



Corporate Parenting Committee

13 October 2021

Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People

Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 2: 1st July to 30th September 2021

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 Onder.beter@brent.gov.uk Nigel Chapman Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes Nigel.chapman@brent.gov.uk

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 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 direct course 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.

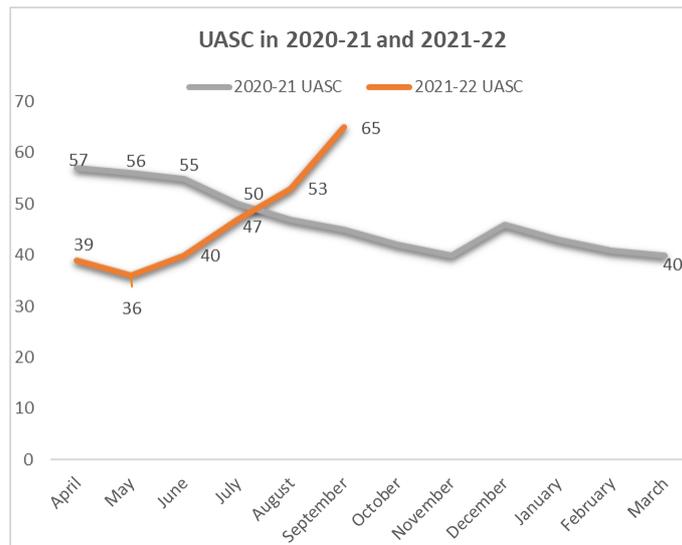
4.0 Placement Activity

4.1 The total number of looked after children as at 30th Sept 2021 was 313, which is an increase by 16 children from Q1 of 2021-2022 (297 children) and an increase by 15 children from the same period in 2020 (298 children).

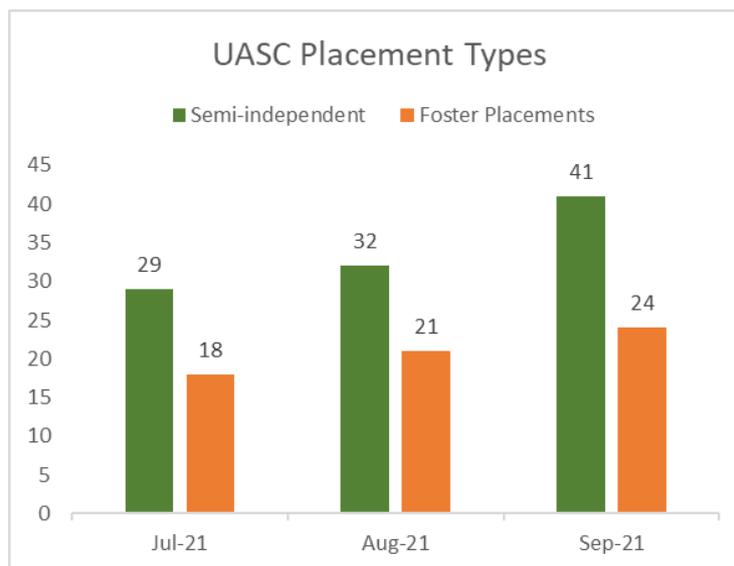
4.2 The corporate performance targets for 2021/2022 are as below:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 30th September 2021 was 17.6% (55 children), a drop by 2.3% from the previous quarter Q1 of 2021/2022, 19.9% (59 children). In this reporting period, more adolescents including unaccompanied asylum seeking children entered care and had to be placed in semi-independent accommodation.
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 30th Sept- 2021 was 11.2% (35 children), a decrease by 2.3% from Q1 of 2021/2022 (13.5%, 40 children).
- Percentage of looked after children placed in independent fostering agencies – annual target 25% - the actual percentage as of 30th Sept-2021 was 32.3% (101 children); an increase by 0.7% from Q1 of 2021/2022 (31.6%, 94 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 30th September 2021 was 61.3% (192 children), a decrease by 3.7% from Q1 of 2021/2022(193 children, 65%). 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 72 looked after children in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 30th September 2021, which represents 23% of all looked after children. This is an increase by 6.2% from the end of Q1, 2021/2022 (16.8%, 50 children). This is again related to an increase in the number of UASC placed in semi-independent provision.

4.3 As of 30th September 2021, there were 65 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), an increase of 25 Unaccompanied Minors from Q1.



4.4 The number of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation is 41, 19 more than at the end of Q1, 2020-22, none in residential children’s home and 6 more UASC placed in foster placements than Q1 (18 UASC).



5.0 Recruitment and Assessment

5.1 Marketing and recruitment activities continue to take place successfully online. Despite a huge success during the previous periods, since the easing of the lockdown rules, we have seen fewer people make enquiries or attend the information evenings. Whilst the sign up rate for the information evening has remained high, fewer people then attended the sessions – a maximum of 3 people attended each one. This is usual for the holiday period but needs more focus now that schools are back as there is usually a pattern of rising in September/October. The monthly fostering information evenings took place

online via Zoom, which attendees reportedly enjoyed, and continue to find more convenient than having to travel to a venue to hear more about fostering.

- 5.2** During this reporting period, all marketing activity has been carried out online through the Brent Council website and managed by the social work team. Interested parties made enquiries by phone or online and the team carried out initial visits and assessments face-to-face and virtually via video calls, ensuring that the experience by prospective carers was for 'business as usual'.
- 5.3** Temporary cover for the position of Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) has been put in place until the substantive MRO returns in January 2022.
- 5.4** Of the 13 enquiries over the period, 3 resulted in initial home visits and have successfully progressed to Stage 1 of the fostering assessment process. 1 applicant has been fast tracked to stage 2, as she had been previously assessed but asked to be on hold for personal reasons. The other 9 applicants were deemed unsuitable to foster at present due to various reasons, including: insufficient space; a lack of flexibility and only wanting to make early enquiries about fostering for the future.
- 5.5** The applicant from an Independent Fostering Agency who was reported in the last quarter as being in stage 2 and on hold, resumed her assessment and was presented to Brent's fostering panel in September 2021. However, the approval was deferred due to a number of questions being raised in the meeting. The case is scheduled to return to panel in November 2021.
- 5.6** Of the 6 assessments reported in the last period as being in stage 1, 4 remain in Stage 1 as there has been a delay in progressing medicals due to Covid19. Of the remaining 2, 1 has progressed to stage 2, and 1 has withdrawn from the assessment process for personal reasons.
- 5.7** Of the 5 assessments reported as being in stage 2 in the last quarter, 1 applicant was approved by the Agency Decision Maker in July, 1 was deferred at panel and 1 assessment has had to come to an end due to a diagnosis of long-term Covid19. The other 2 remain on hold for now; the applicants remain interested in fostering but cannot at the moment commit due to personal reasons.
- 5.8** During this reporting period 13 assessments were in progress, including the 2 previously identified as being on hold. Of these:
- 8 are in Stage 1; and
 - 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 3rd April 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there are plans to reinstate face-to-face panels as of 1st October 2021 in line with other council meetings given the roll out of the vaccine programme.

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 2021, 4 panels were held with 21 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:

- 2 new 'family and friends' fostering households were recommended for approval;
- The approval of one potential new foster carer was deferred due to questions being raised as described above;
- 1 new fostering household was recommended for approval;
- 8 fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;
- 3 'family and friends' fostering households were found suitable to continue to foster following review;
- 1 young person was matched on a long-term basis with his foster carer;
- The approval of 3 'family and friends' households were terminated – 1 due to the young person returning home, 1 due to the young person reaching the age of 18, and 1 due to an Special Guardianship Order being granted; and
- 2 fostering households resigned from their fostering role for Brent – 1 due to health reasons and 1 as they realised they would prefer to adopt than foster.

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 for foster carers and special guardians under review given the removal of lockdown restrictions and look forward to offering some face-to-face sessions, however there are no immediate plans to do so. First Aid Training is the only course that has been offered in person to carers since April 2020. This will be reviewed in quarter 3.

7.1.1 8 courses were offered (all virtual) during the period under review, using Zoom, including:

- 5th July – sudden unexpected death of infants – for carers working with babies (SUDI)
- 7th July – the role of the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer)
- 28th September – oral health

Carers' comments about the sessions were mainly positive but they continue to express that they are missing face-to-face interaction with their peers:

"It was good knowing how to lay the infant to sleep and to be careful not to leave the cot unsupervised."

Sudden unexpected death of infants – SUDI.

"Trainer was very confident in her knowledge as she is currently practising in this area of work so was able to give examples etc."

Brent LADO Training

7.1.2 All carers additionally have access to an online training package provided by an external provider, AC Education. The training courses offer a range of topics from *Fostering Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children* to specialist educational needs courses such as *Understanding Dyslexia and Dyspraxia*. 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 AC Education, with a view to having more signed up as the year progresses.

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. The Covid-19 Pandemic affected the lives of all Brent foster carers; however, they have expressed their appreciation for the support they received.

7.2.2 To keep foster carers engaged and informed in writing, the fostering service use emails and mobile text messaging. Additionally, SSWs have maintained this flow of information via their supervisory visits and in their email and telephone communications. The next Newsletter is due to be sent out mid-October by the interim MRO.

7.2.3 The monthly foster carers' support group continues to be facilitated virtually as foster carers have expressed that it is their preferred option. 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 – 12noon) 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 finance to the reviewing process.

7.2.4 The topic of the virtual support groups held in July and September focused on equipment, staffing, consideration for the foster carers' ball, training, and visits. No foster carers' support group meeting takes place in August as it is a holiday period. The July Support group meeting was attended by the Fostering Service Manager, and the feedback received from foster carers indicated that they appreciated the Service Manager's attendance and contribution at the meeting.

7.3 Support for kinship carers

7.3.1 Support for people who foster as a result of being a family member or family friend of a looked after child are entitled to the same support as Brent's unrelated foster carers and receive the same financial, social work and developmental support from an allocated SSW and Brent's training programme.

7.3.2 Support for carers who offer kinship care for children and young people subject to a Special Guardianship Order receive support from both the local authority and Brent's Regional Adoption Agency, *Adopt London West*. Support requiring an element of finance is requested via Brent's Commissioning and Resource

Team via a financial assessment of need. Special Guardians are also entitled to access the training programme available to foster carers. All other support is offered to special guardians via *Adopt London West*. This includes: advice, guidance, mediation and advocacy.

7.3.3 There is a support group available to special guardians via *Adopt London West*, which is co-facilitated by one of Brent's special guardians on a voluntary basis and a social worker from within the service.

7.3.4 The Head of Service for Adopt London West, Brent's Agency Advisor for Fostering and Adoption and the special guardian who facilitates the support group met on 30.09.21 to develop the support offer for special guardians. Discussions included improving information available on Brent's website in relation to the support available, providing annual input into the review of the Statement of Purpose and the creation of a feedback loop, ensuring that learning from the support group is fed back to each of the partner authorities in *Adopt London West* for service development. The longer term plan is to recruit a special guardian from the other 3 local authorities to volunteer alongside Brent's one.

8.0 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

8.1 July 2021

Booked reviews – 4 (1 is a couple)

Took place – 4

August 2021

Booked reviews – 4 (1 is a couple)

Took place – 4

September 2021

Booked reviews – 16

Took place - 14

1 did not take place as the young person turned 18 before the review could be held

1 did not take place due to staff sickness at short notice.

Totals for July 2021 to September 2021:

Booked reviews – 24 (5 were couples)

Took place – 19

Cancelled/rescheduled - 5

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. The two work streams that were meeting weekly (virtually) have now been combined and are held bi-weekly as it was felt by the staff involved to be more productive that way. The focus continues to be on sufficiency and placement stability. These meetings provide an opportunity for workers from each of the local authorities to develop their working relationship, learn from one another and share ideas. Further updates will be provided to the Committee in early 2022 as this progresses.

- 9.2** Following national consultation by the Department for Education on the use of unregulated (independent or semi-independent) provision, the prohibition of placing children under the age of 16 in such accommodation became law on 9th September 2021. This new piece of legislation was contained within amendments to The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021. There are no children under the age of 16 placed in such accommodation and Brent is compliant with the requirements of the new regulations.

Report sign off:

Gail Tolley

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