	<p align="center">Corporate Parenting Committee 5 February 2024</p>
	<p align="center">Report from the Corporate Director of Children and Young People</p>
	<p align="center">Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools - Councillor Gwen Grahl</p>
<p>Progress report- Revised Fostering Offer</p>	

Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Non-Key Decision
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
List of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)	<p>Elena Muller Service Manager, Looked After Children and Permanency elena.muller@brent.gov.uk</p> <p>Kelli Eboji Head of Service for Looked After Children and Permanency Kelli.eboji@brent.gov.uk</p> <p>Palvinder Kudhail Director Early Help and Social Care Palvinder.Kudhail@brent.gov.uk</p>

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 In March 2023, the Corporate Management Team (CMT) approved a 6-month programme of work to explore innovative approaches to the commissioning of children’s placements by CYP given the continued, sustained budget pressures faced by the department. The programme’s aims were to achieve efficiencies and financial savings whilst ensuring good outcomes for Brent Looked After Children (LAC) and care leavers.

1.2 This report focuses on the findings from the work of the Fostering workstream and presents the plan for a revised and updated **Fostering Offer** which will be implemented from April 2024.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review and comment on the contents of this report.

2.2 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to note and advocate for the need for Brent to improve its offer to foster carers in order to increase the number of in house foster carers and improve retention rates.

2.3 The Corporate Parenting Committee is asked to note the benefits of ongoing work to establish a regional West London fostering hub.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

3.1.1 The revised fostering offer contributes to the following borough priorities:

- **The Best Start in Life**
- **Prosperity and Stability**
- **A Healthier Brent**
- **Thriving Communities**

In order for care experienced young people to have the best start in life, prosperity and stability, safety, and good health they need safe, stable homes with primary carers who love them and who are able to meet their holistic needs. The purpose of this updated offer is to recruit and retain more inhouse foster carers, thereby providing more local placements for Brent's looked after children, meaning that these children can stay connected to their families, schools and community. Providing safe, stable, loving placements for children and young people when they are unable to remain with their parent/s, means that they will have the best life chances.

4.0 Background

4.1 Growing In-House Fostering – Rationale for change

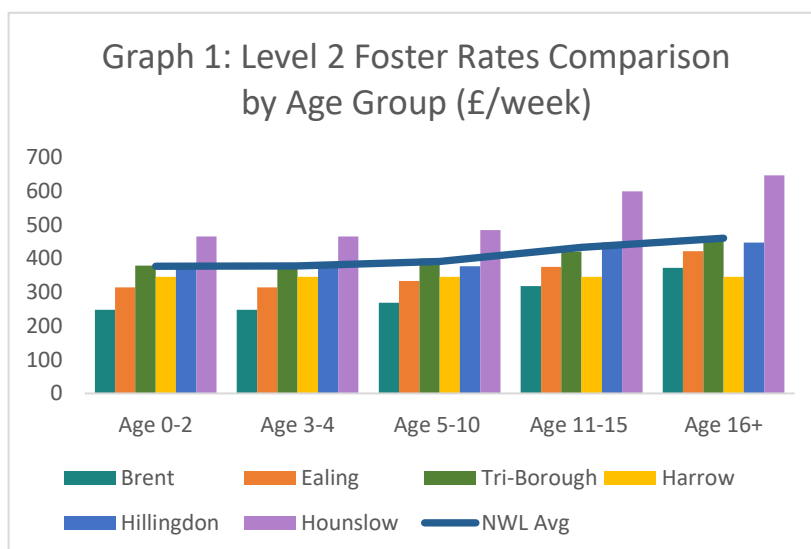
4.1.1 There was a 39% reduction in Brent's in-house fostering households between 2017/18 and 2022/23 and a reduction in available beds/placements from 106 to 74. Brent is not alone in experiencing falling numbers of foster carers. Nationally, 1 in 8 fostering households in England left their role during the period 2021-22 according to [Ofsted research](#), which compares to 1 in 6 Brent Foster Carers leaving over the same period. Furthermore, Brent currently has 23 fostering households aged 65 and over, creating a risk that a sizeable proportion of carers will leave fostering in the coming years.

4.1.2 As a result of the number of in-house foster carers reducing, Brent is increasingly reliant on commissioning fostering placements from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) which are more expensive than inhouse placements. At the end of March 2023, 53% of foster placements in Brent were made with IFAs, rather than Brent foster and kinship carers.

4.1.3 Exit interviews conducted with Brent Foster Carers over the period 2020-23 suggest that for those transferring to IFAs or other local authorities, the more attractive financial

and support packages offered was a key reason for leaving Brent Foster Care Service. Recent anecdotal evidence also demonstrates that carers are moving to neighbouring local authorities more frequently, with recent moves to both Harrow and Camden. In addition, Brent loses a number of foster carers each year due to retirement.

- 4.1.4 Benchmarking foster carer rates confirms the weekly rates paid to Brent Foster Carers are the lowest among neighbouring local authorities (Graph 1). The line shows the average North West London weekly rates for Level 2 fostering placements across different age groups. Brent is the furthest from the average across all age ranges except for 16+. Benchmarking against other packages of support on offer for foster carers identified the need for Brent to consider a new fostering offer, which included increasing payment levels.



- 4.1.5 The modelling work completed over the past 9 months has demonstrated that if the current offer was not updated and increased it is projected that by 2028/29, 56% of all fostering placements will be made with IFAs, compared to the 2018-2023 average figure of 47%. This would increase spend on IFA placements further increasing existing pressures on the budget and providing rationale to a cost avoidance approach.

4.2 New Foster Carer Offer

4.2.1 Increased weekly fostering allowance

- 4.2.2 To reach *parity* with the North West London average, a weekly rate uplift across all Brent allowance rates was required. This will ensure an aligned approach across the Department for Education (DfE) funded West London Fostering Recruitment Hub (as outlined in 4.9.3). Due to council budget pressures, this increase will be introduced in two phases over the next two financial years.

4.3.1 Digital Offer

- 4.3.2 Benchmarking against other authorities demonstrated that a key additional benefit offered by neighbouring authorities is the offer of a free laptop to their foster carers to complete the various administrative tasks related to their placements. Cross-council discussions have identified existing funding that will be used to support Brent foster carers to access a digital device, laptop or iPad, through the Council's digital inclusion scheme.

4.4.1 Free gym membership

4.4.2 In response to a survey sent to foster carers regarding their interest in free gym membership, which demonstrated overwhelming interest in this benefit, all Brent foster carers will have access to free gym membership at Brent's leisure centres.

4.5.1 Blue Light Card - Discounted shopping and leisure activities

4.5.2 Blue Light Card provides those in the NHS, emergency services, social care sector and armed forces with discounts online and in-store. Blue Light Card offers a range of official discounts from large national retailers to local businesses. Sign up to this card is being tested currently with a small group of carers in preparation for a full roll out in April 2024.

4.6.1 A word-of-mouth referral fee

4.6.2 Although Brent has historically offered a word-of-mouth referral fee, this has been inconsistently applied and "advertised". As part of our refreshed fostering offer, Brent foster carers who successfully refer a friend or family member who are subsequently approved to be a foster carer and have a child placed with them, will receive a £1000 referral fee.

4.7.1 Council Tax Exemption

4.7.2 Local authorities can leverage opportunities to increase foster carer capacity that are not available to IFAs, such as council tax exemption. Council Tax exemption for carers that live in-borough and additional payments to those living out-of-borough to subsidise council tax costs is offered by several nearby local authorities, including Camden, Hounslow and the Bi-Borough. Feedback from other local authorities suggests that this has a particularly positive impact on foster carer retention. This was also positively received in the Foster Carer Reference Group.

4.7.3 Due to Council budget pressures it is not possible to introduce this incentive immediately. The service will continue to work with Council colleagues to explore the possibility of introducing this for the 2025/26 financial year.

4.8.1 Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention

4.8.2 **Looked After Children's Resilience Service:** A new test and learn project was initiated in November 2023 called the Looked After Children's Resilience Service. This is a preventative approach, using CAMHS provider collaborative funding and will be tested until July 2024. It will replicate the system-wide approach of a current Hospital Discharge Service programme to support, train and further upskill Brent foster carers, identified IFA carers and further local residential children's homes through bespoke training and in-reach placement support so that children and young people with mental health needs can be more effectively supported. Work with foster carers will seek to reduce the number of fostering placement breakdowns that result in higher-cost residential placements.

4.8.3 **A Fostering Friendly Organisation:** The service is working with colleagues in Human Resources (HR) to review and amend key Brent Policies so that Brent Council can achieve Fostering Friendly status recognition. This would encourage Brent staff to

become foster carers with the Council. The same approach will be encouraged with other large local employers such as the Football Association.

- 4.8.4 **Regional Fostering Hub:** Brent, together with 7 other neighbouring West London local authorities (Ealing, Harrow, Hounslow, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hillingdon), successfully submitted a funding application to Department for Education to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers in September 2023 by creating a joint fostering recruitment hub (dedicated “front door” for fostering enquiries) that will be operational from April/May 2024. This is being overseen by the Commissioning Alliance, with Hammersmith and Fulham acting as the lead local authority. The increase to Brent’s fostering allowances will ensure Brent’s offer is comparable to our neighbours, allowing the West London coalition to compete with IFAs in a unified way.

Funding provided by DfE will also be made available to Brent to establish its first ‘Mockingbird’ fostering constellation, something that will serve to boost recruitment and retention of Brent foster carers.

Mockingbird is a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK. It delivers sustainable foster care through an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community. Planning has already begun with The Fostering Network and further updates will be provided to CPC in our next 6-monthly fostering report.

4.9.1 **Marketing and Communication**

- 4.9.2 The Fostering team are working closely with the Brent Communication Team to develop an attractive, sustainable fostering brand that will be launched in April 2024 when our new fostering offer goes “live”. The new brand identity for Brent Fostering will be used across all advertising materials to give a consistent and recognisable look and aid recruitment.
- 4.9.3 Brent has during this period joined a growing partnership of councils and children’s trusts and CAN Digital to promote Local Authority fostering. The project is called ‘Any Of Us’ and it is the largest public sector fostering film collaboration yet, with over 80 participants across England. CAN Digital have produced a short film telling three different stories from diverse foster carers who are sharing their own experience of looking after children. The film will appeal to a wide audience, and it is envisaged that it will encourage people to foster for Brent. The film was launched nationally in Birmingham on the 26 September 2023 and can be accessed on the Brent website and social media: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laCl9H6Qrkk>
- 4.9.4 Currently there is no dedicated marketing and recruitment budget for the Brent Fostering Service. Marketing activity costs are met using the fostering team budget and as a consequence is limited to those which are low cost, meaning the impact on increasing foster carer numbers is minimal. Marketing arrangements will be strengthened once arrangements with the West London Fostering Recruitment Hub are more fully known, and there may be a future financial ask of each local authority to support marketing and recruitment initiatives as part of the work within the hub. At the moment the activities undertaken by the fostering service on its own include the following.

- Fostering fortnight activities- *please note that 2024 Fostering Fortnight will be taking place from 15th-28th May 2024*
- Community-based awareness raising.

5.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

5.1 The work undertaken in the fostering workstream was informed by foster carers and supervising social worker in several ways: direct feedback, reference group meeting, surveys, exit interviews.

6.0 Financial Considerations

6.1 The financial considerations discussed in this report have been agreed and will be funded by future growth allocation budget within CYP.

7.0 Legal Considerations

7.1 The operation of fostering services is governed by the Children Act 1989, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and associated National Minimum Standards. The regulations and standards do not prescribe the detail of how a fostering service should financially reward its foster carers, but the National Minimum Standards provides that there is a clear and transparent written policy on payments to foster carers that sets out the criteria for calculating payments and distinguishes between the allowance paid and any fee paid.

8.0 Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

8.1 Pursuant to s149 Equality Act 2010 (the “Public Sector Equality Duty”), the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited under the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; and
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it,

8.2 The Public Sector Equality Duty covers the following nine protected characteristics: age, disability, marriage and civil partnership, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

8.3 Having due regard involves the need to enquire into whether and how a proposed decision disproportionately affects people with a protected characteristic and the need to consider taking steps to meet the needs of persons who share a protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it. This includes removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by persons who share a protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.

8.4 There is no prescribed manner in which the council must exercise its public sector equality duty but having an adequate evidence base for its decision is necessary.

8.5 The proposals in this report have been subject to screening and Officers believe that there are no adverse equality implications. The proposals covered in this report

support Looked After Children and Care Leavers and aim to improve their life chances.

9.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

- 9.1 The work and recommendations outlined in this paper will also have a positive impact regarding climate change. By increasing the sufficiency of local placements by building local foster carer capacity, far less travel (often using carbon-emitting modes of transport) will be required.

10.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

- 10.1 There are potential Human Resources implications relating to need for additional staffing to support Brent Foster Carers. It is understood that when numbers of Brent Foster Carers increase, there may be a need for to restructure and increase resource of the Supervising Social Worker team.
- 10.2 There are no property considerations associated with this work.

11.0 Communication Considerations

- 11.1 Communications and Marketing have been considered throughout the process and are relevant to the new Brent Foster Carer offer.
- 11.2 Engagement with communications colleagues is ongoing to ensure that the launch of a new Marketing and Communications Strategy for Brent Foster Care recruitment coincides with the launch of any new Brent Foster Carer offer to ensure maximum impact.
- 11.3 It is important to note that the success of the new foster carer offer and associated campaign will require a council-wide approach at all levels to promote the new fostering offer and opportunities to become a foster carer.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director of Children and Young People