	<p align="center">Corporate Parenting Committee 22 April 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 - Cllr Gwen Grahl</p>
<p align="center">Brent Fostering Service 6-monthly Monitoring and End of Year Report: 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2024</p>	

Wards Affected:	ALL
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
List of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
Contact Officer(s): <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	<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. 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. It includes relevant data on the service's performance and activities, as well as updates on the functioning and progress of the Fostering Panel. Additionally, the report outlines the developments that have taken place in the Service throughout the year, as well as any planned initiatives for the upcoming period. This is in accordance with standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards (2011).

1.2 Brent Fostering Service operates in accordance with the Fostering National Minimum Standards, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. These regulations are the foundation of the regulatory framework for fostering services under the Care Standards Act 2000. This report details the activity of Brent's fostering service from the 1 October 2023 to the 30 March 2024 and provides an "end of year" position.

2.0 Recommendation(s)

2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review and comment on 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 Brent Looked After Children.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities & Strategic Context

3.1.1 This report sets out the management of the local authority's inhouse fostering service and the developments that have taken place in the reporting period. The work of the fostering service 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 fostering service contributes to these priorities by recruiting, assessing, and supporting foster carers and connected person carers for Brent children and young people. 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 Service Priorities

4.1.1 The in-house fostering function is located within the LAC and Permanency Service (LACPS) of the Children and Young People's Department.

The service focused on the following priority areas in 2023/24:

- To have a strong focus on recruitment, assessment and approval of new carers with the view to achieve a net gain of 10 new carers by the end of the

financial year

- To enhance the support offer to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers, by providing therapeutic services and other additional benefits to increase placement stability
- To enhance the training and development programme for carers to include a permanent, ongoing mix of virtual and direct delivery of courses and seminars
- To continue improving the stability of children by providing more local and in-house placement options, minimising change of social workers and placements
- To develop partnerships with neighbouring authorities to recruit and retain more foster carers
- To recruit, train and retain foster carers that offer emergency placements to children and young people who come into care in unplanned circumstances
- To continue to develop and transform the service in consultation and collaboration with care experienced young people and foster carers through workstreams and co-designed training
- To ensure that the foster carers feel supported and valued by providing regular service updates, building and strengthening Brent foster carers community and celebrating their achievements.

4.1.2 Achievements in 2023/24 against our priorities:

Unfortunately, we have not achieved our recruitment target of new mainstream foster carers in this reporting period. We had **3** new mainstream foster carers approved in 2023-24. This was a net increase of **-4** as there were **7** mainstream carers who resigned/approval was terminated in the same period. This was compared to a net increase of 1 new mainstream foster carer in the previous year (2022-23).

The newly recruited carers ranged from early 40's to mid-late 60's in age and were from either an Asian or Black British heritage, which meets our target demographic.

The Corporate Parenting Committee is aware of the challenges the service has faced in recruiting new foster carers and the work that has been undertaken over the past 12-18 months to improve our ability to recruit and retain our carers, which we anticipate will have a positive impact on our mainstream fostering numbers in the next financial year.

Our achievements and successes:

- The recruitment team was very active in the community during the summer and attended a number of community events to raise awareness about the need to recruit local carers. As a result, the number of enquires and assessments have increased in the reporting period.
- The Fostering Team celebrated the achievements and commitment of the foster carers by organising 3 main events last year. The Cream Tea in May during the Foster Care Fortnight, the seaside trip in August and the End of Year Celebration in November were well received by the carers and their

families and contributed to the strengthening of Brent's fostering community and carers feeling valued and appreciated.

- A new and improved fostering offer has been approved which will improve the recruitment and the retention of the inhouse foster carers thereby providing more local placements for Brent's looked after children who will enable them to stay connected to their families, community and network.
- Brent, and 7 other neighbouring West London local authorities (Ealing, Harrow, Hounslow, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hillingdon), have received funding from Department for Education for a project to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers in September 2023 and a new joint fostering recruitment hub (dedicated "front door" for fostering enquiries) was created and will be operational from April/May 2024.
- Brent has received Department for Education funding to implement our first Mockingbird constellation in the next 12 months, which will provide a model for support and community which will result in better carer retention.
- A new test and learn project was initiated in November 2023 called the Looked After Children's Resilience Service (LRS). This provision replicates the system wide approach of the Hospital Discharge Service and supports, trains and further upskills Brent foster carers, through bespoke training and in-reach placement intervention to increase placement stability and to better meet the children's needs. Brent foster carers have engaged well with the project and the feedback received so far has been positive.
- A new and attractive fostering brand has been developed in collaboration with the Brent Communication Team which will be launched in May 2024 during the Foster Care Fortnight. In addition, Brent has joined a growing partnership of councils and children's trusts and CAN Digital to promote Local Authority fostering. As part of this project short film called 'Any of Us' was launched nationally in September 2023 and it is envisaged that it will encourage people to foster for Brent.

4.2 Staffing Arrangements

- 4.2.1 The structure of the Fostering Service has remained the same since the last report. The Fostering Service consists of two teams: one Support and Assessment Team, and one Kinship Care Team. The service is overseen by the Service Manager.
- 4.2.2 The Fostering Support and Assessment Team consists of 8 supervising social workers, one Team Manager, and one part-time Recruitment Officer (RO) post.
- 4.2.3 The Kinship Care Team consists of 8 social workers, one Team Manager and one Practice Consultant Social Worker.
- 4.2.4 The workload in the fostering team continues to be at manageable levels, whilst the Kinship Team has experienced an increased number of cases over the reporting year as new kinship carers are assessed, approved and allocated to supervising social workers for ongoing support. Kinship care

can offer children the stability and love they need where there is family breakdown through the continuation of existing relationships with extended family members or friends, which we continue to prioritise where safe and appropriate.

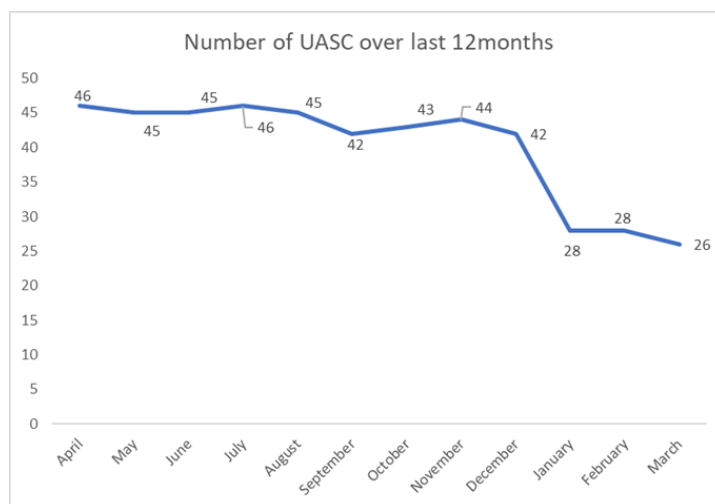
4.3 Placement Activity

4.3.1 The total number of looked after children as of 31 March 2024 was 297, which is a decrease by 22 children from 31 October 2023 (319).

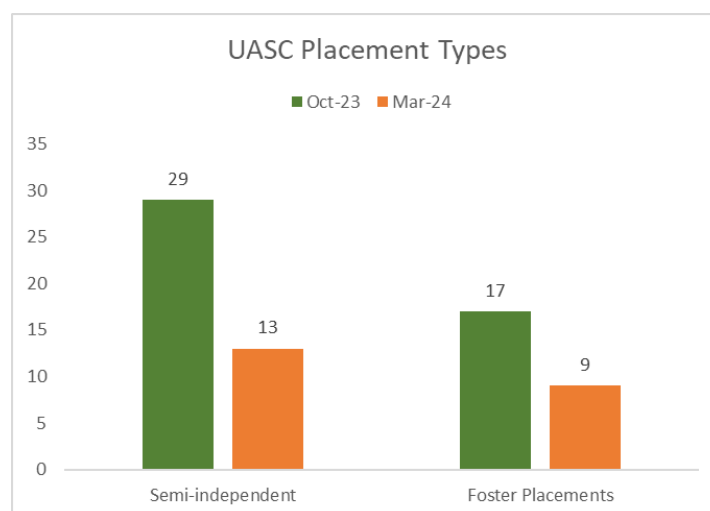
4.3.2 The corporate performance targets for 2023/2024 are as follows:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers as of 31st Mar-2024 was 17.8% (53 children), an increase by 1.2% from 31st Oct-2023, 16.6% (53 children) – below the annual target of 25%
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend as of the 31st Mar-2024 was 15.8% (47 children), an increase by 1.7% from 31st Oct-2023 (14.1%, 45 children) – below the annual target of 20%
- Percentage of looked after children placed with independent fostering agencies as of 31st Mar-2024 was 32% (96 children), a decrease by 1% from 31st of Oct -2023 (33%, 105 children) – below the annual target of 25%
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements as of 31st Mar-2024 was 66% (196 children), an increase of 2.4% from 31st of Oct- 2023 which was 63.6% (203 children) – below the annual target of 70%. 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 44 looked after children in semi-independent accommodation (residential accommodation not subject to Children's Home Regulations) as of 31st Mar-2024, which represents 14.8% of all looked after children. This is a decrease by 2.4% from 31st Oct-2023 (17.2%, 55 children).

4.3.3 There were 26 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) as of 31st Mar-2024, a decrease of 16 UASC (42 UASC as at Oct-2023). The decrease is attributable to the number of UASC turning 18.



4.3.4 The number of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation as of 31st Mar-2024 was 17 compared to 29 UASC as at Oct-2023, none in residential children's home and 9 UASC placed in foster placements, compared to 13 UASC as at Oct-2023.



4.4 Recruitment and Assessment of new foster carers

4.4.1 During this reporting period, the monthly information evenings were held on Zoom, and the team attended both face-to-face and online recruitment events targeted at communities in various parts of the borough. The recruitment activity continued to be focused on specific local groups with a high fostering potential, such as the local pensioners group (aimed at those younger retirees who have time, space and capacity) and faith groups.

4.4.2 The recruitment officer joined all Brent Connects online sessions from September to December 2023, to talk about the impact of fostering in the borough and raise awareness about the increased need for local carers. Good engagement was noted during the presentation with participants showing a genuine interest in fostering, thus helping to raise the profile of the service during the event.

- 4.4.3 The Fostering team responded positively to an invitation from the Eastern European Hub to attend one of their events in December 2023 where the team met the Romanian community, who make up one of the largest minority groups in the borough. The team had the opportunity to gauge the appetite for fostering within this minority group and establish a relationship with the Eastern European Hub team who agreed to support the service's recruitment efforts.
- 4.4.4 The Fostering Team attended the Brent Multi-faith forum meeting at the beginning of March 2024 to raise awareness of the need to recruit more Brent foster carers, with the focus on being able to offer local placements to Brent children who will be more likely to maintain family ties and remain part of their community and network.
- 4.4.5 Leaders and representatives of the faith groups expressed their interest in supporting the Fostering Service to recruit local carers and made an open invitation to return to the multi faith forum in the future once the new fostering offer had been launched. Some faith leaders expressed an interest to support the recruitment of new foster carers by inviting the Fostering team to meet their congregation and their respective communities.
- 4.4.6 The Fostering Service joined a number of health-focused events organised by the Brent Health Matters team during this period. These events were aimed specifically at minority community groups, like the Somali community. The team was able not only to speak to people and distribute flyers and branded merchandise but also to receive valuable feedback about some of the misconceptions and barriers to fostering.
- 4.4.7 A short satisfaction survey has been drawn up and emailed to all Brent foster carers, inviting them to comment on the quality of the support received from the service, the relationship they have with the wider professional network and the aspects they want to see improved. It is envisaged that the foster carers will be invited to complete this type of survey on a 6-monthly basis in order to understand the carers' expectations, to further develop the service and to establish its goals and priorities. The current survey is open until the end of April and the findings will be shared in the next fostering report.
- 4.4.8 The Fostering Newsletter continues to be delivered monthly to the 4000+ subscribers.
- 4.4.9 In the reporting period, the fostering team received **20** enquiries. Phone calls and web requests for call-backs were the two most popular ways for people to contact the fostering team. **10** applicants had an initial visit and **3** progressed to stage 1 of the assessment process and **1** remaining initial visit was moved from March to April (due to applicant's availability), therefore it is still pending a decision. The remaining **6** applications required 'no further action' for reasons including: housing situation and decision to foster for independent fostering agencies (IFAs) due to higher allowances which is addressed in section 7.

4.4.10 In this reporting period there are 10 assessments in progress. Of these:

- 5 are in stage 1
- 5 are in stage 2.

4.4.11 Of the 4 assessments in Stage 2 reported in the last 6 months, 1 applicant was approved in December 2023, 1 applicant withdrew due to personal circumstances in November 2023 and 2 applicants will attend the Fostering Panel in April and May 2024. The assessment could not be presented to the Fostering Panel in a timely manner due to the delay in receiving statutory checks.

4.5 Support from Supervising Social Workers (SSW)

4.5.1 The retention of foster carers is and has been one of the Fostering Service's main priorities. The foster carers continue to report positive relationships with their supervising social workers and the feedback received during their annual reviews and attendance to panel, has highlighted the importance of the support received from the highly skilled and experienced supervising social workers. The quality of the relationship they have with the social workers has been cited as the main reason for their commitment to Brent. The foster carers report being able to contact their supervising social worker when in need and receiving appropriate level of support and guidance during difficult periods.

4.5.2 The fostering team works closely and in partnership with the Children's teams (Localities and Care Planning teams) to ensure that the care plans are progressed without delay and the children's needs are met whilst receiving the best care. The supervising social workers and team managers attend placement planning and permanency planning meetings, looked after children's reviews and all other relevant statutory and non-statutory meetings, supporting their foster carers to build positive relationships with the 'team around the child'.

4.5.3 Placement stability is an important factor in offering an effective fostering service and is crucial to ensuring that Brent delivers good outcomes for each child in care. Placement stability meetings are now embedded in practice with children's social workers making a referral for stability meetings in a timely way. Over recent years, there has been considerable focus on supporting foster carers to maintain placements. With the launch of the West London Fostering Hub, our joint West London fostering front door, and an overall improved core offer for foster carers, it remains a necessary and priority task to ensure that foster carers and their families feel supported in their valuable role.

4.5.4 In addition to the support the carers received from social workers, the foster carers attend monthly support groups organised and facilitated by the Fostering Service. This is an informal and relaxed event where foster carers new and more established are able to meet and get to know each other. This works well to provide support to newly approved carers. The monthly foster

carers' support group continues to be facilitated virtually as this remains the foster carers' preferred option.

- 4.5.5 The fostering service with the support of the Brent Communication team keep foster carers engaged and informed by providing a monthly newsletter.
- 4.5.6 On 24 November 2023, the Fostering Team organised the Annual Celebration Event which was a great success and well attended by carers. The Foster carers brought along their family members or nominated carers to celebrate their hard work and commitment to fostering with good food, magic and a live performance by a talented care leaver. 79 people took part in the end of year celebration event.
- 4.5.7 Some of the carers received recognition for outstanding achievements, where they went over and beyond their role and duty to support children and young people, The Deputy Mayor, the Cabinet member for Children, Young People and Schools, the Corporate Director and the Director Early Help and Social Care were in attendance and joined the rest of the team to thank the foster carers for their invaluable contribution to the community and their love and dedication to the looked after children.



Feedback received from the foster carers:

From SA, foster carer for 3 children: *"I just wanted to thank everybody for the nomination at the Foster Carers' Annual Celebration. I really enjoyed the party. It was well organised and I had lots of fun. I also wanted to thank the whole fostering department for all of the work and effort the team puts into helping the children and foster carers, we couldn't do it without you. Thank you so much for the nomination. I'm truly grateful and honored to receive this award"*.

From JB, foster carer for one child: *"I really enjoyed the celebrations and felt very appreciated. The idea of the awards were great and I am very proud to be part of such a great team of staff and foster carers"*.

From JG, foster carer for one child (and Brent adopter): *"I would just like to take this opportunity to thank you to you all, (especially my supervising social worker). Without the support and hard work that you all do and having my social worker at the end of the phone along with the rest of the team, make everything we as carers do a lot easier. You are always thanking us, but*

you guys need thanking too ...so here's too many more years of working with you all. Thank you for everything you all do for us families and the children we care for.”

4.6 The Kinship Care Team

- 4.6.1 The Kinship Care team undertakes both planned and emergency assessments of prospective family members and friends who come forward as alternative carers when it is not possible for a child to remain in the care of their parents. The team provides placement support to the connected persons carers and training during the assessment period.
- 4.6.2 In the period from October 2023 to March 2024, Kinship Care team received 74 referrals for viability assessments of a relative, friend and people connected to the child. In the period from April 2023 to Sept 2023, Kinship Care team received 85 referrals.
- 4.6.3 In this reporting period, following a positive viability assessment, 40 Connected Persons assessments were undertaken. 2 of these assessments did not progress as further assessment was not required. 5 carers withdrew and did not wish to be assessed further.
- 4.6.4 24 children were placed in 18 new Reg 24/ Connected Persons placements between October 2023 and March 2024.
- 4.6.5 Children who remain in kinship placements beyond 24 weeks where the carer has not been approved as a Connected Persons carer (following presentation and recommended for approval at the Fostering Panel) are considered to be in unregulated placements. For the reporting period, there were 11 children in 9 unregulated placements (some placements were made prior to October 2023). A risk assessment has been completed for each of these placements which has been signed by Head of Service and there continues to be close monitoring of these placements by visiting the placements weekly until the carers assessment is presented at the Fostering Panel and the approval is ratified by the Agency Decision Maker for the Fostering Service.
- 4.6.6 Five Connected Persons foster carers were presented to the Fostering panel between October 2023 to March 2024, all of whom have been approved as short-term Connected Persons carers.
- 4.6.7 Seven children were made subjects to Special Guardianship Orders in this reporting period. 4 were private applications and 3 were as an outcome of public care proceedings.
- 4.6.8 Kinship Care Week took place during the first week in October 2023. The Kinship Care team in collaboration with the Brent Kinship Carer Peer Volunteer, Brent Health Matters, Brent Community Engagement Team, Virtual school and Adopt London West hosted and took part in a series of events to mark Kinship Care and share the mutual appreciation and commitment of Brent kinship carers. These events included:

- Library display in the Civic Centre between the 2 to the 6 October 2023 about Kinship Care through time as reflected in literature. Banners were placed in the foyer promoting the Kinship Care week and leaflets were distributed to raise awareness of Kinship care.
- 'Meet and Greet' on the 5 October 2023 provided Special Guardians and Kinship carers the opportunity to meet the Kinship Care Team and have an informal discussion.
- Kinship carers and their families were invited to attend the Fun Day on the 7 October 2023 which took place at Bridgestone Arena. The London Fire Brigade attended the event and spoke about the work they do and invited the children and their carers to step into the truck and see equipment etc. There were 3 kinship carers in attendance and 8 children participated in activities. Brent Health Matters were present at event and provided information on local health services. The Mayor of Brent and Lead Member for CYP attended the second half of the event. The feedback received from carers was positive and they enjoyed the event.

Brent Kinship Team will continue to work with partner agencies and other council services to raise awareness of the support services and resources available to kinship carers by attending different outreach events in the community and by keeping carers informed via newsletters and other communication methods of the universal offer within Brent. Our learning from the work and events in 2023-24 has been related to the importance of co-production and co-ownership with kinship carers. We are committed to working in partnership with our carers to plan and design engagement activities in 2024-25, and we would like to develop this approach with children in kinship placements as well.

4.7 Fostering Panel

- 4.7.1 The Fostering Panel is 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 is an independent person with professional and personal experience of fostering. Most of the independent panel members have personal experience of the fostering system, including one independent panel member who was brought up in a kinship arrangement. The work of the Fostering Panel is supported by the Panel Adviser.
- 4.7.2 One new Panel members has been recruited in the last 6 months. Of the 3 independent panel members recruited in the previous period, 2 have been attending regularly and one has had a change in personal circumstance and did not take up to offer to become an independent panel member.
- 4.7.3 Fostering Panels are generally held three times every two months and extra panels are arranged if there is an increase in demand. Most panels take place virtually; and face to face when the number of cases presented is high.

4.7.4 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) 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.
- The long-term fostering matches of all children below the age of 12.

4.7.5 During this period October 2023 to March 2024: 9 panels were held with 28 cases presented of which:

- 5 were recommended for approval as short term connected persons
- 1 was recommended for approval as short term carer
- 9 carers were re-approved as part of their 3 yearly annual review
- 2 carers were re-approved as part of their 1st annual review
- 9 carers whose fostering approval/status were terminated/resigned
- 1 carer was re-approved as a long term carer.
- 2 prospective foster carers whose Stage 2 was terminated.

4.7.6 All the recommendations made by the panel were ratified by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

4.7.7 The Head of Service for Looked after Children and Permanency acts as the ADM for the Fostering Service. The ADM, upon reviewing the recommendation of the Fostering Panel, decides whether applicants should be approved as foster carers or not. The ADM also has the responsibility of determining the continued suitability of foster carers following completion of annual reviews of foster carers and recommendation from the Fostering Panel. The ADM meets with the Panel Chair several times a year and observes the panel at least once a year, the last occasion being January 2024.

4.8 Training and Support for Foster Carers

4.8.1 The CYP Learning and Development Team within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service continues to offer learning opportunities for new and experienced foster carers and connected persons using different delivery methods comprising of face-to-face, online/virtual and E-Learning.

4.8.2 In the period of October 2023 to March 2024, 17 learning sessions were offered to carers which included 4 workshops via Brent Safeguarding Partnership. With the exception of the First Aid and Understanding and Responding to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) trainings, all the sessions which carers attended took place online.

4.8.3 There has been limited progress in carer participation in learning opportunities since the last report. Training sessions have had to be cancelled or rescheduled due to low booking numbers, such as Safeguarding and Safer Caring, Child Development and Attachment. However low attendance at training sessions continues to be a national issue affecting many local authorities, and Brent is no exception. The Learning and Development Team continue to make efforts and find creative ways to promote and encourage participation of carers in mandatory trainings and other learning offers, such as through regular reminders. The Fostering Panel also monitor and scrutinise the foster carers' training attendance and hold carers to account if the carers are not compliant with this requirement. Moving forward a new system of tracking the Fostering Training and Development using our performance dashboard will assist with improved identification of carers who have not completed or have overdue mandatory training. The plan for the coming 6 month period is utilising the information in the dashboard for targeted invitations offering carers a choice of dates to complete the required mandatory trainings or timeframe to complete online as an e-learning if they prefer.

It should also be noted that as our support increases and improves, we will be offering different development opportunities for carers as part of our therapeutic offer and also the Mockingbird model, and therefore a higher expectation of carers in relation to their commitment and engagement with learning opportunities will be expected.

4.8.4 As part of strengthening relationships, improving the quality of care for children and young people in care, and promoting multi-agency learning, all our carers continue to have access to learning opportunities via the Brent Safeguarding Partnership, multi-agency learning and development offer, as well as the wider Brent CYP practitioner training offer.

4.8.5 The training offer is regularly reviewed to ensure that the foster carers continue to develop their professional skills, deepen their understanding of the looking after children's needs, and have the opportunity to keep abreast with new findings, research and learnings from serious case reviews. For the coming period new learning opportunities include Restorative Practice Approach for Foster carers, and Talking to care-experienced young people.

4.8.6 In addition to facilitated learning opportunities, the Learning and Development Team continued to provide all carers access to learning opportunities at any time of the day, evenings, and weekends, through access to an online E-Learning courses package. There are some limits on the completion of E-Learning courses by carers with some reasons being carer's not having access to computer/ laptops. We anticipate this will improve once all carers have access to our Brent digital offer.

4.8.7 As part of evaluating the effectiveness of our trainings, following each session carers are encouraged to provide feedback- asking carers to share reflections on what they learned and what they plan to apply to their role as a carer; some responses can be found below:

"The trauma river. It was good to get a deeper understanding of trauma and how it can affect children and their families...The course was interesting and engaging. It was good to get a deeper insight"

(Trauma informed Practice)

"The session was very interesting, there was so much I lean that I had no idea about... I appreciate how engaging the group were. It was so clear and easy to understand"

(Supporting LGBT+ Young People)

4.9 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

- 4.9.1 During the reporting period, there were no allegations made against Brent foster carers and the Complaints Service received one complaint from a parent regarding the care her daughter received whilst in the care of a Brent foster carer.
- 4.9.2 The Fostering and Kinship Teams received numerous positive comments from foster carers during assessments, annual reviews and from other colleagues and professionals. One assessing social worker was praised by the judge for the quality of her assessment and robustness of her analysis. The practitioners' achievements and good practice continued to be acknowledged and celebrated at the bi-monthly LAC and Permanency Forums. Additionally, the Fostering Panel complimented several practitioners for the quality of the reports and their presentation at panel.
- 4.9.3 There have been **56** annual reviews completed in this reporting period.
- 4.9.4 Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) for fostering conduct all the annual reviews of foster carers, ensuring impartiality and providing a safeguarding mechanism for both the child and the carer. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer also completes Standards of Care Review meetings, where concerns have been identified regarding carers. This allows a level of independence from the Fostering Service, and the officer will then take these to Fostering Panel where appropriate for fuller discussion and recommendations on continued approval.

Service Development

5.0 Kinship Care

- 5.1 On 15 December 2023 the Department for Education released the National Kinship Strategy – Championing Kinship Care. The Strategy, which aims to put kinship care at the heart of children's social care, included proposals to match the payment of financial allowances for Special Guardians, with the foster carer allowance rate; guidance to employers to improve the support they offer to kinship carer employees; an extension of the Virtual School to cover children in kinship placements and further investment in peer support initiatives. In addition, the government published a definition of kinship care which aims to improve visibility and understanding whilst the term 'family and friends care' is replaced with kinship care.

- 5.2 The kinship care strategy outlines a number of positive steps to better support the development of kinship arrangements, however, there is a lot of detail to work through. The Kinship care team will continue to work with the Kinship Care Peer Volunteer, Virtual school, HR and other external organisations to promote the voice and interests of Kinship carers in Brent and to implement the government plans as set up in the new strategy.
- 5.3 Brent has a track record of outstanding support for its kinship carers and is already compliant with a lot of the new requirements as set out in the recent strategy. Brent is already paying the qualifying kinship carers/special guardians a financial allowance equivalent to the allowance foster carers are entitled to. Brent kinship carers already receive bespoke training during the assessment stage and have access to ongoing training and support once approved. The new Brent Fostering Friendly Employer policy will also include kinship carers.
- 5.4 The website will be updated to include the necessary changes in the way we work with families and children in kinship arrangements and the support that they receive as the strategy progresses. Brent will continue to engage family members, friends and connected persons from the outset to identify the most appropriate caring arrangements for the children they care about.
- 5.5 The Kinship Care and Support policy has now been reviewed and updated and will be published in April 2024 once it has been signed off.
- 5.6 In light of the government's new kinship strategy a new professional network meeting will be organised to update the network regarding the new requirements and to finalise the guide for kinship carers and professionals of the organisations that offer service and support to Brent Kinship community.
- 5.7 The Kinship Care Team has been working closely with Brent Health Matters and Brent Community Engagement team to raise awareness of the various kinship care arrangements in the community and share information about the support available to the carers through statutory and voluntary agencies.

6.0 Enhanced Support and Resources for Brent Carers

- 6.1 The Fostering Service continues to remain committed to enhance the support offered to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers by including a therapeutic element to support placement stability.
- 6.2 Anna Freud has been commissioned to provide a targeted mental health via Brent WEST service and emotional wellbeing service for vulnerable children and young people in the Brent as well as support foster carers and kinship carers through consultations and Reflective Carers' Groups.
- 6.3 In addition to individual work with children, young people and carers, WEST also ran the Reflective Fostering programme online for six weeks with an additional virtual coffee morning held before the start of the group. It was

facilitated by a WEST Child and Family Specialist. 11 foster carers were invited to attend the group and 4 foster carers (for 5 Brent Looked after children) attended all seven sessions.

Feedback from carers:

"I have noticed that I am doing more mind checking and it's really helping".

"This course has helped me to understand why I need to understand myself before understanding my child".

"I wait for this group every week".

"This course has awakened a lot of the thoughts of mindfulness and how to stop and pause. I feel that I grew as a human being".

6.4 A new test and learn project was launched in January 2024 called the Looked After Children's Resilience Service (LRS). 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 the 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 met. Work with foster carers will seek to reduce the number of fostering placement breakdowns that result in higher-cost residential placements.

6.5 To date the LRS has received 13 referrals for children aged between 4 to 16 and is currently working with 8 families across Tier 2 and 3. They have delivered 32 hours of training content in Tier 1 and have celebrated the first foster carer graduate of the universal training offering.

7.0 Recruitment and retention

7.1 Recruitment and retention remain a key priority for the fostering service, national trends and benchmarks for performance and data have helped the service understand its own strengths and plan for development through a joined-up approach and service strategy for growth.

7.2 Maintaining those foster homes ensures the growth of the community and ability to meet the need of an increasing number of children but also provides with the options for better matching between foster carer families and children's needs.

7.3 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. Benchmarking the fostering rates confirmed that Brent foster carers received the lowest rates in comparison to the neighbouring local authorities and if nothing was done, the reliance on IFA foster placements would increase and put more pressure on the local authority budget.

- 7.4 In order to increase the number of in- house foster carers and to reach parity with the other neighbouring boroughs, Brent has developed a new and improved recruitment and retention package that is equally competitive across the sector and rewarding for the new and existing foster carers. A weekly rate uplift across all Brent allowance rates was agreed and this increase will be introduced in two phases over the next two financial years. For details of the new offer please refer to “*Progress report-Brent Fostering Offer*” that was presented to Corporate Parenting Committee in February 2024.
- 7.5 A few additional benefits are also part of the new and improved fostering offer such as: a free laptop or tablet for the foster carers to perform their administrative duties and be GDPR compliant; free gym membership, support to apply for the Blue Light Card and a word of mouth referral fee of £1000 for the foster carers who refer a friend or family member who is subsequently approved to be a foster carer and has a child placed with them. A council tax exemption for all foster carers will be considered for the 2025/26 financial year to encourage more fostering applications.
- 7.6 The service is working with colleagues in Human Resources (HR) to review and amend key Brent HR Policies so that Brent Council can achieve Fostering and Kinship Friendly Employer status recognition.
- 7.7 The Department for Education (DfE) have selected the West London region (Brent, Ealing, Harrow, Hounslow, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hillingdon) for a project to improve foster carer recruitment and retention following the publication of the Care Review in 2022. Hammersmith and Fulham have been selected as the Lead Authority for the region to implement this 2-strand programme, which is fully funded by the DfE until the end of the 2024/25 financial year. The Project is comprised of 2 key strands: the creation of a regional recruitment and support hub for prospective foster and the design and delivery of a regional fostering communications / marketing campaign.
- 7.8 The recruitment of Hub’s team manager and the two recruitment offices has been successful, and it is envisaged that they will be in post by the end of April, beginning of May, when the new recruitment and retention hub will be launched.
- 7.9 Fostering Service are currently working towards implementing and launching the first Mockingbird constellation. The Mockingbird programme is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model where mockingbird hub carers are specially trained to offer sleepovers, peer support, emergency support, joint planning and social activities to fostering homes. Mockingbird supports children and foster carers by creating extended communities of support around the child and their fostering family.
- 7.10 A project manager has now been appointed, the stakeholder analysis completed, and the communications and engagement plan has been drawn up. The next steps are to agree the Implementation Working Group (IWG)

structure, approach and membership and to recruit a home hub carer and a liaison officer.

- 7.11 The role of the Mockingbird hub carer is crucial to the success of the programme and can be very rewarding as it improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationship between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.
- 7.12 Information about the Mockingbird family model will be shared with Brent fostering community during the support group in April and during Foster Care Fortnight in May. The qualifying foster carers will be invited to submit their expression of interest in becoming a home hub carer and the interviews are scheduled in July 2024. The successful candidate will be announced in early August 2024.
- 7.13 It is envisaged that the first Mockingbird constellation will be launched in November/December 2024, or earlier if possible. Further updates will be provided in the following fostering report.
- 7.14 Fostering Service has new and attractive branding which will be launched at the same time as the new and improved fostering offer in May 2024 during the Foster Care Fortnight. Foster Care Fortnight is The Fostering Network's annual campaign to raise the profile of fostering and show how foster care transforms lives. It gives fostering services the opportunity to thank fostering families and recruit more foster carers from the local community. #FCF24 will run from Monday 13 May to Sunday 26 May 2024 and the theme this year #FosteringMoments. Throughout the fortnight Fostering Services nationwide will be celebrating the moments that define fostering journeys big and small. The charity, Fostering Network, will take a leading role in coordinating this event nationally and Brent will also take part and arrange a series of local events. Although the plans for the fortnight are not finalised, the Fostering Service will seek to shed the light on the small things that Brent foster carers have done with love that have helped change the life of children in care. The foster carers will be asked to film, record, write, share those moments that have mattered to them and these testimonials will be uploaded on Brent Fostering website and used for future recruitment events.
- 7.15 Brent Fostering Service's new branding and a new slogan which was developed in collaboration with Communication Team will be launched in May together with the new fostering offer. The new slogan 'Share your love, share your life' will now be included in all the recruitment merchandise and together with the new branding will form part of the new Fostering identity. The launch event will look at bringing together members of the public with an interest in fostering, new and established foster carers, partner agencies and elected members, panel members to raise awareness of this great profession, highlight the difference that carers make in the life of young people every day and invite the wider community to support the Fostering Service to increase the number of local carers.



7.16 The Fostering Service is in the process of organising outreach events in different parts of the borough during Foster Care Fortnight, to raise the profile of fostering, and to boost the recruitment and retention efforts.

8.0 Service Priorities for 2024-2025

- To have a strong and renewed focus on recruitment, assessment and approval of new foster carers with the view to achieve a net gain of **10** new carers by the end of the financial year.
- To enhance the support offer to Brent's foster carers and kinship carers, by rolling out the new fostering offer and deliver existing and new therapeutic support to increase placement stability and develop carers ability and resilience in managing more complex and challenging placements.
- To implement the first Mockingbird constellation in Brent.
- To improve the outcomes for the looked after children by providing local and in-house placement options, minimising change of social workers and placements and keeping children connected to their networks.
- To promote and improve the take up of learning opportunities for new and experienced foster carers and connected persons using different delivery methods comprising of face-to-face, online/virtual and E-Learning.
- To consolidate and strengthen the partnerships with neighbouring authorities to recruit and retain more foster carers by working collaboratively with neighbouring local authorities to implement the West London Recruitment Hub.
- To recruit, train and retain foster carers that can offer emergency placements to children and young people who come into care in unplanned circumstances.
- To continue to develop and transform the service in consultation and collaboration with care experienced young people and foster carers through regular feedback and co-designed training and steering groups.
- To ensure that the foster carers feel supported and valued by providing regular service updates, promoting a sense of belonging to a wider fostering community and celebrating the carers achievements and commitment to their role.

9.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

9.1 Stakeholder consultation and engagement takes many varied methods within the service, and we are committed to evaluating and developing new and creative ways of hearing from stakeholders.

9.2 Carers views are sought through one-to-one discussions with their SSW, Annual Foster Carer Reviews, and Support Groups. Carers are encouraged to provide written feedback on their experiences of assessment and panel process.

9.3 Children and young people provide feedback through discussions with their social worker, IRO, or their carers SSW, Looked After Children Reviews, written feedback for Annual Foster Carer Reviews, Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, Care in Action/Participation activities, Brent Care Journeys.

10.0 Financial Considerations

10.1 There are currently no financial considerations arising from this report.

11.0 Legal Considerations

11.1 There are currently no legal considerations arising from this report.

12.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

12.1 There are currently no Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) considerations arising from this report.

13.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

13.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

14.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

14.1 There are no human resource or property considerations.

15.0 Communication Considerations

15.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director of Children and Young People