

**AGENDA ITEM: 12** Page nos. 18 – 25

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Meeting	Business Management Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Date	11 July 2011
<b>Subject</b>	<b>Fostering Recruitment Task and Finish Group – Draft Report</b>
Report of	Scrutiny Office
Summary	This report presents the findings and recommendations of the Fostering Recruitment Task and Finish Group.

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Officer Contributors	John Murphy – Scrutiny Officer (National Graduate Development Programme)
Status (public or exempt)	Public
Wards affected	All
Enclosures	Appendix 1 – Report of the Fostering Recruitment Task and Finish Group
For decision by	Business Management Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee

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## 1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 **Members of the Committee consider the findings of the Fostering Recruitment Task and Finish Group, as set out in the report attached at Appendix 1.**
- 1.2 **Members of the Committee discuss and agree the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.**
- 1.3 **That agreed findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group are forwarded to the Executive for their consideration.**
- 1.4 **Members of the Committee be requested to give consideration to including in the Overview and Scrutiny Future Work Programme the proposal to establish a Task and Finish Group to consider the reasons behind the shortfall in attracting adoptive parents for children with complex needs and investigate opportunities for improving this situation.**

## 2. CORPORATE PRIORITIES AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Sub-Committees, Panels and Task and Finish Groups must ensure that the work of Scrutiny is reflective of the Council's priorities.

2.2 The three priority outcomes set out in the 2010/13 Corporate Plan were: –

- Better services with less money
- Sharing opportunities, sharing responsibilities
- A successful London suburb.

2.3 The proposals contained within the report of the Task and Finish Group contribute to the achievement of the 2010/13 Corporate Plan priorities of:

**Better Services with Less Money**, as the following strategic objectives and top performance targets and improvement initiatives are applicable:

- Increasing the percentage of children in care, aged under 16, who are in London Borough of Barnet foster placements to 54 per cent in 2010/11.
- Make sure that we get the best value from our resources across the public sector, including our people and assets;
- The launching of a new foster carer recruitment campaign to increase opportunities for stable, local placements.

**Sharing Opportunities, Sharing Responsibilities**, as the following strategic objectives and top performance targets are applicable:

- Working with residents and partners to ensure that every child can reach their potential by drawing on the expertise of our diverse

communities.

**2.4** Since the Task and Finish Group completed their review (in April 2011), an updated Corporate Plan has been published for 2011/12 which has the following corporate priorities:

- Better services with less money
- Sharing opportunities, sharing responsibilities
- A successful London suburb

**2.5** The proposals contained within the report of the Task and Finish Group contribute to the achievement of the 2011/12 Corporate Plan priorities of:

**Better services with less money:**

- Focus on improving and streamlining our customers' access and assessment services so residents find them easier to use

**Sharing opportunities, sharing responsibilities:**

- Everyone should be able to share in Barnet's success, but we recognise that some people need more support than others to achieve this.
- Working with residents and partners, we aim to ensure that every child can reach their potential and that adults in need of support are confident to live independently

**Strategic objective:**

- Recruit and retain more foster carers to support children in care to have a happy childhood and successful transition into adulthood.

**Performance target:**

- Increase to 55 per cent the percentage of children in care under 16 that are in council (rather than agency) foster placements.

**2.6** Barnet Children and Young People Plan 2010/11- 2012/13 also has a number of priorities that are applicable to the work of this review including:

- Increasing stability of placements of looked after children by increasing from 64 per cent to 74 per cent the stability of placements in terms of length.
- Increase the percentage of children in care, aged under 16, who are in London Borough of Barnet foster placements from 53 per cent to 54 per cent.

### **3. RELEVANT PREVIOUS DECISIONS**

- 3.1 Policy & Performance Overview & Scrutiny Committee, 2 June 2010, Agenda Item 7 (Overview and Scrutiny Appointments) – the Committee established a Task and Finish Group to consider Fostering and Adoption Recruitment
- 3.2 Business Management Overview & Scrutiny Sub-Committee, 13 September 2010, Decision 11 (Overview & Scrutiny Appointments) – the Sub-Committee appointed Members to sit on the Fostering and Adoption Recruitment Task and Finish Group.

### **4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES**

- 4.1 None saved those referred to in the report

### **5. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

- 5.1 Barnet has the second largest population of children and young people in London, and is increasingly diverse. Within Barnet Council's Corporate Plan (2011-12) a number of priorities have been identified which aim to improve the outcomes of children and young people living in Barnet.
- 5.2 Barnet Council is committed to monitoring closely the outcomes for the borough's most vulnerable children and young people, through the intelligent use of data analyses and by ensuring that the voices of all parts of the community are heard. This will include children in care who have often had less positive outcomes than other children in Barnet.
- 5.3 Barnet Council believes that everyone should be able to share in Barnet's success while recognising that some people need more support than others to achieve this. Working with residents and partners in drawing on the expertise of the borough's diverse communities, Barnet Council aims to ensure that every child can reach their potential.

### **6. USE OF RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS (Finance, Procurement, Performance & Value for Money, Staffing, IT, Property, Sustainability)**

- 6.1 Previous reviews undertaken by the Children's Services which considered the performance of fostering recruitment identified that in-house locally based provision of fostering placements was preferential to placements with independent agencies due to cost and locality of placement. The research suggested that placements through independent agencies are significantly more expensive and may involve placing children outside the borough away from their local community.
- 6.2 Recommendation one of the Task and Finish Group proposes the introduction of an online electronic or e-form to enable people with an interest in fostering to submit expressions of interest online. The cost implications associated with this recommendation are explored in 6.1.1 and 6.1.2 below:

- 6.2.1 Currently, the council has a contractual relationship with a supplier of e-forms called Ebase. Ebase build, maintain and host the council's electronic/e-forms forms. Data collected is retained by them, and then e-mailed through to the relevant council departments. In the past, Ebase have charged £1,000 per day to build new forms and the total cost is often proportional to the complexity of the form itself. Accordingly, the precise cost of using Ebase to develop the e-form would be dependent on the requirements of the Fostering Team.
- 6.2.2 The council's web transformation project, which forms part of the New Support /Customer Services Organisation One Barnet project, is seeking to introduce a new platform for the council's website. The new platform will have a "forms component" that should make it much easier for the council to develop and deploy forms internally. The cost of purchasing the forms component will be built into the web project budget. Accordingly, the cost of using this option for developing and introducing an e-form is expected to be minimal.
- 6.3 Recommendation three proposes that the Children' Service compare the cost of placements provided by the council with those provided by independent fostering agencies. It is anticipated that this assessment will be contained within the existing approved Children's Service budget. Children' Services have suggested that future work could be undertaken to build upon recommendation three, particularly relating to reviewing support services provided by the service to foster carers and children in their care.
- 6.4 Recommendations two and four proposed by the Task and Finish Group are anticipated to be contained within the existing approved Children's Service budgets.

## **7. LEGAL ISSUES**

- 7.1 As an English local authority, the London Borough of Barnet's functions and responsibilities in terms of the provision of fostering services are determined by national legislation laid out in the:
- Children Act 1989;
  - Children Act 2004; and
  - Children and Young Persons Act 2008.
- 7.2 Furthermore, the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 requires local authorities, in exercising their social services functions, to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, updated April 2011, provides guidance to local authorities on how they should fulfil their statutory requirements. The guidance states that local authorities should comply with national legislation and guidance when exercising their functions, unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons that justify a variation.

- 7.3 In order to operate lawfully, the Fostering Service must also comply with the statutory requirements outlined in various Statutory Instruments, but in particular the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.
- 7.4 The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, updated April 2011, provides guidance to local authorities on how they should fulfil their statutory requirements. The guidance states that local authorities should comply with national legislation and guidance when exercising their functions, unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons that justify a variation.

## **8. CONSTITUTIONAL POWERS**

- 8.1 The scope of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees is contained within Part 2, Article 6 of the Council's Constitution.
- 8.2 The Terms of Reference of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees are set out in the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules (Part 4 of the Constitution).
- 8.3 Item 6 of Business Management Overview & Scrutiny Committee Terms of Reference states that the role of the Committee is to:
- “To coordinate and monitor the work of scrutiny panels and task and finish groups, including considering reports and recommendations and referring to the relevant decision-making body.”

## **9. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 9.1 The membership of the Fostering and Adoption Recruitment Task and Finish Group was approved at the Business Management Overview & Scrutiny Sub-Committee on 13 September 2010.
- 9.2 Since being established the Task and Finish Group met on seven occasions. The first meeting of the Task and Finish Group took place on 17 January 2011. Councillor Thompstone was appointed as Chairman and, after consultation with Children's Service officers, the following scope was agreed for the Task and Finish Group:
- How can the council improve foster carer recruitment; and
  - Identify the key factors that contribute to good foster carer retention and establish how the council can utilise these factors to increase retention of foster carers.
- 9.3 The Task and Finish Group initially considered investigating the reasons behind the shortfall in attracting adoptive parents for children with complex needs and exploring the opportunities for improving this situation. However, as the Task and Finish Group's work has progressed they have found that, due to the complexity of the issues faced in the recruitment and retention of

foster carers and limited time constraints in which to conduct the review, the Task and Finish Group would produce a more effective piece of work by focusing primarily on the council's fostering service.

- 9.4 Children's Service officers have suggested that the issue of recruiting adoptive parents for children with complex needs would require a separate Task and Finish Group to review this specific issue independently.
- 9.5 Since being established the Task and Finish Group met on seven occasions. At the meeting on 17 January 2011, the Group agreed their terms of reference and received from the Acting Director for Children's Social Care who provided an overview of issues and challenges faced in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- 9.6 Over the following weeks, the Task and Finish Group met with key stakeholders in the provision of fostering services across the borough including foster carers, representatives from independent agencies, and senior officers from the North London Fostering Consortium.
- 9.7 The outcome of the Task and Finish Group's evidence gathering sessions form the basis of the report which is set out in **Appendix 1**.

## **10. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 10.1 None.

**Legal: SH**  
**CFO: MC/JH**





# **Fostering Recruitment Task and Finish Group**

**Final Report**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That an online enquiry form be created on the Fostering page of the council's website, Barnet Online, to allow people thinking of fostering to register their interest with the Fostering Team.

Complementing the creation of an online enquiry form, the Fostering Team should update the Fostering Information Pack provided via the Fostering webpage to include clear guidance on the type of personal information applicants will be expected to divulge during the application process.

2. That the Fostering Team, as a means of supporting contact and mutual support among foster carers and looked after children, should assist in facilitating coffee morning meetings for foster carers more locally.

As foster carers may not be able to attend the regular meetings of the Foster Carers Support Group due to child care commitments, the Fostering Team should identify suitable council properties in the borough to enable foster carers to bring children with them to assist in providing a local support group that meets their needs.

3. The Fostering Team be requested to undertake a review of the cost of placements with independent fostering agencies. The review should report the range of support services provided by independent agencies within their inclusive packages and establish if:

- The council also provides these support services, and
- What is the added cost of such services to in-house placements.

4. That the Fostering Team provide six-monthly updates to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Fostering Teams performance in terms of:

- The number of new recruitments.
- The number of foster carers de-registering
- The number of placements of children in care under 16 years of age.
- The number of children under 16 placed in London Borough of Barnet in-house foster placements.
- The number of children under 16 placed with independent foster agencies.

- Analysis of the impact of ongoing and previous advertising and marketing campaigns in terms of their success in recruiting foster carers including:
  - Details of the number of any specific “lifestyle” type that marketing campaigns have targeted in terms of their inquiries about fostering with Barnet Council, and subsequent progression through the application process to approval.

## **1 Background Information**

- 1.1 At the Policy and Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 June 2010, the Committee agreed that a Task and Finish Group should be established to look at fostering and adoption recruitment. The Business Management Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee appointed Members to the Group at their meeting on 13 September 2010.
- 1.2 The membership of the Task and Finish Group was appointed as follows:
- Councillor Braun
  - Councillor Coakley Webb
  - Councillor Khatri
  - Councillor Slocombe
  - Councillor Thompstone
- 1.3 Further to the appointment of a Task and Finish Group, the Children’s Service undertook a review of fostering recruitment which identified the need to reassess how the Service manages the process of recruiting foster carers. This review of recruitment also identified how the Fostering Team faces a significant challenge in terms of retaining an adequate pool of foster carers.
- 1.4 The first meeting of the Task and Finish Group took place on 17 January 2011. Councillor Thompstone was appointed as Chairman and, after consultation with Children’s Service officers, the following scope was agreed for the Task and Finish Group:
- How can the council improve foster carer recruitment; and
  - Identify the key factors that contribute to good foster carer retention and establish how the council can utilise these factors to increase retention of foster carers.
- 1.5 The Task and Finish Group initially considered investigating the reasons behind the shortfall in attracting adoptive parents for children with complex needs and exploring the opportunities for improving this situation. However, as the Task and Finish Group’s work progressed they have found that, due to the complexity of the issues faced in the recruitment and retention of foster carers and limited time constraints in which to

conduct the review, the Task and Finish Group would produce a more effective piece of work by focusing primarily on the council's fostering service.

## **2 Review Format**

2.1 Following protocol guidelines stipulated in the Council's Constitution under Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, the Task and Finish Group undertook a series of evidence gathering meetings with key stakeholders in the provision of foster care in Barnet.

2.2 The evidence gathering sessions were supported by:

- A review of the analysis previously undertaken by the Children's Service;
- Reports produced by the Children's Service;
- Best practice guidance; and
- Research published by service provision experts and leading academics working on foster care provision in the United Kingdom

2.3 The engaged stakeholders included:

- Children's social care professionals from the council's Fostering Team<sup>1</sup>;
- Representatives from independent foster agencies;
- The Independent Chairman of the Fostering Panel; and
- The Chairman and Manager of the North London Fostering Consortium.

The Task and Finish Group also received evidence from members of the council's Foster Carer Support Group, assisting in gathering insight from a broad range of the council's in-house foster carers.

2.4 The report of the Task and Finish Group details the findings of these evidence gathering sessions categorised across four key themes relating to foster carer recruitment and retention that emerged during course of the review, namely:

1. Recruitment of Foster Carers
2. Training and Preparation of Foster Carers
3. Foster Carer Support
4. Improving and Measuring Performance

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<sup>1</sup> The Council's Fostering Service is co-ordinated by a number of sub-teams within the Children's Service. These are detailed in Section 4.7. Due to the inter-connected nature of their work, the fact that the Task and Finish Group engaged with these teams collectively, and to avoid confusion within the context of the review the teams will be referred to in the report as the Fostering Team.

### 3. Overview - Challenges and Innovation in Foster Carer Recruitment

3.1 Both national and international research has identified the recruitment of foster carers as a challenging and difficult undertaking with a shortage in recruitment numbers a common experience (Sellick & Howell, 2004).

3.2 For example, in an overview of fostering services in England the Department for Education (2004) notes that:

*“Recruitment has often been haphazard, poorly targeted and generally unable to convey a positive (but realistic) image of fostering”.*

3.3 Furthermore, Clarke (2009) reported a shortfall of at least 10,000 foster carers in the United Kingdom. This shortage of foster carers has significant impacts on the coverage and quality of fostering services including:

- Local authorities being forced to place children where there is a vacancy rather than with a foster family best meeting a child's individual needs.
- Children having to change schools and move away from family and friends.
- Poorly matched carers and children increasing the likelihood of breakdowns in placements with both foster carers and children suffering as a consequence.

3.4 Clive Sellick and Darren Howell, writing in the British Journal of Social Work, undertook a review of multi-sectoral fostering practice across the United Kingdom. In this review they identified a number of innovative fostering practices that they felt might lead to an increase in foster carer recruitment. Their findings included the following observations:

- A significant number of foster carers reported being attracted to fostering after speaking to an existing foster carer.
- Some agencies reported providing financial incentives to foster carers for recruiting new carers.
- An example cited included a city council in southern England paying an initial payment of £20 for introducing a candidate foster carer which was followed up with a payment of £200 upon this candidate being approved and a child being placed with them.

3.5 Overall, research conducted into fostering services suggests that fostering agencies can increase the effectiveness of their recruitment campaigns by targeting their efforts to specific neighbourhoods or demographic groups from which agencies wish to recruit.

- 3.6 These reviews also report that general efforts to improve recruitment included the employment of designated staff to:
- Implement a recruitment strategy for foster carers.
  - Design material for marketing purposes.
  - Liaise with local press.
  - Produce and deliver information packs.
  - Follow up expressions of interest in a timely and professional manner.
- 3.7 Some local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) place an emphasis on promoting foster caring as a career option and place advertisements in the jobs section of the local press. Sellick and Howell's (2004) review also identified a West Country local authority that targeted potential foster carers from socially and economically disadvantaged areas. The idea behind this approach was the prospect of bringing regeneration to the area through training and employment as foster carers to previously socially excluded people. The strategy was also intended to help keep children close to their birth families community.

#### **4. Fostering in Barnet**

- 4.1 As an English local authority, the London Borough of Barnet's functions and responsibilities in terms of the provision of fostering services are determined by national legislation laid out in the:

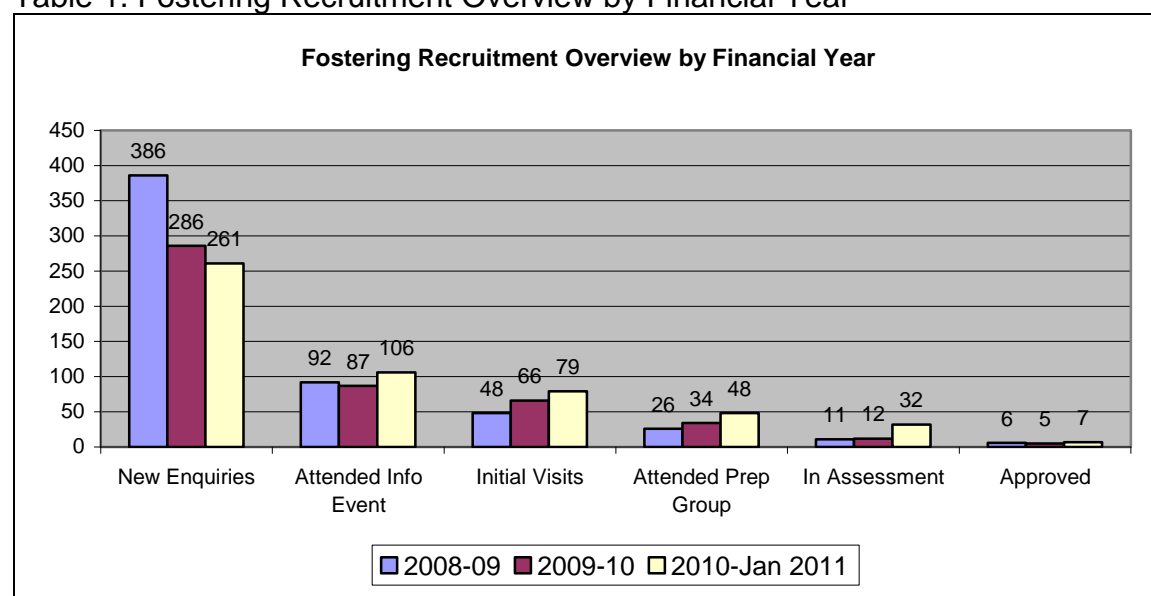
- Children Act 1989;
- Children Act 2004;
- Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

Furthermore, the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 requires local authorities, in exercising their social services functions, to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. In order to operate lawfully, the Fostering Service must also comply with the statutory requirements outlined in various Statutory Instruments, but in particular the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, updated April 2011, provides guidance to local authorities on how they should fulfil their statutory requirements. The guidance states that local authorities should comply with national legislation and guidance when exercising their functions, unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons that justify a variation.

- 4.2 The council's Corporate Plan 2010/13, as part of the objective of 'Better services with less money', identified the launching of a new foster carer recruitment campaign to increase opportunities for stable, local placements as one of nine council wide top improvement initiatives.

- 4.3 In support of this objective, increasing the percentage of children in care, aged under 16, who are in London Borough of Barnet foster placements to 54 per cent in 2010/11 was identified within the Corporate Plan as a top performance target.
- 4.4 Historically recruitment and retention have been problematic both locally and at a national level. For example, 2009/10 saw 5 families recruited to the council's pool of foster carers with 5 de-registering. In 2010-11, 6 de-registered with 7 recruitments (As of the end of March 2011, 12 applicants were under assessment). Recruitment in the 6 months leading up to September 2010 had showed signs of improvement, with 26 families under assessment, compared to an overall total of 12 for the previous year. This was attributed to increased and improved training for potential foster carers and a committed recruitment drive by the Fostering Team.
- 4.5 In comparison to previous years 2010-11 saw fewer new enquiries being received by the Fostering Team, but higher proportions of applicants proceeding through to assessment by social workers (See Table 1 below).

Table 1. Fostering Recruitment Overview by Financial Year



Source: London Borough of Barnet Fostering Recruitment Team, 2011. By the end of the financial year in addition to the 7 approved applicants a further 12 were awaiting final assessment.

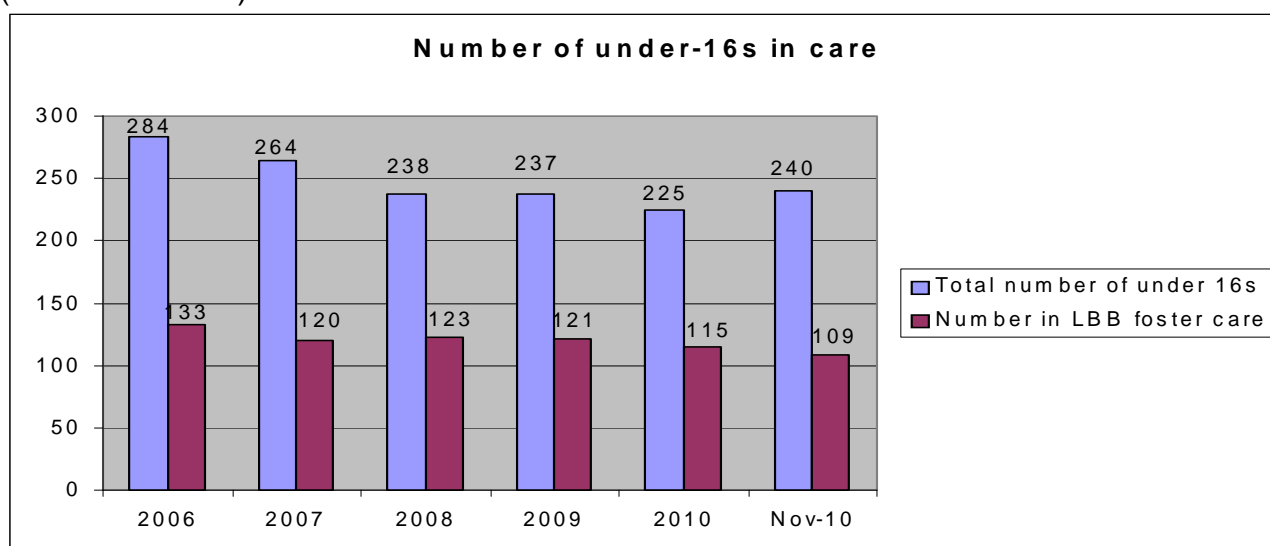
- 4.6 Excluding care provided by family and friends, foster care is the preferred option of the council for most Barnet children who come into the care of the local authority. Children are placed both with in-house London Borough of Barnet carers and with carers provided by IFAs.
- 4.7 In-house London Borough of Barnet carers are recruited by a Recruitment and Training Team, and supervised by a Fostering Support Team. Placements are co-ordinated by the Placements Team in Children's Social Care. The Placements Team will seek to place children with in-house carers in the first instance, dependent on availability and approval criteria. Failing any spare in-house capacity, the team will contact a range of IFAs to check for availability and negotiate on prices. The majority of IFAs used

by the Team are registered under the London Care Placements Framework Agreement, to which London Borough of Barnet is signed up. This commissioning framework, which is subscribed to by 33 London boroughs, evaluates providers, benchmarks costs and negotiates fees.

4.8 As of the end of November 2010 there were 240 under-16s in care in the borough, with 109 of these in London Borough of Barnet foster placements. This equates to approximately 45 per cent, with the target identified within the council’s corporate priorities for 2010/13 being 54 per cent. The figure of 45 per cent is indicative of year on year decreases in the amount of under-16s cared for in foster placements.

4.9 Overall, including placements with IFAs, the number of children placed in foster care within the borough is reflective of the borough’s statistical neighbours<sup>2</sup> (See Table 3).

Table 2: Number of Looked After Children Under-16 in London Borough of Barnet (November 2010)

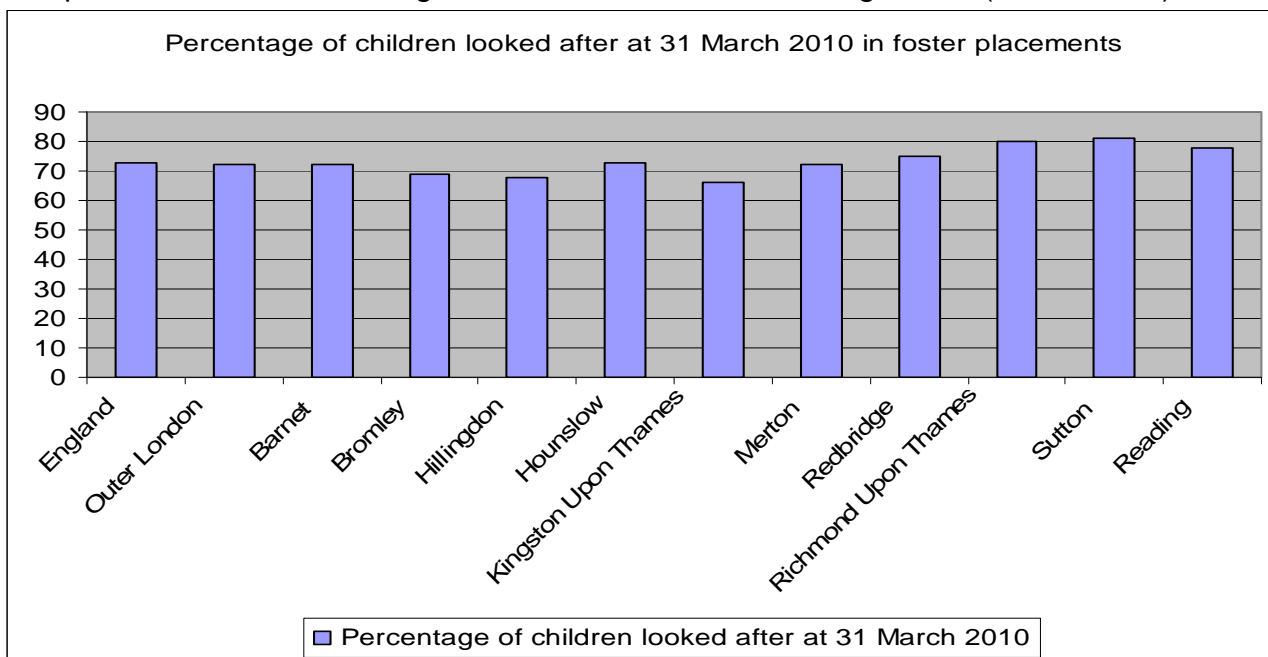


Source: Children’s Service, London Borough of Barnet, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Statistical neighbour models provide one method for benchmarking progress. For each LA, these models designate a number of other LAs deemed to have similar characteristics. These designated LAs are known as statistical neighbours. Any LA may compare its performance (as measured by various indicators) against its statistical neighbours to provide an initial guide as to whether their performance is above or below the level that might be expected (Department for Education, 2011).

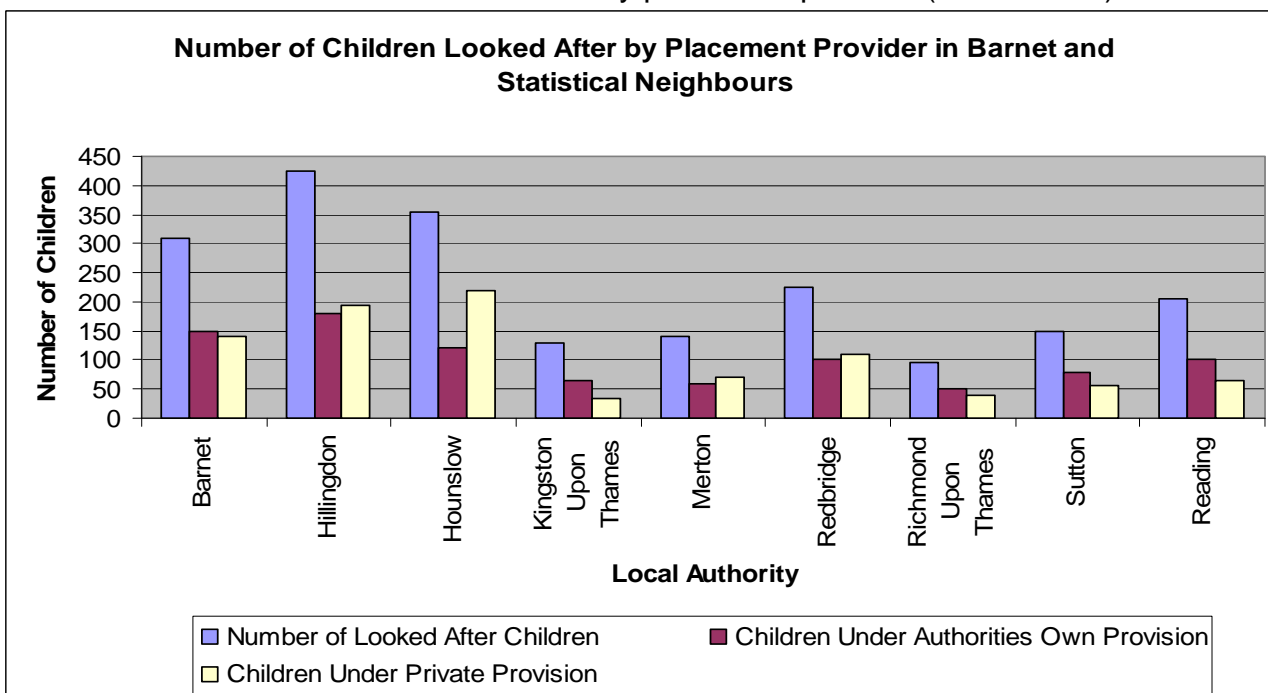


Table 3: Percentage of Looked After Children in Foster Placements Including IFAs. Comparison of London Borough of Barnet with Statistical Neighbours (March 2010).



Source: Department for Education, 2010

Table 4: Number of children looked after by placement provider (March 2010)



Source: Department for Education, 2010

## 5 Previous Analysis on Fostering in Barnet

5.1 In preparation for the 2010-11 Fostering Recruitment Strategy the Children's Service commissioned a "mosaic"<sup>3</sup> analysis. The analysis

<sup>3</sup> Mosaic is a classification system originally designed to identify groupings of consumer behaviour for households and postcodes for marketing purposes. It is produced by a private

sought to help identify what types of people were more likely to become foster carers.

5.2 The study identified three “lifestyle types” that were over-represented among Barnet foster carers: settled minorities; original suburbs; and Asian enterprise (The overall ethnic makeup of London Borough of Barnet foster carers is detailed in Table 5). Using Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping the main areas where these “types” lived were identified as:

- The west of the borough including Edgware, Burnt Oak, Colindale and Cricklewood.
- The north east of the borough including High Barnet, East Barnet, Oakleigh Park, Brunswick Park and Friern Barnet.
- An area in the centre of the borough covering Mill Hill East.

5.3 The Fostering Team utilised the data gathered in the mosaic analysis to target advertising campaigns, including promotional adverts placed in London Underground Stations, towards these key lifestyle types.

5.4 Further recruitment analysis conducted by the Barnet Fostering Recruitment Team which compared the in-house carer population with that of a sample IFA has shown that in terms of age structure the current in-house carer population has fewer carers under the age of 40 and more carers over the age of 60 compared to the IFA sample (Table 6 details the current carer age profile).

Table 5. Foster Carer Population by Ethnicity, London Borough of Barnet (March 2010)

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Carer Numbers March 2009</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Carer Numbers March 2010</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Any Other Ethnic Group	4	5%	5	6%
Asian/Asian British	5	6%	5	6%
Black/Black British African	10	12%	10	12%
Black/Black British Caribbean	16	20%	15	18%
Mixed	4	5%	4	5%
White British	37	46%	38	46%
White Other	5	6%	6	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>-</b>

Source: London Borough of Barnet Fostering Recruitment Team, 2011.

5.5 However, these figures are reflective of national trends in foster carer age profiles. The Fostering Network<sup>4</sup> suggests that an aging carer population is a source of concern as a significant number of older carers may choose to

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company called Experian. Classifications are created using data from different sources and different levels of geography. Approximately 54% is sourced from the 2001 census and 46% includes the Electoral Roll, Experian Lifestyle Survey information, and Consumer Credit Activity, Post Office Address File, Shareholders Register, House Price and Council Tax Information and ONS local area statistics (London Borough of Barnet, Children’s Service, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The Fostering Network is a leading UK charity specialising in supporting fostering services.

retire in the coming years. Therefore, an aging foster carer population emphasises the need to increase the number of younger carers recruited (Clarke, 2009).

- 5.6 The Fostering Team’s experience support this hypotheses reporting that in-house carers are being lost due to “natural wastage” such as carers retiring rather than to carers leaving to work with independent agencies.

Table 6. Age Profile Comparison of Foster Carer Population London Borough of Barnet (March 2010)

Age Group	Carer Numbers March 2009	Percentage	Carer Numbers March 2010	Percentage	Sample National IFA percentage	England Percentage (March 2009)
20-29	0	0%	0	0%	2%	N/A
30-39	8	10%	4	5%	15%	6%
40-49	27	33%	32	38%	36%	29%
50-59	33	41%	29	36%	35%	38%
60-69	13	16%	17	20%	12%	24%
70+	0	0%	1	1%	0%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>

Source: London Borough of Barnet Fostering Recruitment Team, 2011; Clarke, 2009.

- 5.7 A further consideration to emerge from the 2010-11 Recruitment Strategy related to how subtle issues may influence the successful recruitment of foster carers. A specific example relates to how the Fostering Team processed enquiries from applicants who did not follow up their initial enquiry. Standard practice was to send closing letters to those applicants who the Fostering Team unsuccessfully tried to contact. However, a study by the Fostering Network (Clarke, 2007) suggests that approximately half of the people who had made an initial enquiry about fostering, but had not taken the enquiry any further, were still considering fostering. Therefore, instead of sending closing letters the Fostering Team suggested setting up a mail merge system whereby they would send bi-monthly reminder letters/e-mails in order to keep Barnet fostering in these potential foster carers’ minds. It is hoped that this simple process will help recruit these potential foster carers.
- 5.8 Previous research conducted in 2006 for the council’s Fostering Team found that foster carers involvement in recruitment campaigns was very valuable. This may be partially because people thinking about becoming foster carers get the opportunity to meet those who have actually entered into fostering. Thus they receive a valuable insight from the perspective of carers themselves rather than council officers. Suggested means of utilising foster carers included their participation at information evenings and preparation groups.
- 5.9 Further to this finding the Fostering Team has also considered engaging foster carers, for a nominal fee, to visit applicants so they can hear first hand accounts of what it is like to foster.

## **6. Task and Finish Group Key Findings – Recruitment**

- 6.1 The North London Fostering Consortium<sup>5</sup> (NLFC) is working towards establishing a protocol that member authorities turn to each other first when they have insufficient places available before outsourcing to IFAs. It is envisaged that this would reduce the cost of retaining IFAs.
- 6.2 The Independent Chairman of the Fostering Panel offered the following advice to the Task and Finish Group in relation to first contact with possible applicants:
- A key point is that the local authority must have a recruitment strategy in place.
  - There is also the important issue of the foster service provider's first response to prospective applicants. It should be remembered, most applicants will be comparing agencies, and so it is vitally important to quickly respond to their enquiry.
  - Local authorities need to present their fostering service in an accessible manner that is welcoming to potential applicants and avoids coming across as cold and bureaucratic.
  - People are nervous when applying. Recruitment teams need to give them encouragement and reassurance while at the same time sensitively screening out unsuitable candidates in an efficient manner.
- 6.3 The council's Insight Team are currently (April 2011) working with the Children's Service to update the previous mosaic analysis of current foster carers and provide up-to-date guidance on improving the selection process, targeting advertising and increasing the retention rate of those who begin the process.
- Using customer profiling tools to analyse the Children's Services records, a summary of a typical Barnet foster carer will be created. This will provide detailed information not only on where foster carers are located, but also on how receptive they are to methods for interacting with council services, and how they find out information.
  - This will initially enable the current advertising methods to be reviewed, but will also provide broader understanding of how the foster carers in the borough fit into Barnet's population as a whole. Further analysis will enable comparisons to be made within the wider borough and potentially enable the Fostering Team to tap into groups who may care about fostering, but have previously not had contact with the fostering process in Barnet.

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<sup>5</sup> The North London Fostering Consortium is a partnership of five local authority fostering agencies: Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Haringey and Islington. The objective of the Consortium is to provide the best possible service for children in care and for foster carers through working in partnership to process enquiries from prospective foster carers and find new homes for children in a more efficient and timely manner (North London Fostering Consortium, 2011).

- Insight and Children's Services will also be able to use this knowledge to compare Barnet's foster carer population to those of neighbouring boroughs and independent foster agencies. This will enable the council to identify whether there are individuals who are choosing to become foster carers elsewhere, but are not doing so through the council's fostering process.
- As with many fostering organisations, Barnet Council wishes to improve the retention rate of individuals who start on the path to becoming foster carers. As the council manages the assessment process, it can be difficult to collect accurate reasons regarding why individuals may decide to stop the process. The Insight Team has many years of experience in undertaking consultations through independent bodies. It is intended that a consultation process will be undertaken with individuals who have started, but decided to stop the process of becoming a foster carer.
- Analysis is currently ongoing and a consultation paper is due to go to Children's Services in June 2011.

#### 6.4 Preliminary findings from Insight's analysis indicate:

- Over the last 3 years the borough's population has grown significantly, creating more households and moving many of the previously identified "lifestyle types" around the borough.
- Analysis has identified approximately 40 households in the borough who are providing care for children via other London boroughs. However, further clarification is needed at this point to identify whether these are placements via independent agencies or through foster carers who are actually working directly for other local authorities.
- It has become apparent through the analysis that there is a marked difference in the mosaic types of the council's in-house foster carers and non-council carers. For example, of the 40 households identified above there is a higher prevalence of the C11 or "creative professional seeking involvement in local communities" lifestyle type. This group accounts for approximately 1.69 per cent of London Borough of Barnet foster carers but closer to 19 per cent of foster carers living within the borough but choosing to foster with other agencies.
- Mosaic analysis strongly suggests that C11 households are technical, like to use the internet and other new media, and not likely to get information from local papers. In addition, they are more likely to have more than one car in their family, meaning that they will not use public transport much. This rules out the two main methods of advertising currently used (papers and bus stop advertising) by the council to target recruitment campaigns.

- Furthermore, the C11 group tends towards self service provision and would engage with online tools.

6.5 Overall, the review conducted by the Task and Finish Group has found that in terms of following best practice guidelines recommended by government, service practitioners and academia, the council's Fostering Team already has in place many of the key recommendations. These include targeted recruitment campaigns, and designated staff developing a foster carer recruitment strategy, as well as promotional materials.

6.6 During the course of the review, the Task and Finish Group noted the growing significance of having a strong online presence in terms of attracting and engaging with people thinking about becoming foster carers. The Task and Finish Group also noted the sophistication of some of the websites used by the independent fostering sector.

6.7 These observations are supported by national surveys, for example, the Fostering Network notes that:

*In recent years fostering services have reported a growing amount of interest and activity on their websites from prospective foster carers. In 2006-07, 13 per cent of applicants either completed an online enquiry form or emailed an expression of interest. In 2010, 30 per cent of fostering services reported that the majority of their enquiries came through online and we anticipate that this trend will continue.*

(Fostering Network, 2011)

6.8 The Fostering Team notes that 43 per cent of enquirers in 2010/11 stated that they first heard about the council's fostering service through the internet. The Fostering Team report that this figure is growing year on year. At present the only way to contact the council's fostering service online is through email. Below is a typical example of the type of enquiries the Fostering Team receives:

*I have been thinking about fostering children for some time now, but until recently it would not have been practical. I am now in a position to look into it further. Please could you send me some information?*

6.9 As can be observed there is no name, no address, no contact number and no relevant information about the enquirer other than an email address. The Fostering Team report that this makes it very difficult to follow up the enquiry or give the enquirer information that is tailored specifically to them. For example, if the Fostering Team knew that the enquirer did not have a spare room they could immediately advise the enquirer that they would only be able to foster children under two years of age. Or if it was apparent that the applicants address was too far away from Barnet for the council to take on the Fostering Team could advise the enquirer which local authority to contact.

- 6.10 Significantly, the Fostering Team reports that an online enquiry form (e-form) would allow them to quickly and efficiently move positive enquiries on to the next stage and immediately screen out unsuitable applicants saving time and resources on follow ups. It would also allow the Fostering Team to compete more effectively with independent agencies, the majority of which have interactive websites with online enquiry forms.
- 6.11 Presently Barnet Council has a contractual relationship with a supplier of e-forms called Ebase. Ebase build, maintain and host the council's forms and the data they collect is kept by them and also emailed through to the relevant departments within the council. In the past, Ebase have charged £1,000 per day to build new forms and the total cost is often proportional to the complexity of the form itself. Going forward the council's next website will have a "forms component" that should make it much easier for the council to develop and deploy forms. The cost of purchasing the forms component is built into the web transformation project budget. The council's Web Team are currently unaware of any internal cost that might be included in developing or deploying these forms in the future.
- 6.12 A strengthened online presence for the council's fostering service is also fundamental to attracting foster carers from the C11 "Creative Professional" lifestyle type who, as identified above, have been shown to work with the independent fostering sector but are, by comparison, under represented among the council's in-house foster carer pool.
- 6.13 Further to improving the effectiveness of the application process, and following the advice of the Independent Chairman of the Fostering Panel in terms of sensitively screening out unsuitable candidates in an efficient manner, is the issue of informing applicants of the nature of scrutiny they will have to undertake in order to become foster carers.
- 6.14 During the course of the review the Task and Finish Group were informed by the Fostering Team of applicants who had progressed through the application process up to final assessment only to drop out when it became apparent that they would be required to provide information relating to previous partners.
- 6.15 If these applicants had understood at the point of their initial enquiry that they would have to provide such information and were unwilling to do so, they could have been eliminated from the application process without the expenditure of the Fostering Teams time and limited resources.
- 6.16 Thus, providing clear guidance as a means of efficiently eliminating applicants who may not pass the Barnet Council's high vetting standards as early in the process as possible compliments the key corporate objective of a relentless drive for efficiency.
- 6.17 Discussions held with Barnet Council's in-house foster carers also highlighted the importance of clear guidance to those thinking of fostering. The Task and Finish Group were informed that enquirers should be informed clearly of what is expected of foster carers both during the

application process and upon approval. Complimenting details of the criteria necessary to become a foster carer should be information outlining the support services the Fostering Team provides as well as the financial allowances paid to foster carers.

### **Recommendation 1**

**“That an online enquiry form be created on the Fostering page of the council’s website, Barnet Online, to allow people thinking of fostering to register their interest with the Fostering Team.**

**Complementing the creation of an online enquiry form the Fostering Team should update the Fostering Information Pack provided via the Fostering webpage to include clear guidance on the type of personal information applicants will be expected to divulge during the application process.”**

## **7. Training and Preparation – An Issue for Both Recruitment and Retention**

7.1 Training foster carers has been widely acknowledged as playing a key role in maintaining a properly functioning fostering service. Three key issues in particular have been identified:

- Managing contact between fostered children and members of their birth families.
- Coping with foster children with difficult behaviour issues.
- Providing the right support for fostered children’s education including liaising with schools.

(Sellick & Howell, 2004)

7.2 As part of the process of becoming a foster carer, applicants must undergo preparation training where they learn about the needs of children coming into foster care. They also receive visits from a social worker who prepares a report recommending whether or not the applicants should become foster carers. This report is presented to the Independent Fostering Panel for consideration.

7.3 The 2010-11 Fostering Strategy noted a suggestion by the Fostering Team that proposed holding preparation groups every month rather than bi-monthly. The Team also questioned whether the practice of taking a break in holding groups during August was resulting in potentially missing out on applicants who work term time and have experience working with children, for example, teachers.

7.4 The strategy also noted that an issue had been identified regarding the capacity of social workers to deliver monthly preparation groups. A suggestion has been made that other Fostering Team members could be trained to provide cover for this role.



- 7.5 A key aspect of training provided to foster carers is guidance through the process of successfully passing the *CWDC Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care*. However, in addition to this support training is often viewed as being complimentary to advocating foster caring as a career option.
- 7.6 A common practice is for foster carers to take a national qualification such as an NVQ Level 3 Caring for Children and Young People. Some foster carers already hold relevant higher educational qualifications and so may not be encouraged by NVQs. In response to this, a number of foster agencies have offered access to professional social work training courses, giving foster carers the opportunity to further their development and also handle more challenging placements.

## **8 Task and Finish Group Key Findings – Training**

- 8.1 The NLFC is considering the running of sequenced training and preparation groups to cut down both the cost to individual boroughs and also the time potential foster carers have to wait to complete the application process.
- 8.2 During the Task and Finish Group meeting with the Foster Carers Support Group, the carers were asked how much training they received and whether it was helpful. Some of the carers found they would prefer training that was more orientated towards day to day childcare rather than “technical” issues. The foster carers suggested that training was not necessarily timed to best fit with their caring and family responsibilities. Nevertheless, the group generally were happy to receive training.
- 8.3 In addition to conventional training, the NLFC has proposed training foster carers to act as parenting capacity assessors:
- Following a change in legal aid provision for parents involved in care proceedings, including an end to funding for placements in family assessment centres, local authorities must pay the cost if they decide such a placement is necessary. This can result in costs ranging from £32,000 to £60,000 for a standard three month placement.
  - A more economic means of conducting these assessments is to place the parent and child with a foster carer rather than in a residential home.
  - Although it is not feasible for individual boroughs acting within the consortia, it may be possible to train foster carers in parenting viability assessments. This would mean that the consortium would have access to a pool of trained foster carers. These foster carers would then work alongside psychologists and other professional assessors to complete the process of evaluation.

- The Fostering Team has committed to participating on the NLFC working group that is being set up to explore the feasibility of this proposal.

8.4 The Fostering Team have demonstrated a history of engaging with the borough's foster carers in order to fully utilise the skills base this pool of carers represents. As part of this philosophy, a position currently being recruited to is for a foster carer who has responsibility for coordinating the involvement of other foster carers in the recruitment and training of prospective foster carers.

8.5 This model for growing the involvement of foster carers within the functions of the fostering service is being trialled within the recruitment and preparation phase, with the intention of then spreading it to growing their involvement in providing peer support, such as "buddying up" experienced carers with new recruits. The Fostering Network has provided a useful model for peer mentoring schemes, which is being used to support London Borough of Barnet's Fostering Teams local development.

## **9. Foster Carer Support – How to Encourage Foster Carer Retention**

9.1 There is a wide body of evidence linking the retention of foster carers with the levels and quality of support they receive. A number of key areas have been identified in terms of support packages. These include:

- Respite.
- Out of hours support (e.g. telephones help lines).
- Well managed payment systems.
- Access to specialist help and advice.
- Good working relationship with social workers and collaboration with other foster carers.

9.2 International reviews of fostering services suggest that:

*Issues such as lack of specific information about the child's welfare system, not being included in case planning, difficulties with child care or respite, and the foster carer's own unrealistic or unmet expectations are also sources of stress.*

(Whenan, Oxlad and Lushington, 2009:753)

9.3 Aside from financial compensation, support in the form of respite has been identified as a significant issue particularly for those who foster children with challenging behaviour. For these carers, respite provides temporary relief from the stress of challenging placements and the opportunity for rejuvenation. McGregor et al's (2006) review of fostering

parents' needs identified how respite provision is not only valued by foster carers, but how its absence can contribute to carers giving up fostering.

- 9.4 McGregor et al (2006) also reported that foster carers valued "in-home" support from another carer as being particularly helpful when caring for special needs children.
- 9.5 A 2004 review of good fostering service practice conducted by the Social Care Institute for Excellence noted that the London Borough of Redbridge were operating a flexi-scheme whereby those foster carers with spare capacity were paid by the hour to relieve other foster carers enabling the carers, for example, to attend training sessions. These carers were also utilised for respite provision.
- 9.6 The provision of clear guidance as part of any support package has featured in recent statements from the Department of Education. Further to this, the issue of delegated authority<sup>6</sup> has featured prominently in the national press as contributing to problematic issues arising between foster carers and agencies, particularly in relation to local authorities. Formal guidance on best practice relating to delegated authority has been included in the recently updated Children's Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Vol. 4, while the Department for Education has encouraged local authorities to establish early in their relationship the terms and conditions of responsibility so as to avoid uncertainty.
- 9.7 The Children's Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Vol. 4 states the following:

*Delays and missed opportunities for looked after children as a result of poor planning around delegation of authority can be a bar to children experiencing a fulfilled childhood and feeling part of the foster carer's family. Looked after children say that problems obtaining parents' and local authorities' consent to everyday activities can make them feel different from their peers, causing them embarrassment and upset. It is therefore very important to agree upfront who can make which decisions about a looked after child, and that this is understood by all key parties and reviewed regularly.*

*Foster carers should be given the maximum appropriate flexibility to take decisions relating to children in their care, within the framework of the agreed placement plan and the law governing parental responsibility (PR). Except where there are particular identified factors which dictate to the contrary, foster carers should be given delegated authority to make day to day decisions regarding health, education, leisure, etc.*

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<sup>6</sup> Authority is delegated to foster carers in order that they can provide the child with a normal family experience. The extent of the delegation will vary depending on the type of placement, the legal status, the views of the child and their parents, and the experience of the foster carers.

## 10 Task and Finish Group Key Findings - Foster Carer Support

- 10.1 Discussions between the Task and Finish Group and the Foster Carers Support Group raised respite provision as an important issue. Foster carers stated:

*“You need a pool of respite carers. Then you can offer challenging placements. Say, look we’re going to offer you a weekend off.”*

*“I need respite; I was promised once a month, I haven’t had any since November. I feel sorry for the child; you can’t leave the child with just anybody because of special needs. I need to find somewhere”*

- 10.2 However, meetings with several other parties including the IFA, Supported Fostering Services, and the Independent Chair of the Fostering Panel also identified the need to balance the wishes of foster carers with the needs of looked after children. There is a need to consider what impact being placed with respite carers will have on a child’s sense of self.

- 10.3 At the meeting with the Foster Carers Support Group, at least one of the foster carers expressed dissatisfaction with being under utilised. This was attributed to a shortfall in infants requiring fostering during the previous twelve months.

*“My time has been cut tremendously. I’m underused. Yes, I’m specialised in disabled children, I am still a carer. I am not busy.”*

- 10.4 The Fostering Team, however, indicate that this was an unusual occurrence that arose from a specific set of circumstances whereby the Fostering Team experienced a situation where they had “baby carers” with vacancies. Two foster carers from this category at the time stated that unless they had a child placed in the very near future they would need to seek work outside of fostering.

- 10.5 The Fostering Team are keen to emphasise that it is difficult at times for the team to predict the age groups of children needing placements and that they are not in a position to guarantee foster carers a consistent income that can be relied on as their only form of income. The team report that for the last two years they have needed a constant supply of baby carers and have often had very short periods of sometimes days between placements.

- 10.6 The Fostering Team must consider the suitability of foster carers’ homes in relation to the care plan and support package of children needing to be placed with carers. For example, despite a foster carer being available for undertaking a placement if they do

not have a spare bedroom available for fostering, it is correct that they are not considered for placements where this is required.

- 10.7 As stated above the Fostering Team is currently developing initiatives such as buddy schemes to increase the involvement of foster carers in the recruitment and training of other foster carers. It is intended that this will further help embed support mechanisms among the council's pool of carers.
- 10.8 As a response to addressing the issue of respite the Fostering Team are specifically recruiting more respite foster carers, to ensure respite care is available for all carers who need this help. The Fostering Team suggest that some of these new respite carers as well as some Barnet LINK carers could also help with unmet childcare needs when foster carers attend training.
- 10.9 The Fostering Team suggest that it is possible that when the peer mentoring or "buddy" scheme is underway, people who act as support carers for particular foster carers could be recruited to offer childcare for other foster carers.

## **Recommendation 2**

**"That the Fostering Team, as a means of supporting contact and mutual support among foster carers and looked after children, should assist in facilitating coffee morning meetings for foster carers more locally.**

**As foster carers may not be able to attend the regular meetings of the Foster Carers Support Group due to child care commitments, the Fostering Team should identify suitable council properties in the borough to enable foster carers to bring children with them to assist in providing a local support group that meets their needs."**

- 10.10 The Fostering Team also welcomed the new national guidance relating to fostering service regulations which came into force on 1 April 2011. These new guidelines address many of the issues relating to delegated authority. The newly introduced reduction in the requirements for local authority vetting of support carers will mean that foster carers will have greater freedom in the future to organise for childcare themselves, without needing their chosen carer to be approved by the Fostering Service. It is hoped that the new guidance will help nurture a more natural family environment within foster placements while contributing to easing the burden of bureaucracy placed on foster carers.
- 10.11 The Fostering Team has committed to improving the communication of foster carers delegated authority to ensure they have a clear understanding of the new regulations and the decisions they can take responsibility for on a day to day basis.

- 10.12 An example of how this information would be communicated is the inclusion of guidance in the new edition of the foster carer's handbook which all carers receive. This handbook will also be made available in electronic form.
- 10.13 The Fostering Service has reported that they are about to launch a new online resource for foster carers, Fosternets. This new online resource will host forums for foster carers to communicate with each other, sharing experiences and advice. The online resource will also host information about training and related events, the latest government guidelines, and policies relevant to foster carers.
- 10.14 The Fostering Team have ensured that all Barnet's in-house foster carer's have a personal computer in their home to help increase their access to online tools and resources.
- 10.15 The objective of providing these Information Technology tools and online support services to foster carers is to compliment the council's One Barnet Framework. In particular, the need to create a new relationship with citizens, including saving residents time when interacting with the council and enabling Barnet's residents to lead independent and successful lives. The One Barnet Framework has identified how digital technology continues to change and develop, as do the ways that people use it to change and grow.
- 10.16 In response to queries relating to the support provided to foster carers in the process of attaining support services such as educational support for fostered children the Fostering Team informed the Task and Finish Group that the services social workers can and do assist foster carers in the process of attaining services.
- 10.17 All fostered children's educational needs are reviewed within two bi-annual review processes as well as within the Fostering Teams 'virtual school' arrangement (which tracks their progress).The Education Panel, which approves requests for additional support, meets fortnightly.
- 10.18 Officers reported that some level of delay in the arranging of agreed provision is inevitable, but recent improvements in tracking tutor requests and a new contract with an additional provider have reduced delays. Most new tutor requests can be met within two months; there is an adequate budget and 69 of the 312 children currently (April 2011) in care are receiving some form of educational support outside of school.
- 10.19 A final issue that arose from the Task and Finish Group's meeting with foster carers was dissatisfaction among carers relating to the efficacy of the current system of categorising carers into three levels and how this reflected skills recognition, difficulty of placement, and compensation.
- 10.20 Children's Service officers have acknowledged the concerns of foster carers on this issue assuring them that their work is very much appreciated. Children's Service officers report that the system of using

levels to categorise carers could be reviewed, admitting that the Children's Service do not always get it right, while re-stating that the council needs to make sure that foster carers can cope with difficult cases. Children's Service officers have suggested that at the next service review the issue of whether the council should reconsider the categorisation structure will be considered.

## **11 Improving and Measuring Performance**

- 11.1 The Corporate Plan 2010-13 highlights the strategic challenges the council faces in terms of how Barnet residents and taxpayers expect high quality, flexible and responsive public services.
- 11.2 The Corporate Plan 2010-13 identified the launching of a new foster carer recruitment campaign to increase opportunities for stable, local placements as one of nine council wide Top Improvement Initiatives. Furthermore, increasing the percentage of children in care, aged under 16, who are in London Borough of Barnet foster placements to 54 per cent in 2010/11, was identified within the Corporate Plan as a top performance target.
- 11.3 Further to this, the One Barnet Framework stipulates the new conceptual framework around which the council will deliver its services in partnership with Barnet's residents. Citizens will be responsible for taking the opportunities that are offered, as the council provides them with the information they need to hold the council to account.

## **12 Task and Finish Group Key Findings - Improving and Measuring Performance**

- 12.1 The Corporate Plan 2010-13 identified the launch of a new foster carer recruitment campaign to increase opportunities for stable, local placements as a Top Improvement Initiative. However, following the launch of the recruitment campaign the number of children under 16 in care placed with the council's in-house foster carers remains (as of March 2010) below the 54 per cent top performance target.
- 12.2 The Fostering Team being aware of this shortfall have undertaken joint work with the Insight Team to engage further analysis of current foster carers and provide updated guidance on improving the selection processes, targeting advertising and increasing the retention rate of those who begin the application process.
- 12.3 As part of Barnet Council's drive for increased efficiency, the Task and Finish Group reviewed the services provided by independent foster agencies and the cost to the council of utilising these agencies.
- 12.4 The Task And Finish Group received evidence from the independent agency, Supported Fostering Services (SFS), suggesting that the commonly held belief that independent agencies are always more expensive than in-house local authority provision may not be accurate.

- 12.5 SFS suggested that although their initial charge for providing fostering services is more than that estimated for in-house provision their fee is inclusive of additional support services. They further suggested that if these support services costs were included within London Borough of Barnet in-house costings, alongside overhead expenses, the SFS fee would compare favourably with that of the council.

### **Recommendation 3**

**“The Fostering Team be requested to undertake a review of the cost of placements with independent fostering agencies. The review should report the range of support services provided by independent agencies within their inclusive packages and establish if:**

- **The council also provides these support services, and**
- **What is the added cost of such services to in-house placements.”**

- 12.6 The Fostering Team reported to the Task and Finish Group that having to engage elected Members through the Scrutiny process has assisted in focusing attention on the Teams performance and engagement with foster carers. As such, the Acting Director of the Children’s Social Care has requested that a formal process for the Fostering Team to report to Scrutiny be put in place.

- 12.7 Further to this positive response to scrutinising the Fostering Teams performance the Task and Finish Group noted that the service has undertaken a number of analyses of recruitment campaigns as well as continuing to develop their recruitment strategy. However, the Task and Finish Group found that it is not always apparent how this ongoing body of analysis and evolving marketing campaigns and strategies delivers improved performance.

### **Recommendation 4**

**“That the Fostering Team provide six-monthly updates to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Fostering Teams performance in terms of:**

- **Recruitment of foster carers.**
- **The number of foster carers de-registering.**
- **The number of placements of children in care under 16 years of age.**
- **The number of children under 16 placed in London Borough of Barnet in-house foster placements.**



- **The number of children under 16 placed with independent foster agencies.**
- **Analysis of the impact of ongoing and previous advertising and marketing campaigns in terms of their success in recruiting foster carers including:**
  - **Details of the number of any specific “lifestyle” type that marketing campaigns have targeted in terms of their inquiries about fostering with Barnet Council, and subsequent progression through the application process to approval.”**

### **13 Conclusion**

- 13.1 The Task and Finish Group has considered in detail the ongoing performance of Barnet Council’s in-house fostering service. They have concluded that across many areas of the service, recommended best practice guidelines are in place and acted upon. This includes the ongoing review and updating of a foster carer recruitment strategy.
- 13.2 The Task and Finish Group has identified a number of aspects of the fostering service where there is some scope for improvements and refinements to be made. In particular the Task and Finish Group has identified the need to keep pace with how Barnet’s residents engage with each other and access the public services they use through the use of online technology.
- 13.3 The Task and Finish Group has also raised the need to continually monitor foster carer recruitment and retention performance in order to meet the council’s corporate objectives, in particular the relentless drive for greater efficiency.
- 13.4 The Task and Finish Group would like to thank all those who contributed their insight to the review, particularly the foster carers who invited Members to their support group meeting to gain an understanding of fostering in Barnet from the foster carers’ perspective. The Task and Finish Group would also like to thank the representatives from the IFA, Supported Fostering Services, the Independent Chairman of the Fostering Panel, officers from the North London Fostering Consortium, Children’s Service officers, The Insight Team and the Cabinet Member for Education, Children and Families.
- 13.5 The Task and Finish Group is satisfied that it has achieved the aims and objectives of the review, as set out in the scoping paper. The Task and Finish Group hope that the conclusions and recommendations reached will assist Cabinet and others in the ongoing work of delivering a continually improving fostering service that meets the needs of Barnet’s residents.

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## PROJECT PLAN

<b>Topic for Review</b>	<b>Fostering Recruitment and Retention of Carers</b>
<b>Membership</b>	<p><b>Councillor Maureen Braun</b>  <b>Councillor Sury Khatri</b>  <b>Councillor Reuben Thompstone</b>  <b>Councillor Agnes Slocombe</b>  <b>Councillor Pauline Coakley Webb</b></p>
<b>Link to Corporate Plan</b>	<p>A Corporate priority for 2010-13 is to launch a new foster carer recruitment campaign to increase opportunities for stable local placements.</p> <p>The Corporate Plan 2010-13 Top Performance Targets identifies increasing the percentage of children in care, aged under 16, who are in London Borough of Barnet foster placements to 54 per cent in 2010/11.</p>
<b>Background</b>	<p>At the Business Management Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting of 13 September 2010 it was decided by Members that a Task and Finish Group should be established to review the councils fostering recruitment policy.</p> <p>The membership of the Task and Finish Group was appointed as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Councillor Braun</li> <li>• Councillor Coakley Webb</li> <li>• Councillor Khatri</li> <li>• Councillor Slocombe</li> <li>• Councillor Thompstone</li> </ul> <p>Further to the appointment of a Task and Finish Group, the Children's Service undertook a review of fostering recruitment which identified the need to reassess how the Service handles the process of recruiting foster carers. This review of recruitment also identified how the Fostering Team faces a significant challenge in terms of retaining foster carers.</p> <p>The first meeting of the Task and Finish Group took place on 17 January 2011. Councillor Thompstone was appointed as Chairman and, after consultation with Children's Service officers, the following key lines of enquiry were agreed for</p>

	<p>the Task and Finish Group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the factors that contribute to good foster carer retention and how can Barnet increase retention;</li> <li>• How the council can improve foster carer recruitment including for groups of hard to place children.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Scope and Purpose of Review</b></p>	<p>The Task and Finish Group will review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How Barnet Council can improve recruitment of foster carers</li> <li>• What are the factors that contribute to good foster carer retention and how can Barnet Council increase retention.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Format of Review</b></p>	<p><b>Methodology</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scrutiny office to conduct desk research</li> <li>• Members to meet with and receive reports from relevant Barnet Council officers</li> <li>• Best practice and engagement as appropriate with other boroughs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key Evidence (internal &amp; external)</b></p>	<p><b>Documents required</b>  Fostering Recruitment Strategy 2010-12  Fostering Recruitment Analysis 2008-11</p> <p><b>Witnesses/stakeholders</b>  Marion Ingram, AD Children’s Social Care  Debbie Gabriel, Service Manager – Provider Services (Children’s Service)  Mr. Paul Adams, The Independent Chairman of the Fostering Panel.  Claire Dutton, Practice Manager SFS  Alan Fisher, Director of Care SFS  The Foster Carers Support Group  Liz Hill, Chairman of North London Fostering Consortium  Peter Stevens, Manager of North London Fostering Consortium</p>

<b>Timescales</b>	Overview and Scrutiny arrangements recommend that Task and Finish Groups should be completed within a timescale of three months. It is envisaged that this review be completed in April 2011 with updates reported to the Business Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
<b>Expected Outcomes</b>	The Task and Finish Group will make up to four clear and concise SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely) recommendations to the council's Cabinet.
<b>Follow up</b>	Implementation of recommendations is to be monitored by the Scrutiny Office.

