

 <b>Brent</b>	<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b> 20 <sup>th</sup> July 2021
	<b>Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People</b>
<b>Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report:          Quarter 1: 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021</b>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	N/A
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	N/A
<b>Background Papers:</b>	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 1<sup>st</sup> April – 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

## 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. Learning from our Covid-safe practice developed in the past year and constructive feedback from our foster carers, commitment has been given to developing the fostering service in the following priority areas:

- To re-introduce the use of recruitment drives that include an element of direct interface between the fostering teams and prospective foster carers as restrictions around social distancing ease, in line with government guidance
- To enhance the support offer to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers with a mixture of virtual and face-to-face contact in social work and peer support
- To develop the training and development programme for carers to include a permanent, ongoing mix of virtual and face to face courses and seminars
- To consider hybrid working a permanent feature of the fostering panel, with a mix of hearing cases virtually and in person dependent upon the complexity of the issues being considered
- To continue improving 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.

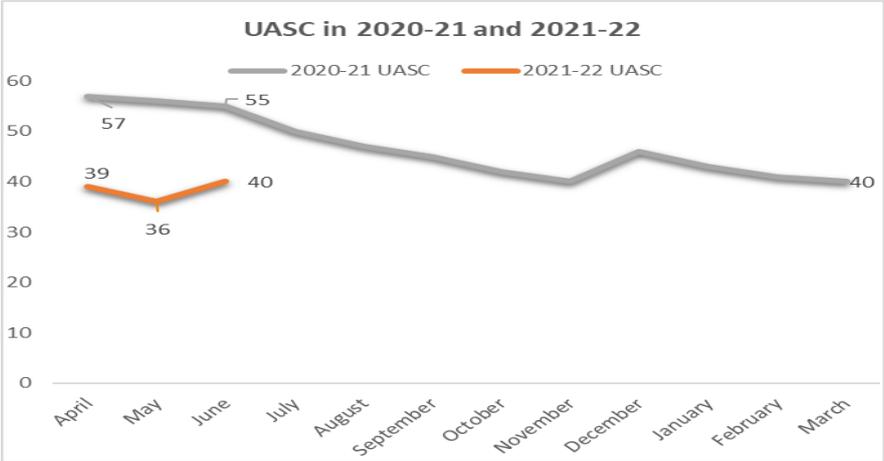
#### **3.2 Staffing Arrangements**

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.

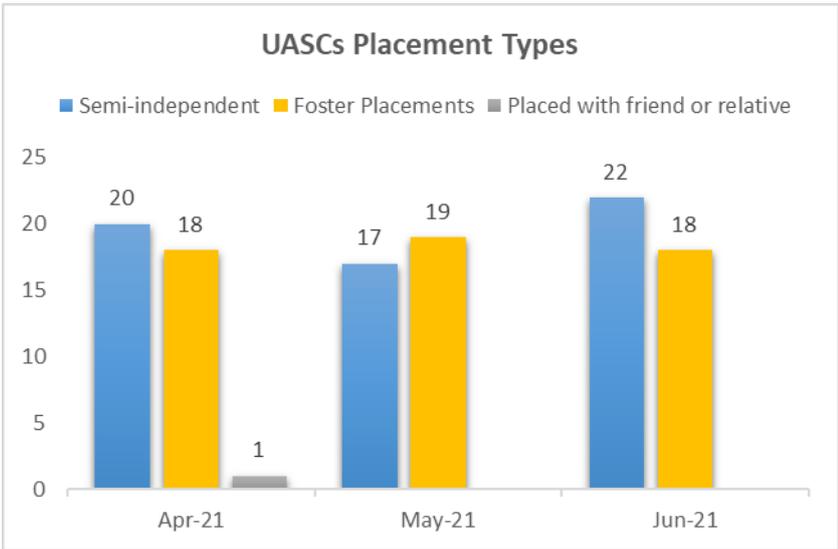
#### **4.0 Placement Activity**

- 4.1 The total number of looked after children as at 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 was 297, which is an increase by 9 children from Q4 of 2020-2021 (288 children) and an increase by 5 children from the same period in 2020 (292 children).
- 4.2 The corporate performance targets for 2020/2021 were mostly retained as similar to the last year's targets as below:
- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 25% - the actual percentage as of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 was 19.9% (59 children), a decrease by 0.6% from the previous quarter Q4 of 2020-2021, 20.5% (59 children).
  - Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 was 13.5% (40 children), an increase by 0.3% Q4 of 2020-2021 (13.2%, 38 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 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 was 31.6% (94 children); an increase by 2.4% from Q4 of 2020-2021 (29.2%, 84 children).
  - Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 was 65% (193 children), an increase by 2.2% from Q4 of 2020-2021(181 children, 62.8%).
  - There were 50 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, which represents 16.8% of all looked after children. This is an increase by 2.6% from the end of Q4, 2020-2021 (14.2%, 41 children).
- 4.3 As of 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, there were 40 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), the same as at the end of Q4 of 2020-2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a nationwide reduction in the number of UASC presenting for assistance from local authorities. However, Brent has been dealing with the impact of the Home Office placing a large number of adult asylum seekers in hotel accommodation in Wembley (two different hotels at the end of June) over the last 12 months. Brent received 21 referrals from the hotel residents with the claim to be under 18. Brent has taken an open-minded approach to deal with these referrals in line with an agreed Pan-London protocol. However, this surge in referrals has placed significant pressure on resources to ensure appropriate and effective assessment and legal liaison work takes place to ensure the best

decisions are made for this group of young people. It is anticipated that numbers of UASC in Brent’s care will increase over the summer period



4.4 The number of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation is 22, 2 more than at the end of Q1, 2020-21. No children are placed in residential children’s homes and the same number of UASC are placed in foster placements as Q1 (18 UASCs).



**5.0 Recruitment and Assessment**

5.1 The efforts of Brent’s Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) continued to take place online during this reporting period. However, there has been a slight decrease in people making enquiries since the increase in spread of the Delta variant of Covid-19 and anxieties around this.

- 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 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 these virtual events to continue post-pandemic.
- 5.3 During the reporting period, the MRO has created more content to go on the website and on social networks. The MRO produced two articles based on discussions with children in care about 'what makes a good foster carer'. One of the articles was shared on the Brent website and on social media and more posts will be scheduled to go out during the summer. The MRO also filmed an interview with a newly approved foster carer about the application and assessment process to be shared online.
- 5.4 The MRO continued to deliver the fostering newsletter to Brent residents who are interested in fostering. Six emails were sent during a period of six weeks educating people on aspects such as: finding the right fostering agency; the relationship between a foster carer and professionals; what being a foster carer entails; and the positive impact of fostering on people's lives and on the lives of local children. The average open rate for these emails was 20%, with an average click-through rate of 3.5% (this is lower compared to other emails but still higher than industry averages). In the current absence of the MRO (maternity leave), the above is currently being managed by supervising social workers whilst we recruit a temporary placement who holds the specialist knowledge essential for this role. The newsletters are being paused whilst recruitment is underway and only essential information shared.
- 5.5 The number of subscribers to the fostering newsletter has reached 3719 sign-ups. There are currently 295 Facebook followers and 272 pages likes. The Instagram page has 147 followers, the Twitter account 236 followers and the YouTube account 19 subscribers. These social media accounts allow for the MRO to share information quickly and keep individuals interested in Brent's fostering events.
- 5.6 Foster Care Fortnight, The Fostering Network's annual campaign to raise the profile of fostering and show how foster care transforms lives, took place 10<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The MRO received quotes and videos from foster carers about 'why they care' about local children, as per the central theme of the campaign. The MRO also produced a press release that went on the website to promote the

campaign. This offered a good opportunity to raise awareness about fostering and look at the motivation people have to foster.

5.7 The marketing activity produced 19 enquiries during this current period, which is a decrease in comparison to the last period but the quality of the enquiries is higher than pre-Covid in that the conversion rate from enquiry to initial visit is higher. 11 people attended the information evening and 6 initial visits took place during this reporting period, which is a slight increase from the previous period.

5.8 Of the 6 initial visits undertaken:

- 1 has yet to return their consent form so cannot proceed to stage 1 as yet;
- 3 resulted in the applicants being progressed to stage 1 of the assessment process; and
- 2 ended in a negative outcome due to not being suitable for health reasons and other wider family factors.

5.9 An applicant, who had previously withdrawn to consider their commitment to fostering has returned and is now being assessed in stage 1.

5.10 Of the 3 assessments reported in the last reporting period as being in stage 1, 2 remain in stage 1 and one has progressed to stage 2.

5.11 Of the 4 assessments reported as being in stage 2 (including those on hold) in the last quarter, one applicant is to be presented to the fostering panel on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2021. The other 3 remain on hold, 2 due to being affected by Covid-19 and 1 due to the applicant needing some support prior to presenting at the panel. This presentation has been rescheduled for September 2021 fostering panel.

5.12 In this reporting period, there are 11 assessments underway. Of these:

- 6 are in stage 1
- 5 are in stage 2

## **6.0 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> April – 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, 5 panels were held with 21 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:

- 6 new ‘family and friends’ fostering households were recommended for approval;
- 9 fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;
- 1 fostering household was found suitable to continue after a serious concerns investigation;
- the approval of 3 ‘family and friends’ were terminated – 2 due to the young person returning home and 1 due to the young person reaching the age of 18; and
- 2 fostering households resigned from their fostering role for Brent – 1 due to health reasons and 1 as they realised they could not fulfil the fostering role.

There were 3 non-kinship foster carers due to be considered by the Fostering Panel in this quarter. However, 2 asked to be put on hold due to COVID-related anxiety and the 3<sup>rd</sup> applicant needed further support before transferring from the IFA to Brent.

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**

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.

7.1.2 Eight courses were offered (all virtual) during the period under review, using Zoom:

- Roles and responsibilities of the professional network and working with birth parents – 9<sup>th</sup> April and 14<sup>th</sup> June
- Safeguarding and safer caring – 13<sup>th</sup> April
- Coercion and financial abuse: the impact on children 22<sup>nd</sup> April
- Domestic abuse – 22<sup>nd</sup> April
- Covid-19: the impact on placements, LAC and families – 4<sup>th</sup> May
- Serious case reviews – 14<sup>th</sup> May
- Emotional resilience – 7<sup>th</sup> June
- First aid – 22<sup>nd</sup> June

Carers comments about the sessions were mainly positive but they have mentioned that they are missing face-to-face interaction with their peers.

Comments on ‘the roles and responsibilities of the professional network and working with birth parents’:

*“Knowing that there are many professionals who can continue the care, development and wellbeing of the child along with you and support us all the way... These topics it was nice to hear (about).”*

Comments on ‘Safeguarding and Safer Caring’:

*“The course helped me to understand the difference between Safeguarding and Child Protection.”*

Comments on ‘Emotional Resilience Training’:

*“It is a good reminder of all the areas one needs to think about when building up resilience in a young person and self-reflection was included.”*

Comments on Covid – 19: the impact on placements, LAC and Families.

*“This training made me realise I wasn’t alone in facing challenges.”*

7.1.3 All carers have access to an online training package provided by an external provider, additional to the core learning and development offer. The online training courses offer a range of topics from ‘*children and domestic abuse*’ to specialist educational needs courses such as ‘*promoting the achievement of looked after children in education (for parents and carers)*’. 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 stayed consistent with carers regularly requesting the online training. Currently 60 carers have accounts with

the commissioned provider, with a view to having more signed up as the year progresses.

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 Despite the Pandemic, Brent continues to meet the statutory duty to commission and facilitate learning events for foster carers. The expectation is that Brent foster carers partake in 4 learning events per year. 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. First Aid Training continues to remain a face-to-face session to allow carers to partake in the CPR exercises and other demonstrations integrated within the course.

## **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 feedback in Fostering Panel presentations and in their annual reviews. The Covid-19 Pandemic has affected the lives of all Brent's foster carers. The support offered to the carers has therefore never been more crucial or appreciated.

7.2.2 To keep foster carers engaged and informed, the fostering service rely on two main communication channels: email and mobile text messaging. Several one-off emails continue to go out every time the service has new important updates to share with the cohort of foster carers.

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 is 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.

7.2.4 The topics of the virtual support meetings in the reporting period covered a range of important issues for carers such as staying put allowances, savings of looked after children, opening bank accounts for UASCs, need to support some foster carers with IT equipment and general queries around support. In

May, a member of staff from the Commissioning and Resources team attended in response to carers concerns in April about payment of fostering allowances and 'Staying Put' allowances (support to foster carers who continue to care for their young person after the age of 18). An Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) attended the support group in June 2021. This was well received by the foster carers in attendance as the IRO spoke about processes pertaining to looked after children reviews and foster carer annual reviews.

## **8.0 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints**

### **8.1 April**

Booked reviews – 14 (3 were for couples)

Took place – 12

1 cancelled due court hearing on 9<sup>th</sup> April

1 rescheduled due to availability

### **May**

Booked reviews – 9 (2 were for couples)

Took place – 8

1 cancelled due to Carer resignation

### **June**

Booked reviews – 12 (4 were couples)

Took place - 11

1 rescheduled due to availability

### **Totals for April 2021 to June 2021:**

Booked reviews – 35 (9 were couples)

Took place – 31

Cancelled/rescheduled - 4

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

## **9.0 New Developments**

### **9.1 Update on Collaborative Fostering Project**

This work continues between Ealing, Harrow and Brent, with Brent leading. Two work streams meet weekly (virtually), with an initial focus on sufficiency and placement stability. These meetings provide an opportunity for workers in marketing and recruitment to come together and share ideas and start working together. As part of the project, a social event to bring foster carers together is being planned for the end of the summer in a Brent park. Further updates will be provided to the Committee as this progresses.

## **Contact Officer**

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**Report sign-off**

*Gail Tolley*

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