	<p align="center">Corporate Parenting Committee 14 October 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 Report: 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024</p>	
Wards Affected:	ALL
Key or Non-Key Decision:	N/A
<p>Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</p>	<p>Under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the duration of the meeting, on the grounds that the attendance of representatives from the council's Children in Care council, necessitated the disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 2, Part 1 of Schedule 12A, as amended, of the Act, namely: Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.</p>
List of Appendices:	N/A
Background Papers:	N/A
<p>Contact Officer(s): (Name, Title, Contact Details)</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 April 2024 to the 30 September 2024.

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 (LACP) of the Children and Young People's Department. Service priorities for 2024/25 are:

- 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.

Progress on these priorities will be explored throughout this report.

4.2 Staffing Arrangements

- 4.2.1 The structure of the Fostering Service remains the same since the last report. The Fostering Service consists of two teams: one Recruitment, Support and Assessment Team, and one Kinship Care Team. The service is overseen by a Service Manager, however this post is currently vacant with recruitment in progress.
- 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.

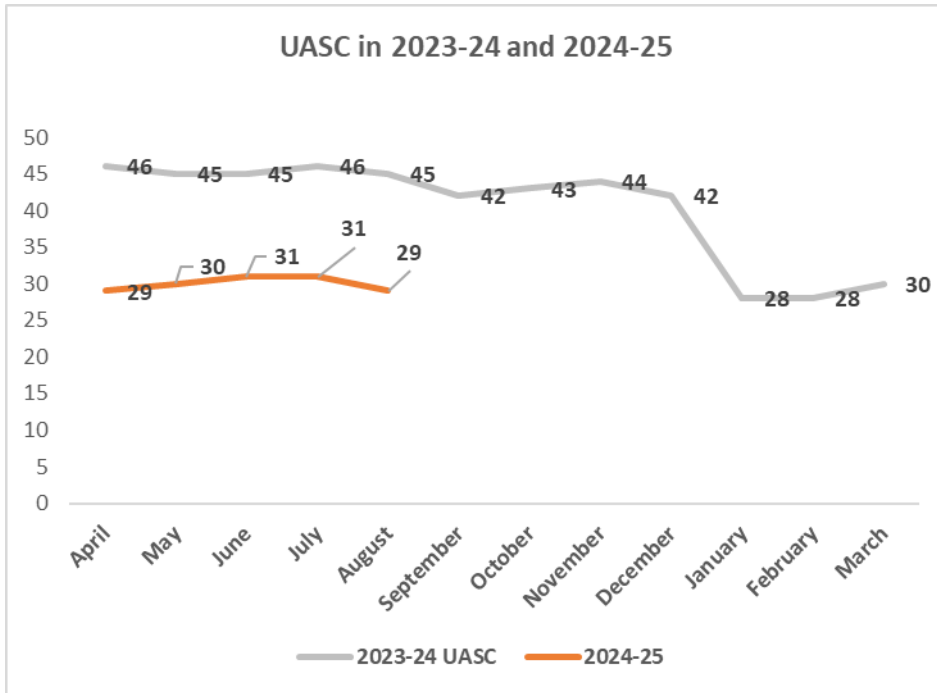
4.3 Placement Activity

4.3.1 The total number of looked after children as of 31 August 2024 was 295, which is a decrease by 12 children from 31 Mar-2024 (307).

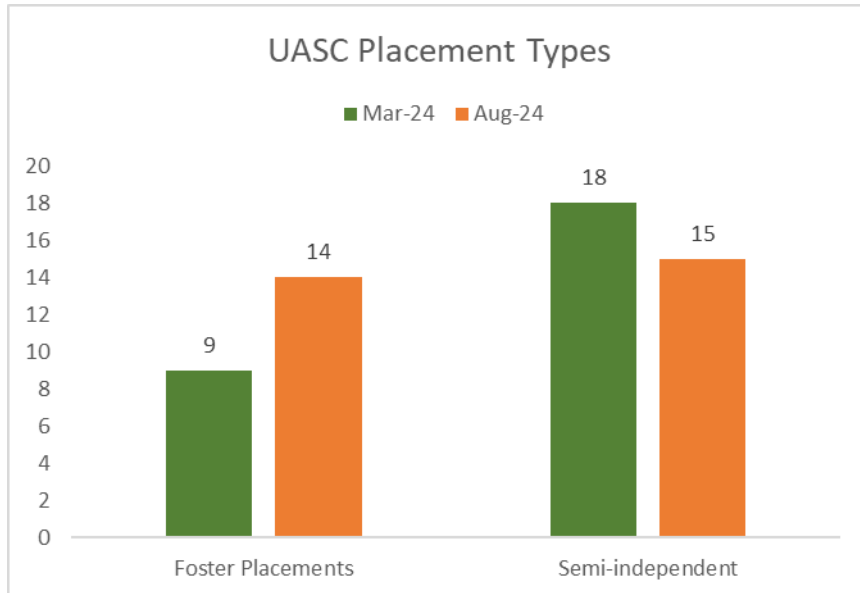
4.3.2 The corporate performance targets for 2024/2025 are as follows:

- Percentage of looked after children placed with in-house (Brent) foster carers as of 31st Aug-2024 was 16% (48 children), same as Mar-24, 16% (49 children) – below the annual target of 25%
- Percentage of looked after children placed with a relative or family friend as of the 31st Aug -2024 was 15% (43 children), a decrease by 2% from 31st Mar-2024 (17%, 52 children) – below the annual target of 20%
- Percentage of looked after children placed with independent fostering agencies as of 31st Aug -2024 was 30% (89 children), a decrease by 2% from 31st of Mar -2024 (32%, 99 children) —above the annual target of 25%
- Percentage of looked after children overall within foster placements as of 31st Aug -2024 was 61% (180 children), a decrease of 4% from 31st of Mar- 2024 which was 65% (200 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 Aug-2024, which represents 15% of all looked after children. This is a decrease by 5.6% from 31st Mar-24 (9.4%, 29 children).

4.3.4 There were 29 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) as of 31st Aug-2024, an increase of 2 UASC (27 UASC as at Mar-2024).



4.3.5 The number of UASC placed in semi-independent accommodation as of 31st Aug-2024 was 15 compared to 18 UASC as at Mar-2024, none in residential children’s home and 14 UASC placed in foster placements, compared to 9 UASC as at Mar-2024.



4.4 Recruitment and Assessment of new foster carers

Recruitment

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 continues to have a broad focus, so as to capture as much interest as possible.

4.4.2 Outreach Work: The Fostering team continued its outreach efforts during this reporting period by attending several key community events. In July, the team participated in the London Jobs Fair, where they had the opportunity to engage with local job seekers and promote fostering as a meaningful and fulfilling alternative career path. The team also attended a community event at Unity Church, where they met with local residents and faith groups to raise awareness about fostering within these communities. In September, the team was present at the Queens Park Day Festival, which was well-attended. This event provided another valuable opportunity to engage with local residents and highlight the benefits of fostering, further expanding the service's outreach and recruitment efforts.

4.4.3 Launch of New Fostering Offer: During this reporting period, the Fostering Service launched its new fostering offer with a special event in May. The launch provided a great opportunity to effectively communicate the new offer to foster carers, staff, and wider public in person. Feedback indicated that the event was well received, with carers appreciating the clarity of the new offer and the chance to engage directly with the team.

The new fostering offer includes:

- Increased fostering allowances
- A free laptop or tablet via the Brent Digital Offer
- Blue Light card-discounts from local and national retailers
- £1000 referral reward for existing foster carers who refer a friend or family member who become a Brent foster carer
- Dedicated one-to-one support from an experienced social worker
- 24/7 telephone support
- Fostering Network membership
- Annual social and celebration events for carers
- Monthly support groups
- Access to free therapeutic support and training
- Potential to be part of our first Mockingbird constellation

4.4.4 West London Fostering Hub: The Hub went "live" on the 13 May 2024.

All fostering enquiries are being routed to the Hammersmith and Fulham hosted WL Hub from our phone lines and website.

A foster carer has been recruited to the Hub Team as an enquiry officer and fostering ambassador. Feedback from enquirers has been very positive so far and we will be growing the "buddy" support element across the region moving forward for those people within the assessment process.

Support Groups for those in assessment start this month. These will focus on themes i.e. taking your first placement, managing finances and Training and Development Standards....

Fostering teams across the partnership are finalising joint Application and Initial Home Visit templates to further streamline practice.

Headline enquiry data from the first 4 months suggests that we are seeing a positive trajectory in relation to increased initial enquiries and contacts.

- The distribution of initial enquiries is relatively even across the LAs (on average between 10-14%).
- Brent's current conversion rate from initial contact to initial enquiry is 17%. The average conversion rates for initial contacts across the region is 22% with some LAs receiving a higher conversion rate. Hillingdon and Harrow are the outliers, having a higher conversion rate from initial contacts. Hillingdon's enquiry source is primarily through print media with Harrow's being mainly through events or google searches. Any patterns seen in success of different types of activity/messaging from the digital campaign are being shared through the CAN dashboard, and comms leads are meeting regularly to provide a reflective space to share what they are seeing work from continued local activity to provide learning to inform local comms and marketing for future activity across the region.
- At the end of August 2024 there were 28 people who are interested in fostering with Brent whom the Hub were in the process of contacting

Due to the time limited DfE funding for the WL Hub, we have agreed a 6-month extension to the project to September 2025 in order to fully test and evidence the impact of the Hub.

Assessments

- 4.4.5 In the reporting period, the fostering team received **28** enquiries. **14** progressed to an Initial Visit, **13** have been completed and 1 is outstanding. Of the 13 completed Initial Visits, 6 withdrew their interest, 2 were NFA, 2 are on hold(to be revisited) and **3** have progressed to stage 1 of the assessment process.
- 4.4.6 Of the 5 assessments in Stage 2 reported in the last 6 months, 2 applicants were approved in May and September 2024. 1 applicant is on hold, and 2 assessments have been terminated. Of the 2 terminated assessments, 1 was not happy with the fostering allowance rate and decided to apply to another local authority and the other due to a change of circumstances which raised health and safety concerns in the home. The two newly approved foster carers in the reporting period are between the ages of 50 and 55, one is Black British heritage and the other White European heritage.
- 4.4.7 Of the 5 assessments in Stage 1 reported in the last 6 months, 1 has progressed to stage 2, 1 remains in stage 1 due to delays in receiving the

outcome of DBS and Medical checks and 3 have pulled out. Reasons for not continuing with the assessment are; ill health, new job and unplanned pregnancy.

4.4.8 Therefore as of the 30 September, there are:

- 2 assessments in Stage 2
- 4 assessments in Stage 1
- 3 applicants to progress to Stage 1 on receipt of fully completed consent forms
- 1 applicant under further exploration

4.4.9 In this reporting period we have seen 5 mainstream foster carers resign. Exit interviews with these carers show the following reasons for ceasing to foster with Brent:

- expecting baby, no room for fostering
- retiring to care for grandchildren
- resigned due to birth children's needs
- following challenging placements, return to work full time (x2)

Therefore, we have a net increase of -3 mainstream foster carers so far this reporting year, given 2 new approvals and 5 resignations.

4.5 Support from Supervising Social Workers (SSW) and the fostering service

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 and this continues to be the case. 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 (team managers when needed) 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 As part of our commitment to engaging with foster carers and improving the service, we have continued with Foster Care Reference Group feedback sessions rebranded as "Coffee with Kelli." These informal gatherings provide foster carers with a valuable opportunity to discuss their experiences, share feedback, and offer recommendations directly to the Head of Service. Two of these sessions were held during this reporting period, and the response from carers has been very positive. The events have fostered open and engaging discussions, with carers appreciating the chance to voice their thoughts in a supportive and relaxed environment over tea and coffee.
- 4.5.6 The fostering service with the support of the Brent Communication team keep foster carers engaged and informed by providing a monthly newsletter and the carers also receive a quarterly letter directly from the Head of Service.
- 4.5.7 Fostering Walk: As part of Fostering Week in May, the service held a Fostering Walk and Picnic on the 13th of May. The event had a strong turnout, and the feedback received from foster carers was overwhelmingly positive. The walk aimed to foster relationships between carers, providing them with an informal opportunity to connect as well as raising awareness of fostering for Brent in the community. It also allowed Supervising Social Workers (SSWs) to engage with foster carers in a relaxed setting, further strengthening these key professional relationships. This event was highly valued by both carers and staff, reinforcing the importance of such gatherings for community building within the Brent fostering community.



Brent Fostering Walk
and Picnic
13 May 2024

4.5.8 Seaside Trip: The Fostering team organised a seaside trip for Brent foster carers and young people, which saw a fantastic turnout with 72 attendees. The event was highly appreciated by both carers and young people, offering a welcome break from daily routines. Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing their gratitude for the opportunity to come together and enjoy the day as a fostering community.



4.5.9 End of Year Celebration: Organising our end-of-year celebration for all Brent foster carers is underway. This special occasion is to recognise and celebrate our foster carers invaluable contributions to Brent children throughout the year. We are looking forward to honouring the dedication and hard work of our fostering community at this event.

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 April to September 2024 (15th Sept), Kinship Care team received 54 referrals for viability assessments of a relative, friend and people connected to the child. In the period from October 2023 to March 2024, Kinship Care team received 74 referrals. Kinship referrals do fluctuate month to month and are demand led.
- 4.6.3 In this reporting period, following a positive viability assessment, 27 Connected Persons assessments were allocated to social workers. 4 of these assessments did not progress as carers withdrew or did not wish to be assessed further.
- 4.6.4 12 children were placed in 10 new Reg 24/ Connected Persons placements between April 2024 to Sept 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. As at the end of September, there were 12 children in 8 unregulated placements of which 3 have been to panel and the average time over 24 weeks is approximately 10 weeks.

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. The reasons for delay in presenting to panel primarily are in relation to delayed DBS and medical checks.

- 4.6.6 9 Connected Persons foster carers were presented to the Fostering panel between April and Sept 2024.
- 4.6.7 7 children were made subjects to Special Guardianship Orders in this reporting period. 6 were granted at the conclusion of public care proceedings and 1 was granted as a result of a private application.
- 4.6.8 Kinship Care Week 2024 will take place from 07 to 13 October 2024. The following activities and events will take place:
- Library display in the Civic Centre between the 07 to 13 October 2023 about Kinship Care through time as reflected in literature. Banners will

be placed in the foyer promoting the Kinship Care week and leaflets will be distributed to raise awareness of Kinship care.

- A 'Coffee Morning' on the 10 October 2024 to celebrate the achievements of our Special Guardians and Kinship carers. This event will include some short presentations from kinship care experienced people, a video produced by 'Kinship,' and an opportunity for our Special Guardians to meet colleagues from Early Help teams, Brent Health Matters, Brent Community Engagement team, Virtual School and Adopt London West.

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 No new Panel members has been recruited in the last 6 months. Unfortunately, our Panel Chair has given notice after 10+ years of chairing Brent's Fostering Panel. We note, with thanks, the contribution that Karen Rogers has made over these years and wish her well in retirement. Recruitment for a new panel chair will commence this month.

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 April to October 2024: 9 panels were held with 34 cases presented of which:

- 9 were recommended for approval as short term connected persons
- 2 were recommended for approval as short term carer
- 16 carers were re-approved as part of their annual review cycle
- 2 Serious Concern reviews
- 3 carers whose fostering approval/status were terminated/resigned

- 1 carer was re-approved as long term carer
- 1 case presented for update

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 Brent CYP Learning Academy (formally known as 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 carers utilising different delivery methods such as face-to-face, online/virtual and E-Learning. Most sessions continue to be online in accordance the carer's preference.

4.8.2 During this reporting period, 14 learning sessions were attended by carers which included 3 workshops via Brent Safeguarding Partnership, and 6 attended jointly by wider CYP practitioners. The 5 remaining sessions were fostering specific: Paediatric First Aid for Foster Carers; Restorative Practice Approach for Foster carers; Contextual Safeguarding Training for Foster Carers; Safer Caring Training; Young Gaming and Gambling Awareness Workshop for carers.

4.8.3 The participation rates for facilitated learning sessions have remains relatively unchanged. However, there has been an increase in bookings to attendance ratio meaning significant reduction in non-attendance to booked session. As previously highlighted, low attendance at training sessions is a national issue affecting many local authorities, and Brent is no exception. The Brent CYP Learning Academy continue to promote and encourage participation by carers in mandatory trainings 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. Since the last reporting period, a new system of tracking Fostering training using our performance dashboard has assisted with improved identification of carers who have not completed or have overdue mandatory training. This has resulted in increased completion of mandatory trainings such as First Aid, Safeguarding, and Safer Caring.

4.8.4 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 the Mockingbird model, and therefore a higher expectation of carers in relation to their commitment and engagement with learning opportunities will be expected.

- 4.8.5 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 practitioners training offer. Attachment and Child Development, and WRAP: Concerned with Radicalisation are some of the wider CYP practitioner training that carers have attended during this reporting period.
- 4.8.6 The training offer is regularly reviewed to ensure that the foster carers continue to develop their professional skills, deepen their understanding of the child looked after's needs, and can keep abreast with new findings, research, and learnings from serious case reviews.
- 4.8.7 In addition to facilitated learning opportunities, the Brent CYP Learning Academy 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. We have moved to a new provider since the last report. The benefit of this new provider is that all the courses are now CPD accredited, subscriptions are based on the number of learners, not courses thus one learner can choose to complete all available courses at no extra cost to the local authority. Since the move to this new provider in May 2024, there has been a notable increase in carer's engagement with the E-Learning courses. There are some limits on the completion of E-Learning courses by carers with some reasons being carers not having access to a computer. We anticipate this will improve as carers access the Brent digital offer.

Feedback from participants:

For the Young Gaming and Gambling Awareness workshop for carers, in response to evaluation question "***From what you learned, what do you plan to apply to your role as a carer?***"

"Understand why a child might gamble or game excessively and recognize if a child might have an addiction to both."

"To become more involved when the child is playing a game, by asking questions. I.e. how is the game played? what is the goal? Does it involve other online players? Explain the risk of becoming addicted, whilst giving recognition to their skills in playing the game. Monitor the time the child is playing a game. Before the game becomes an addiction, I would discuss with the child restricted access times. Involving them in the decision making of the agreed times."

"Having conversations about the risk how it can affect them and giving tips and monitoring them."

For training Restorative Practice Approach for Foster carers, in response to evaluation question "***From what you learned, what do you plan to apply to your role as a carer?***"

"Encourage restorative practice wherever possible in the event of conflict situations."

4.9 Monitoring – reviews, allegations, complaints

4.9.1 During the reporting period, there were no allegations made against Brent foster carers and no complaints received in relation to foster carers.

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. The practitioners' achievements and good practice continued to be acknowledged and celebrated at the bi-monthly LAC and Permanency Forums. Additionally, the Fostering Panel provides feedback to practitioners on the quality of the reports and their presentation at panel.

For one practitioner, Panel fed back that "*the report and verbal presentation were excellent. The report was comprehensive, a joy to read, clear, and concise.*"

4.9.3 There have been **40** 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 The sign off for our updated Kinship Care and Support policy has been delayed, as we wanted to ensure that we had fully considered this policy in light of the recent National Kinship Strategy. This is in final stages and will be finalised and published by the end of October 2024.

The National Kinship 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 are continuing 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.

- 5.2 The other priority for this area of work in the next reporting period will be to finalise the work started on redesigning our website page, to make it more user friendly and informative for kinship carers.
- 5.3 The Kinship Care Team continues to work 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 twice in the 2023-24 academic year. The sessions are facilitated by a WEST Child and Family Specialist. 6 carers have completed the full programme over the last 12-month period. The next programme will run in Nov/Dec 2024.

The content includes:

- Mentalising for self and others and techniques to support this.
- An exploration of the carers' experience of being parented/cared for and how this influences their approach to caring.
- Overview of trauma and how this impacts emotions and behaviour.

Outcome measures show an increase in carers' mental wellbeing and an increase in carers' interest and curiosity about their child's mental states, indicating an increase in mentalizing and reflective capacities.

Feedback from carers:

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

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

"I was looking forward to Wednesday mornings. With you I could be a little bit soft with my heart and find solutions to my problems."

"Because we have the opportunity to share our experiences, I now don't feel alone."

"I can talk without being judged. There are things I can talk about which I

can't talk about with other grandmothers.”

- 6.4 The Looked After Children's Resilience Service (LRS) test and learn project was launched in January 2024. This is a preventative approach, using CAMHS provider collaborative funding and was tested until July 2024 in Brent and then expanded to include the Shared Fostering Services for Hammersmith and Fulham, Westminster, and Kensington and Chelsea from September 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 19 referrals for children aged between 4 to 16, with positive outcomes related to stabilising and avoiding placement breakdowns. The next reporting period will see the LRS training extended and delivered to SSW and CSW in Brent so that the content/tools can be reinforced by the whole professional network and benefit all carers, not just those who are working with LRS.

7.0 Recruitment and retention

- 7.1 Recruitment and retention remains the key priority for the fostering service, and this reporting period has seen significant activity and efforts to improve both the recruitment of new foster carers and the retention of the carers we have.
- 7.2 In order to increase the number of in-house foster carers and to reach parity with the other neighbouring boroughs, Brent renewed our Fostering Offer which was launched in April 2024. Please refer to section 4.4.3.

The new offer information is available on our website and has been sent out to all carers via Supervising Social Workers, Foster Carer newsletter and HOS communication. It has also been shared at Support Groups and at Reference Group meetings.

The digital offer has been positively received with 34 carers receiving a laptop or tablet to date. 30 carers are awaiting delivery of a device.

- 7.3 The service is working with Brent Leisure colleagues to ensure carers have access to free and reduced cost leisure facilities and activities around the borough. We are simultaneously working on a proposal with Leisure to test out impact and effectiveness of free gym and swim access for foster carers.
- 7.4 Brent is officially a "Fostering Friendly" local authority. 'Fostering Friendly' is The Fostering Network's programme to encourage employers to support fostering, and in particular, foster carers. As an employer who is a member of this programme, Brent have made sure that we have in place a fostering

friendly HR policy for all foster carers in the council's employment (regardless of their fostering service)

A marketing campaign is being designed currently to raise awareness of our Fostering Friendly status and to promote fostering for Brent within our council staff group during the autumn term which will result in more fostering applications from Brent employees.

- 7.5 The 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.

The service is currently working hard to recruit a Home Hub carer. The role of the Mockingbird hub carer is crucial to the success of the programme, and it has been challenging to identify an inhouse carer who is able to take on this rewarding role. The primary reasons for this are: no suitable space, work, have long term children in placement. Moving forward we are expanding efforts to recruit to this role by considering prospective carers with previous fostering experience, kinship carers, and we are also advertising externally.

- 7.6 Following the success of the 'Any of Us' CAN Digital project in 2023, Brent have continued to work with CAN Digital and over 100 other councils and children's trusts this year to produce a new film called 'Everyone' to promote Local Authority fostering. This film will appeal to a wide audience and will add to our marketing resources and encourage people to foster for Brent. The film will be launched nationally in Birmingham in October 2024, and will be shared with Corporate Parenting Committee members.

8.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 Carers views are sought through one-to-one discussions with their SSW, Annual Foster Carer Reviews, Support Groups and Foster Carer Reference Group. Carers are encouraged to provide written feedback on their experiences of assessment and panel process.
- 8.3 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.

9.0 Financial Considerations

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

10.0 Legal Considerations

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

11.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

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

12.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

12.1 There are no climate change or environmental considerations.

13.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations (if appropriate)

13.1 There are no human resource or property considerations.

14.0 Communication Considerations

14.1 At this stage there are not any communication considerations.

Report sign off:

Nigel Chapman

Corporate Director of Children and Young People