

 Brent	Cabinet 27 July 2026
	Report from the Corporate Director, Children, Young People and Community Development
	Lead Member – Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Employment and Climate Action (Councillor Jake Rubin)
West London Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme	
Wards Affected:	All
Key or Non-Key Decision:	Key
Open or Part/Fully Exempt: (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
List of Appendices:	None
Background Papers:	Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children - GOV.UK
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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks approval for the Council to enter into a new, updated Collaboration Agreement in respect of the West London Regional Fostering Recruitment Hub along with Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster Councils. The updated Collaboration Agreement will have a wider remit and requires Cabinet approval.
- 1.2 The report sets out the intention to expand the work, started in 2024, with the West London Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme (Foster with West London – FwWL). Initially this programme focused on the fostering “front door” to increase the numbers of fostering enquiries and applications and to work together in respect of a shared identity and marketing approach. This new updated collaboration agreement will enable Brent to continue to work

with West London partners to expand this regional model towards an end-to-end recruitment of foster carer service. This will include assessments of new fostering families as well as training all new foster carers.

- 1.3 The DfE have been clear in recent policy of their expectation that every local authority should move towards joining a regional fostering hub to achieve the long-term policy objectives set out in 'Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children', February 2026.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Council enters into a new and updated Collaboration Agreement.
- 2.2 That the Council approve to delegate authority to the Corporate Director Children, Young People and Community Development, in consultation with the Corporate Director of Finance and Resources, to finalise the terms of the Collaboration Agreement.

3.0 Detail

3.1 Cabinet Member Forward

- 3.1.1 This proposal reflects Brent's commitment to ensuring that more children and young people can benefit from safe, stable and loving foster homes within their local community. By entering into an updated Collaboration Agreement with neighbouring local authorities, Brent will strengthen its ability to recruit, assess and support foster carers, helping to increase the number of fostering households available for children who need care.
- 3.1.2 Like many councils across the country, Brent faces growing challenges in recruiting sufficient foster carers to meet increasing demand. Working collaboratively with other local authorities will enable us to reach a wider audience, attract more prospective carers and provide a more streamlined and consistent journey for those interested in fostering. The development of a regional approach to foster carer assessments and training will help make the best use of resources and expertise, whilst maintaining Brent's responsibility supporting and retaining foster carers.
- 3.1.3 By increasing the number of local foster carers, we can reduce reliance on costly external placements and enable more children to remain connected to their schools, families and communities. Ultimately, this proposal supports Brent's ambition to give every child the opportunity to thrive, by ensuring that more children in care can grow up in stable, nurturing homes provided by foster carers who are supported to deliver the highest standards of care.

3.2 Contribution to Borough Plan Priorities and Strategic Context

- 3.2.1 This work contributes to the following borough priorities:
- The Best Start in Life
 - Prosperity and Stability
 - A Healthier Brent

- Thriving Communities

- 3.2.2 For Brent children in care 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 can meet their holistic needs. The Brent fostering service, and the West London Fostering Hub, contribute to these priorities by recruiting, assessing, and supporting foster carers and connected person carers for Brent children and young people. There are currently not enough in-house Brent fostering places to support all our Brent children in care.
- 3.2.3 Children in care benefit from living with in-house foster carers because placements are typically closer to their families, schools, friends, and local communities. This helps maintain important relationships and provides greater stability, which can improve outcomes for children in care. In-house placements are also significantly more cost-effective than independent fostering agency placements, helping the local authority make best use of its resources. Whilst the cost of FwWL is a significant upfront cost to the Local Authority, obtaining more in-house foster carers will enable significant cost avoidance.
- 3.2.4 Despite sustained efforts to increase the number of foster carers through existing local approaches, progress has been insufficient to meet current and projected needs for Brent's children in care. A regional approach offers an opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of recruitment activity through greater collaboration, shared resources and a wider market presence. While there is some uncertainty associated with this change, it is considered a necessary step in responding to the current challenge.

3.3 Background

- 3.3.1 The Council entered into a collaboration agreement for a regional fostering support hub with West London authorities in October 2023. Approval will be sought for this arrangement to be extended to 31 March 2027.
- 3.3.2 On 04 February 2026 the Department for Education (DfE) published fostering reform policy for local authorities titled 'Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children'. Highlights of this policy include the following:
- The reforms aim to avoid delays in assessment of foster carers, reduce the reliance on residential care and avoid children living further away from their home Local Authority.
 - Local Authorities that do not have a Fostering Hub **should create/enter into a Regional Fostering Hub as soon as possible**. Brent are already in an established Regional Fostering Hub.
 - Local Authorities with Fostering Hubs (such as Brent) should expand to an 'end to end' model. This means Fostering Hubs include processing potential fostering enquiries, completing fostering assessments and training of new foster carers. Presently Foster with West London (FwWL) is supporting with marketing and the 'front door' element only.

- 3.3.3 England's Minister for Children and Families, Josh MacAlister, has written to every local authority asking all to embrace the fostering reforms. According to the DfE, by participating in the expansion of FwWL, Brent will be well positioned to align with the DfE's direction of travel and contribute to the development of a more collaborative and sustainable fostering recruitment system. This initiative presents an opportunity to embrace innovation, build on existing strengths, and adopt new approaches that can enhance our ability to meet the needs of children, families and foster carers in Brent. Ultimately, it reflects our commitment to continuously improve outcomes and ensure that local provision is responsive to current and future demand for care placements.
- 3.3.4 The DfE undertook consultation on the impact on fostering panels with some minor amendments agreed as a result. The DfE also intend to update statutory guidance, Fostering National Minimum Standards and the Fostering Regulations to remove some potential barriers and reforming the approach taken when allegations are made in respect of foster carers.
- 3.3.5 Separate to this agreement, but awarded under the same grant stream, all authorities agree to sustain delivery of the Mockingbird programme, supported by match funding from DfE. The Mockingbird model is an offer for approved foster carers which is proven to assist in the retention and support of foster carers. Brent's Mockingbird project went live in May 2025 and continues to support Brent's fostering families.
- 3.3.6 Since the DfE policy publication Brent has participated in a series of design workshops and planning meetings to explore Brent's involvement in the proposed expanded arrangement. The FwWL programme team, at Hammersmith and Fulham, have in parallel been working through the up-to-date minimum requirements and design expectations of the programme, which must be met to remain in the programme and access continued grant funding. This has informed the final design and associated cost plan set out below.
- 3.3.7 The below slide establishes what responsibilities will remain with Brent under the proposed arrangements and what will lie with FwWL.

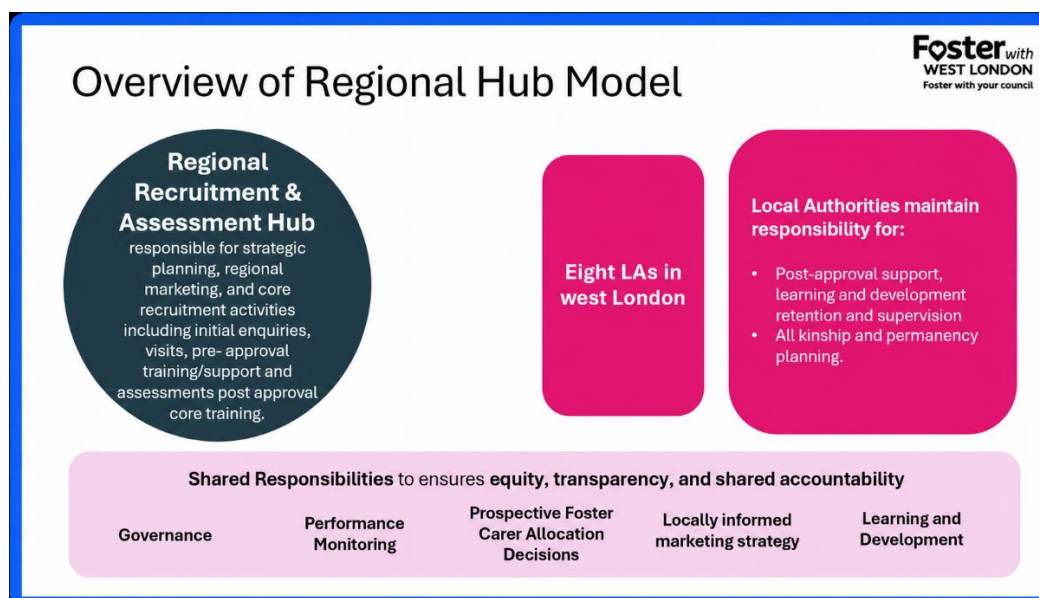
Under the existing arrangement FwWL undertake a number of activities to support Brent's fostering activity including:

- Marketing
- Screening and processing all enquiries to support potential fostering households to start their fostering application
- Undertaking initial home visits to potential fostering households

Under the proposed new arrangement, as well as the 3 activities above, FwWL will undertake the following:

- Undertaking the whole fostering assessment process, up to approval at a new regional fostering panel

- Providing initial training to foster carers



3.3.8 FwWL launched in May 2024, achieving 41 approvals to date across the region, representing a 37% increase in approved foster carers across the region compared to pre-Hub figures, representing 124% of the DfE programme target. It is important to highlight that FwWL included foster carers who were already in assessment (before the launch of FwWL) in these figures as well as 15 'weekender only' respite carers recruited by Ealing as part of a pilot scheme. In Brent we have not yet seen a significant increase in fostering households since joining FwWL; please see table below outlining new mainstream fostering household approvals for Brent.

Financial Year	Number of new fostering households
2022-2023	8
2023-2024	3
2024-2025	6
2025-2026	5

3.3.9 Equity of arrangements under the new model will be key. FwWL have confirmed the current partnership operates under a jointly agreed regional allocations policy. This sets out a clear expectation that prospective carers are encouraged to foster for the local authority in which they reside and pay council tax to. All local authorities are aware that foster carers cannot be forced to become foster carers for a local authority, the choice remains theirs. Carers can decide to foster for another borough if they wish. At present if a potential new foster carer lives in Brent but states they would like to foster for Harrow, their referral/allocation will be passed to Harrow. If the foster carer does not have a preference, the referral/allocation will be passed to the local authority where they reside. Brent have made clear to FwWL that Brent will request a clause in the agreement to review the allocations policy to ensure there is equity across the region.

3.4 Funding Arrangements

3.4.1 The DfE provided grant funding for operational running costs of FwWL as well as set-up transformation costs during 2025/26 of £600k:

- 50% was allocated to contribute towards the operational costs of the existing service, representing approximately 25% of the total cost of running the current model.
- The remaining 50% supported the transition to an end-to-end service model, covering approximately 30% of the associated transition costs.

As a result of delays in establishing the model across 8 boroughs, in financial year 2026/27, FwWL forecast an underspend of approximately £400,000, with costs reduced as the end-to-end service will not be operational until 1st October 2026). After applying the underspend and the DfE grant contribution, the remaining local authority contribution based on an even split for this financial year 2026/27 is c£56k.

For financial year 2027/28, the DfE has indicated that no further grant funding will be available for regional hubs. This will be the first full year of operating the end-to-end service, with a projected total service cost of £1,780k. If this cost is shared evenly across 8 participating local authorities, the estimated contribution per LA will be approximately £222,562.

The cost plan reflects the 'end-to-end' model co-designed and agreed regionally. However, some costs have had to be estimated based on the information available at this time with amendments possible as DfE requirements become clearer in the coming months and as the model embeds.

3.4.2 Additional Grant Funding Opportunities. In addition to the core DfE grant, participation in the programme provides access to several supplementary funding streams this Financial Year:

- Mockingbird Grant – £80,000. Available to extend the network of support around foster carers.
- Room Makers Funding – £50,000 to £120,000. Designed to support the creation of high-quality additional child places by extending existing experienced foster carers homes. Due to the limited funding for this it is likely this funding will be used for room dividers and garden rooms.
- Innovation Fund – Total Bid Submitted: £1.5 million (across two years)
The regional hub has submitted a bid totalling £1.5 million to support large-scale innovation and transformation, with the development of regional specialist carers aligned with the end-to-end programme. The outcome of this bid will be known in summer 2026.

3.4.3 The expanded FwWL end-to-end model is expected to go live on 01 October 2026. FwWL asked all 8 Local Authorities to confirm their indicative commitment to FwWL by 01 June 2026, in advance of seeking formal Cabinet approval. As outlined above, the previous Lead Member for Children and

Young People and Schools, provided indicative approval for Brent's participation in the continuation and expansion of FwWL on the 18 May 2026.

- 3.4.4 The costs of the FwWL expansion are required to be met by the participating local authorities, as outlined below.

Cost Plan Summary

Table 1: FwWL current 'as is' costs

As Is - Original Model (Supporting Potential Enquiries Only)		
Area of spend	FTE	£
<i>Staffing inc. management & finance support</i>	8.5	£574,254
<i>Communications</i>		£122,000
<i>Staff DBS, Memberships, Staff L&D, HR, IT, Admin & Legal fees, Travel, etc</i>		£66,567
<i>Website support, maintenance & development</i>		£12,200
Total		£775,021

Table 2: FwWL End-to-End Ops

End to End Structure - Ops		
Area of spend	FTE	£
<i>Staffing inc. management & finance support</i>	18	£1,398,946
<i>Communications</i>		£140,000
<i>Memberships, Staff L&D, HR, IT, Foster Carer L&D core training 1st year, Admin & Legal fees, Travel etc</i>		£241,552
<i>Website support, maintenance & development</i>		£12,200
Total		£1,780,498

Table 3: Transformation and 2026/27 Costs

26/27 Forecast Cost - Assumption: 6 months As Is (Recruitment Only) Model, 6 months End-to-End Ops Structure, 1 Year Transformation Costs		
<i>As Is (Enquiries Only)</i>	<i>6 months</i>	£387,510
<i>End-to-End Ops</i>	<i>6 months</i>	£890,249
<i>Transformation</i>	<i>1 Year</i>	£176,562
Total FY 26/27		£1,454,322
<i>Underspend 25/26</i>		<i>£401,914</i>
<i>DFE Funding - Inc. £50k transformation funding</i>		<i>£602,157</i>
Grand Total		£450,251
Split by 8 - Split evenly per LA		£56,281

3.5 Anticipated Benefits

The anticipated benefits of entering into the expanded FwWL model are:

- Brent's involvement in the expansion of FwWL positions the Council at the forefront of this agenda, enabling it to contribute to and benefit from a more collaborative, sustainable and effective regional fostering recruitment system.
- FwWL has been operating for 26 months, and this extension will allow the joint fostering hub to continue to develop and strengthen.
- Increased enquiries, which we are seeing in performance data, should mean increased fostering approvals in the coming 12 months.
- More children will be able to live locally.
- The expansion of a regional approach will reduce competition between local authorities. Authorities will work more closely together to increase the number of fostering households.
- With more available fostering households for Brent children, this will reduce the use of Independent Fostering Agency placements, and potentially the use of residential placements.
- With marketing, outreach, assessments of new foster carers, training of new foster carers and initial fostering panels all moving to FwWL, the remaining Brent fostering social workers can focus attention and resources on fostering support and the retention of approved foster carers.
- To ensure the new foster carers coming through from FwWL are of a high standard, Brent will have access to FwWL's recording system to closely monitor new carers. The decision to register a foster carer with Brent, after they have been to FwWL's fostering panel, ultimately lies with the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) in Brent. The ADM will review the fostering assessment, supplementary checks and the fostering panel minutes before registering the foster carer with Brent. Brent's fostering ADM is the Head of Looked After Children and Permanency.

3.6 Potential Risks

The potential risks of entering into the new agreement to expand FwWL include:

- The significant cost investment with no guarantee of a minimum number of foster carers.
- The national approach by DfE is to support and encourage foster carers to 'foster with your local council'. Due to Brent's housing demographic, FwWL may struggle to identify new fostering households within Brent and may not benefit from obtaining carers who live in other nearby local authorities.
- The guidance from DfE asks fostering hubs to ensure there is a consistent regional approach to marketing and branding. As a result the

Brent fostering service cannot continue to use 'Brent Fostering' marketing materials or branding. This may be confusing for those considering fostering with Brent.

- FwWL have made clear they do not have capacity to undertake all the outreach activities in Brent that the Brent Fostering service undertake. FwWL will also not have the local Brent knowledge and connections currently held by the Brent fostering service. Brent will need to continue to promote some awareness of fostering within the borough.
- There is a risk that the regional programme may not achieve the anticipated increase in fostering places. Should this occur, local authorities may be left without sufficiently robust local fostering services to revert to, potentially reducing their ability to meet statutory responsibilities and creating additional pressure on placement sufficiency. Although the requirement to be a hub is not mandatory, there is a clear policy shift towards regional working. If Brent do not participate in the FwWL expansion there is a risk we will not benefit from the new, creative, funded activity moving forward to address local and national placement sufficiency concerns.

3.7 Due to the size and demography of our area, recruitment of suitable foster carers is challenging, resulting in low approval rates across West London (with approvals per year ranging from an average of 0-10 per LA). This very small, LA based approach reinforces the need for a consistent, expanded and ambitious regional approach that can generate sufficient volume to achieve meaningful efficiencies.

3.8 In July 2026 FwWL will release secondments for social workers, which will be open to current social workers based in the fostering services of each of the 8 local authorities. Should a Brent social worker apply and accept one of these secondments, their post will not be recruited to which will provide a saving to Brent. Should any of the Brent social workers not be successful in applying for secondments based at FwWL, redeployment of social workers to other teams and services will be carefully considered as part of a managing change exercise in order to support the funding required.

4.0 Stakeholder and ward member consultation and engagement

4.1 There have been a number of stakeholder consultation activities in relation to the DfE reforms for fostering. These have and will include national surveys, workshops and meetings to discuss the reforms and develop a proposal for West London. The previous and current Lead Members for Children have been updated on progress of regional developments. Existing foster carers and Brent children in care will also continue to be updated and consulted upon future developments.

5.0 Financial Considerations

5.1 The cost of the FwWL programme is outlined in Section 3.4 of this report.

- 5.2 The current budget allocated to the Brent Fostering Assessment and Support teams is insufficient to meet the full costs associated with the expansion of the FwWL programme. It is estimated that the programme will create budget pressures of approximately £31k in the current financial year and £203k in 2027/28, should there be no changes to the existing structure.
- 5.3 These pressures are expected to be offset through the use of central government transformation grants awarded to the directorate, covering the period up to March 2029. In addition, a service redesign that can streamline current processes to reduce internal resource requirements will reduce associated costs, thereby helping to mitigate the financial impact of the FwWL programme. However, it is worth noting that if the programme is successful, additional resources may be required for the on-going support to new foster carers.
- 5.4 In a broader context, the average weekly cost of an in-house foster carer is approximately £433, compared with significantly higher costs for placements through independent agencies. As a result, each additional in-house foster carer generates a saving of around £600 per week (approximately £31,000 per year) that would otherwise be spent on independent placements. To ensure value for money, FwWL would need to recruit at least eight new foster carers in 2027/28, when all boroughs are expected to meet the full cost of the programme.

6.0 Legal Considerations

- 6.1 The Agreement for the West London Regional Recruitment Hub Collaboration Agreement was entered into on 1 October 2023 for a period of 1 year and 5 months and was subsequently extended to allow for further extensions. Officers recommend that the Council enter into a new and updated Collaboration Agreement subject to Cabinet approval; with the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham as the Lead Authority. The Council may rely on the general power of competence set out in the Localism Act 2011 to enter into such Collaboration Agreement
- 6.2 The assessment of foster carers is governed by the following pieces of legislation: Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013, statutory guidance to the Children Act 1989. Part 4 and statutory guidance on Fostering services: national minimum standards. These statutory responsibilities should be set out in the Collaboration Agreement.
- 6.3 Contract Standing Order 85 sets out certain requirements for the entry into a partnership agreement and for collaborative procurements with other public bodies. CSO 85 provides that:
- a) No Partnership Arrangements may be entered into unless they are approved by the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources and a formal agreement covering the arrangements is signed by the parties. - Officers have confirmed in Paragraph 5.5 that the Corporate Director,

Finance and Resources has approved entry into an inter-authority co-operation agreement.

- b) Any Partnership Arrangement or Collaborative Procurement which includes delegation of powers shall be approved by the Cabinet (or, where relevant, Full Council)
- c) Any Collaborative Procurement shall comply with these Standing Orders and Financial Regulations unless: (i) agreed otherwise in consultation with the Head of Procurement and in writing by the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources and the Monitoring Officer; or (ii) in the case of a High Value Contract, the agreement of the Cabinet is obtained under Standing Order 84(a). For the purposes of this Standing Order the Contract Value shall be calculated on the estimated value of the Council's part of the contract only.
- d) Any agreement between the Council and one or more other body which includes any payment by the Council in respect of the costs of carrying out a Collaborative Procurement shall comply with these Standing Orders unless agreed otherwise in writing by the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources and the Monitoring Officer – The proposed Collaboration Agreement does not require payment by Brent Council to the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

6.4 Legal Services have not had sight of the new Collaboration Agreement for the new proposed service as this agreement is still being drafted by H&F Legal service.

6.5 It is likely that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment Regulations 2006) TUPE may apply in the event that employees who are assigned to the service are transferred from the Council.

7.0 Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Considerations

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

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

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

- 7.3 Having due regard involves the need to enquire into whether and how a proposed decision disproportionately affects people with a protected characteristic and the need to consider taking steps to meet the needs of persons who share a protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it. This includes removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by persons who share a protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.
- 7.4 There is no prescribed manner in which the council must exercise its public sector equality duty but having an adequate evidence base for its decision is necessary.
- 7.5 The proposals in this report have been subject to screening and officers believe that there are no adverse equality implications.

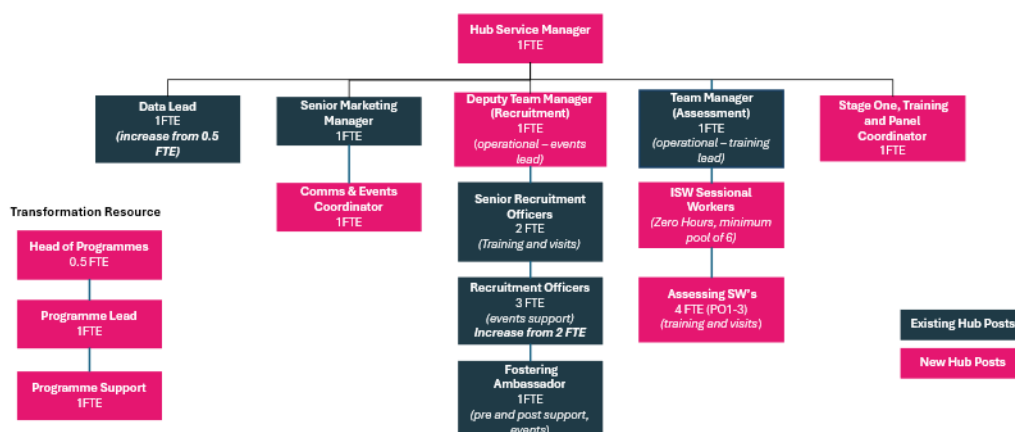
8.0 Climate Change and Environmental Considerations

- 8.1 There are no specific climate change or environmental considerations.

9.0 Human Resources/Property Considerations

- 9.1 As outlined above, Brent staff based in Brent's fostering and kinship teams are able to apply for the secondment opportunities that will be advertised within FWWL (staff would be based with Hammersmith and Fulham local authority). At this stage there are no TUPE arrangements; as outlined above TUPE may apply in the event that employees who are assigned to the service are transferred from the Council. Staff based within Brent's fostering assessment and support team have been made aware that their work will focus on fostering support instead of fostering assessment and support when the expansion of FWWL takes place.
- 9.2 Any future staffing considerations will be subject to the Council's Managing Change process.
- 9.3 The below slide outlines the proposed structure for FWWL from 01 Oct 2026.

End-to-end hub Staffing Structure



Additional resource amount for the Hub operation **9.5 FTE** to extend delivery to support end-to-end. Plus **2.5 FTE** temporary resource to facilitate transformation to an end-to-end model.

This represents the minimum staffing requirement. This should be considered scalable and subject to ongoing review once baseline delivery is implemented.

10.0 Communication Considerations

- 10.1 Information relating to the DfE Fostering Reforms is available in the public domain. Communication in respect of Brent's involvement with FwWL is an ongoing process. We are updating our current fostering community using our fostering newsletter and WhatsApp community/channel. Brent staff are updated via email, internal team meetings, service meetings and supervision.

Report sign off:

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