessment reported in the last reporting period as being in stage 1, remains in stage 1. The applicant requested to be on hold due to changes in their personal circumstances that required further exploration. The assessment has recently resumed.
- 5.12. Of the 6 assessments reported as being in stage 2 in the last quarter, 1 was recommended for approval at panel on 26th March 2021 and 1 was recommended for approval at panel on 12th March 2021. The other 4 remain in stage 2. Of these, 2 assessments are currently on hold due to applicants being affected by Covid-19.
- 5.13. In this reporting period overall there are 7 assessments in process:
- 3 assessment in stage 1; and
 - 4 assessments are in stage 2.

6. Fostering Panel

- 6.1. The LACPS 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 January – 31st March 2021, 5 panels were held with 20 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:
- 2 new fostering households were recommended for approval;
 - 2 new ‘family and friends’ fostering households were recommended for approval;
 - 12 fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;

- 2 '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; and
- 1 fostering household resigned from their fostering role for Brent and moved to an Independent Fostering Agency. When asked, they declined to explain the reasons for this decision.

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

7. Training and Support for Foster Carers

7.1. The Learning and Development Programme

Brent's learning and development team continue to keep the training offer under review in light of the easing of lockdown restrictions and look forward to offering some face-to-face sessions once it is safe to do so.

7.1.1. 7 courses were offered virtually during the period under review, using Zoom:

- Helping Children Manage Anxiety, the Impact of Trauma and Attachment were delivered in January;
- Traffic Light Tool, (which focuses on managing online safety) and LGBT+ awareness were offered in February; and
- LADO training, Digital Safety and Transitions for Schools were offered in March.

Foster carers' comments about the sessions were generally positive:

"The [Helping Children Manage Anxiety] training gave me an overall overview about anxiety and general ways to deal with it. For me, this was mainly a refreshing exercise. Thank you."

"The course [Impact of Trauma and Attachment] allowed me to look out for signs that something is wrong like behaviour or emotional problems growing up."

"[Traffic Light Tool] taught me to identify the signals of sexualised behaviour and the ways we could address it through the traffic light system."

"Learning about managing allegations against people that work with children is important to know for carers. The Brent LADO training is informative and the course aims were met."

"This training [Digital Safety] made me realise the need to be aware about the benefits of various digital platforms for communication and development, risks

and dangers resulting from wrongful use of them and the need to ensure that they are used for right purposes...I think the training is a bit long for Zoom as it is difficult to look at a screen non-stop for 3 or 4 hours."

- 7.1.2. All carers additionally have access to an online training package provided by an external provider. The training courses offer a range in topics from 'The role of the foster carer' to specialist educational needs courses, such as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Autism. The courses can be accessed at any time of the day, or 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. Currently 60 carers have online accounts, with more being encouraged to sign up as the year progresses.
- 7.1.3. 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.
- 7.1.4. 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. In 2021/22 the team intend to expand the variety of training courses provided 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 (SSW)

- 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 their feedback in Fostering Panel presentations and in their annual reviews 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, at very short notice. The support offered to carers continues to be appreciated. A number of compliments have been received during this period:

"I just wanted to thank the team for all the support they have offered me over the years we have worked together and I extended this to all the SWs I have worked with."

T, foster carer for Brent since 2000, now fostering along with her son since 2019.

"I am happy and proud to consider Brent Social Care as my second home."
M, foster carer for Brent since 1994.

- 7.2.2. To keep foster carers engaged and informed, the fostering service rely 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 continue to 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 Covid vaccines now being available for those aged 50+ in Brent and support with sharing information electronically on a confidential basis. All email messages are followed up by a text message alerts to ensure foster carers are notified whenever a new email reaches their inbox.
- 7.2.3. In December 2020, all foster carers switched from using the Brent carer emails to SharePoint, which is a secure information-sharing platform. Foster carers were 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.
- 7.2.4. 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 range of topics from current digital transformation within the department, to issues about staying put arrangements, entitlements for foster carers, Covid-19 lockdown, difficulties with schooling and home learning, Covid-19 vaccinations and children's savings. 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 unfamiliar to them.
- 7.2.5. The topic of the virtual support meeting held in January 2021 focused on E-vouchers that had been provided to carers as a thank you from the department and feedback on Christmas arrangements. Foster carers were informed that during the lock down their SSWs would be contacting them weekly on a virtual basis until restrictions were eased. Carers felt reassured by this support offer.

7.2.6. At the support group in February 2021, the Head of Service (HOS), acknowledged the foster carers' hard work and support they provide to the children and young people over the year. The HOS updated foster carers around local Covid-19 cases and conveyed the local authority's concern and support to those who had been directly affected. The foster carers were encouraged to participate in Brent's Covid-19 vaccination programme.

7.2.7. The support group in March included discussion and advice on children's savings, holiday entitlements, respite and staying put arrangements.

8. Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

8.1. A total of 34 foster carer annual review meetings were conducted during the period with 31 taking place. The 3 that did not take place were rescheduled at the request of the foster carer.

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

9. New Developments

9.1. Update on Collaborative Fostering Project

As outlined in previous reports, the Department for Education (DfE) did not allocate any 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 and prevent children from being placed into residential care. Heads of Service in Brent and Ealing have remained in communication and are considering alternative models of joint working and co-operation. Early conversations with equivalent senior leaders in Harrow suggest that they are interested in joining Brent and Ealing in a collaborative arrangement, considering at an initial stage how to enhance the marketing and recruitment elements of each fostering service. Further updates will be provided to the Committee as this progresses.

Report sign off:

GAIL TOLLEY

Strategic Director, Children and Young People