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|  Brent | Corporate Parenting Committee 19 January 2022 |
| | Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People |
| Brent Fostering Service Quarterly Monitoring Report: Quarter 3: 1st October 2021 to 31st December 2021 | |

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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 |
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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 October – 31st December 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. Learning from our Covid-safe practice developed since the beginning of the first National lockdown in March 2020 and feedback from children, families and our foster carers, the following priority areas have been set out:

- To maintain use of recruitment drives that include an element of direct interface between the fostering teams and prospective foster carers as restrictions around social distancing continue, 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. Currently there are eight social work posts filled with permanent members of staff. The remaining 4 posts are currently vacant. There are plans in place to recruit to two of the vacant positions in early 2022. The two other positions have been kept vacant to meet growing demand in other parts of the service, particularly leaving care as a result of higher numbers of care leavers requiring support.

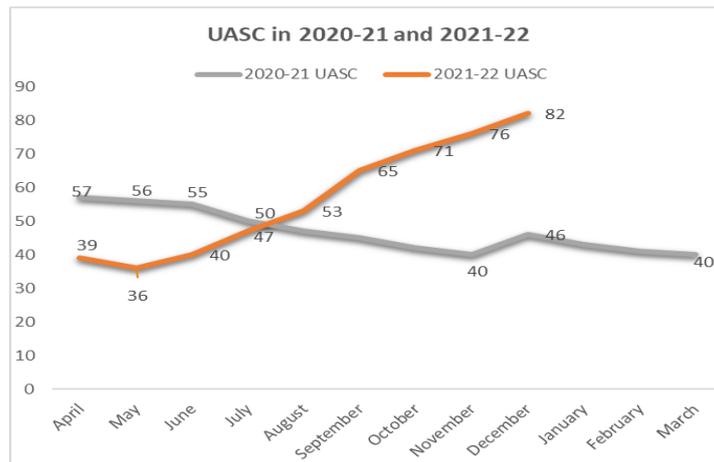
4.0 Placement Activity

4.1 The total number of looked after children as at 31st December 2021 was 351, which is an increase by 39 children from Q2 of 2021-2022 (312 children) and an increase by 55 children from the same period in 2020 (296 children). This is an expected trend in line with the increase with the number of children on child protection plans. Additionally, we have more unaccompanied asylum seeking children within the cohort compared to last financial year.

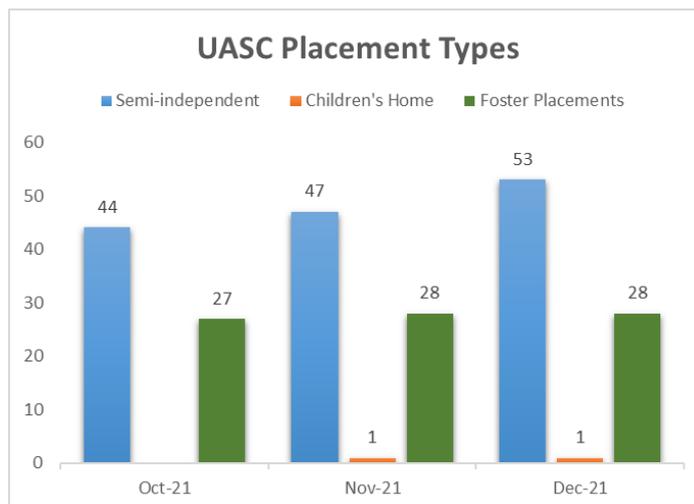
4.2 The corporate performance targets for 2021/2022 are as below:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers – annual target 30% - the actual percentage as of 31st December-2021 was 16.2% (57 children), a drop by 1.4% from the previous quarter Q2 of 2021/2022, 17.6% (55 children)
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend – annual target 15% - the actual percentage as of 31st December-2021 was 12.8% (45 children), an increase by 1.6% from Q2 of 2021/2022 11.2% (35 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-2021 was 31.3% (110 children); a decrease by 1% from Q2 of 2021/2022 (32.3%, 101 children).
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements – annual target 70% - the actual percentage as of 31st December-2021 was 60.4% (212 children), a decrease by 0.9% from Q2 of 2021/2022(192 children, 61.3%).
- There were 91 looked after children, aged 16/17 in registered semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as at 31st December 2021, which represents 25.9% of all looked after children. This is an increase by 3% from the end of Q2, 2021/2022 (23%, 72 children)

4.3 As of 31st December 2021, there were 82 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), an increase of 17 (65 UASCs) from the end of Q2 of 2021/2022.



4.4 The number of UASC who are placed in semi-independent accommodation is 53, 12 more than at the end of Q2, 2020-22, one is in a residential children’s home and 4 more UASCs placed in foster placements than Q1 (24 UASC).



4.5 The increase in number of UASC mostly related to referrals received from three hotels where the Home Office placed adult asylum seekers in Brent. Referrals come from individuals who claim to be under the age of 18 requesting interim support from the local authority whilst age assessments are undertaken by children’s services. Local authorities are under statutory obligation to provide accommodation and interim support without prejudice whilst undertaking age assessments. Individuals who are assessed to be adults are referred back to the Home Office and those assessed to be under 18 are provided with on-going care and support by children’s services. In order to meet its statutory duties Brent recruited four specialist social workers to respond to this demand and provided accommodation to individuals whilst undertaking age assessments. This has put a significant pressure on placement and staffing budgets.

5 Recruitment and Assessment

- 5.1** Marketing and recruitment activities continue to be delivered online. An increase from 13 enquiries in Q2 to 19 enquiries during Q3 was observed. Monthly fostering information evenings continue to take place online via Zoom, which attendees continue to find more convenient than having to travel to a venue.
- 5.2** During this reporting period marketing activity has been carried out through Brent Council's website and social media, managed by the Marketing and Recruitment Officer (MRO) and fostering social work teams. Interested parties made enquiries via phone or online. The teams carried out initial visits and assessments face-to-face and virtually via video calls, ensuring the experience of prospective carers remain 'business as usual'. The interim MRO has remained in place until the substantive MRO returns to work from maternity leave in April 2022.
- 5.3** Online recruitment activities have assisted Brent to have strong social media presence, with constant daily posts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, aimed at attracting new foster carers. We have seen a steady increase of interaction on these digital platforms.
- 5.4** The number of subscribers to the fostering newsletter has reached 4637 sign-ups. Our Facebook Page reach was 2,896 (up 1,100% on previous quarter) and Instagram reach was 937, up 1,600% on previous quarter). Our Twitter account averaged 3000 per month; this is the biggest area of growth in terms of social media marketing. This growth is expected to rise and make a positive impact on fostering enquiries in spring of 2022.
- 5.5** In addition to Brent's increased focus on social media campaigns, a three-month Google Advertising campaign is planned to launch in January 2022, to pilot "pay per click" advertising. This is expected to increase enquiries and attract more prospective foster carers developing an interest in fostering.
- 5.6** Of the 19 enquiries over the period, 7 resulted in initial home visits and 3 have successfully progressed to Stage 1 of the fostering assessment process. The other 16 applicants were deemed unsuitable to foster at present due to a number of reasons, including insufficient bedroom space, prospective applicants needing more time to consider whether they wish to apply and some fixed views from enquirers about the ethnic and cultural background of children they were prepared to consider fostering.
- 5.7** Of the 8 assessments reported in the last period as being in stage 1, 3 still remain in Stage 1 due to delays in completing relevant checks. Of the remaining 5, 2 have progressed to stage 2, and 3 have withdrawn from the assessment process for personal reasons.

5.8 Of the 5 assessments reported as being in stage 2 in the last quarter, 3 are being presented to the fostering panel on 21st January 2022. 1 assessment has had to come to an end as the applicants pulled out due to personal reasons. The other 1 remains in stage 2

5.9 In this reporting period there are 12 assessments underway. Of these:

- 6 are in Stage 1
- 3 are in Stage 2
- 3 are being presented to the fostering panel on 21st January 2022.

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 Face-to-Face panels were reinstated from 1st October 2021. However in light of recent developments linked rising Covid case numbers a decision was made to return to virtual fostering panels from January 2022. The situation will be monitored closely and reviewed on a monthly basis to explore when face to face panels can be re-established.

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)
- the first annual review of each approved carer and any other review as requested by the service, including those where there is 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 2021, 3 panels were held with 17 specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within these cases:

- 4 new 'family and friends' fostering households were recommended for approval;
- 4 fostering households were found suitable to continue as foster carers following review;

- 1 'family and friends' fostering households were found suitable to continue to foster following review;
- The approval of 1 'family and friends' households was terminated due to the child reaching 18 and therefore ceasing to be looked after;
- 7 fostering households resigned or had their fostering role terminated for a number of reasons including ill-health, moving to another part of the UK or overseas and in one case transferring to an independent fostering agency.

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 for foster carers and special guardians under review in light of Covid 19. To date, First Aid Training is the only course that has been offered in person, and due to the renewed guidance regarding homeworking and the sharp rise in Covid numbers, online training will continue. This will be kept under review and the aim is to establish more face to face courses when the guidance indicates it is appropriate to do so.

Foster Carers do report preferring face to face sessions as they appreciate the ability to interact with peers and enjoy the group exercises, however some carers have commented that they are pleased that sessions are online as presently they would not feel comfortable attending in person.

7.2 Eight courses were offered during the period under review, 7 went ahead and one had to be rescheduled. All except First Aid were virtual. The training included:

- 13th October - Digital safety, keeping children safe online
- 8th Nov 21 – Prevent training
- 10th Dec 21 – Managing challenging behaviour

Carers' comments about the sessions were mainly positive:

"All the elements of this course will help to improve the care I provide for children placed in my care." Managing challenging behaviour.

"This training will help me in the care I am giving to the child as I have gained knowledge and the 'know how' if I am placed in a situation the best way to deal with it and benefit the child as well" Managing challenging behaviour.

"All aspects of the course were useful and informative" Prevent training

7.3 In addition to arranged training sessions, all carers have access to an online training package provided by an external provider. 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. There are currently 60 Brent carers who have accounts with AC Education, with a view to having more signed up as the year progresses.

8 Support from Supervising Social Workers (SSW)

8.1 Alongside recruitment and retention of foster carers, 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 continues to affect the lives of Brent foster carers and looked after children, making the support offered to carers even more important.

8.2 In addition to visits and calls to foster carers by the SSWs, foster carers are engaged and informed via emails and mobile text messaging. The MRO (Marketing Recruitment Officer) also sends a monthly newsletter to carers.

8.3 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 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.

8.4 The October Support Group was attended by the recently appointed Interim Service Manager. Topics covered and discussed during October to December included annual celebration of achievements for Brent's foster carers, SharePoint, Covid/vaccination, training and LAC reviews. In relation to annual celebration, foster carers voiced their appreciation of Brent rewarding carers with vouchers last year in the light of face to face celebrations not being permitted due to Covid-19 related restrictions. Therefore, a discussion took place between senior managers and the Lead Member for children and families resulting in a decision made to acknowledge the carers' achievements via a certificate and a voucher, as a token of appreciation. Brent foster carers were sent vouchers and feedback was that this was very much appreciated by the carers. Each foster

carer will also receive a certificate of achievement signed by the Strategic Director CYP in the New Year.

9 Support for Kinship Carers

- 9.1** Support for connected persons carers who foster on a ‘family and friends’ basis are entitled to the same support as Brent’s mainstream foster carers and receive the same financial, social work and developmental support from allocated SSWs and via Brent’s training programme.
- 9.2** 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 able to access Brent’s training programme available to mainstream foster carers. All other support is offered to special guardians via *Adopt London West*. This includes: advice, guidance, mediation and advocacy.
- 9.3** In terms of developments, the national kinship care charity ‘Kinship’ has been commissioned by Adopt London West to offer Special Guardians free emotional and practical support. Special guardians can approach ‘Kinship’ who can help with expert advice and support around benefits, financial issues, housing, education, legal issues, family relationships and contact; access to grants; regional and local peer support groups and telephone peer support with another kinship carer.

10 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

10.1 October 2021

Booked reviews – 18

Took place – 11

6 – Didn’t take place due to SSW sickness

1 – Cancelled due to carer resigning

November 2021

Booked reviews – 10

Took place – 9

1 –postponed to December 2021

December 2021

Booked reviews – 1

Took place - 1

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

11 New Developments or updates

11.1 Update on Collaborative Fostering Project

This work continues between Ealing, Harrow and Brent, with Brent providing the lead role. The main focus has been on establishing agreed shared principles surrounding fostering allowances and fees which will enable the collaborative arrangement to successfully compete against Private and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) when it comes to recruitment and retention of foster carers. More detailed planning and specific details outlining the work undertaken and proposed future work will be provided to the next Corporate Parenting Committee.

11.2 Brent, Ealing and Hounslow local authorities have jointly commissioned 'Kinship' to provide a membership package to provide additional support for Special Guardians which is being administered by Adopt London West. Kinship will provide one to one support to Special Guardians through their Project Workers. All referrals to Kinship services are made by Adopt London West in consultation with Brent. As at 9th December 2021 7 Brent carers were accessing Tier 2 support.

11.3 New Scheme. In December the "recommend a friend" recruitment scheme was launched. This was framed as a call to action targeting in-house carers through our monthly foster carer newsletter and asking supervising social workers to promote the scheme through their networks. The recommend a friend scheme provides carers with a £750 "finder's fee" for each applicant put forward who successfully complete the assessment stage and is formally approved via our fostering panel. Progress will be reviewed and reported at the end of Q4 (March 22).

11.4 Carers on Hold. A key focus of work involves improving the utilisation of carers, with an emphasis on reducing the number of carers on hold. Carers can be on hold for a number of reasons e.g. ill health, break from fostering, concerns surrounding standards of care, personal or family circumstances and home relocation. During the last 12 months some carers have had to deal with ill health due to Covid and carers or family members having to self-isolate and/or recover from illness.

11.5 Having carers on hold means the team are unable to utilise foster carers or match children requiring placements. The management team currently conduct fortnightly monitoring of carers on hold to enable current status to be tracked and to agree actions to ensure carers eventually are able to resume fostering. During Q3 progress has been made in reducing the number of carers on hold from 16 to 10. Where there are practice concerns linked to carers on hold the focus is on establishing whether carers fully recognise and understand the level of concerns; can continue to meet fostering standards and are willing to undergo further training.

Report sign off:

Gail Tolley

Strategic Director Children and Young People