

**Family Services**

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The Fostering Service Annual Report 2020-2021

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work of the Barnet Fostering Service for the year 2020-2021 and highlights the service outcomes, quality of practice and innovations in association with plans to continue to improve the service. This report should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Panel Annual review 2020-2021.

Ensuring children and young people in the care of Barnet Family Services flourish and thrive is at the heart of Barnet's resilience-based approach to social work practice. We know that it is fundamental that children and young people in our care are placed in the best provision to meet their diverse and individual needs, as informed by our placement sufficiency strategy 2019 -2023 and the newly devised guidance document, Who We Place Where.

2020-21 saw the fostering service progress with a recruitment strategy successfully generating a significant number of enquiries by prospective foster carers despite the inherent challenges of working throughout a global pandemic that saw the world pause with lockdown restrictions and families living in isolation. Our assessments of potential carers remained thorough and dynamic, continuing our best practice standards with robust and curious thinking about the family holistically and approving 16 new carers. We continued to offer a good and varied training program to support all carers with their development enabling them to be the best carers possible for Barnet's looked after children. To support our foster carers we developed an online survey in December and applied this feedback to service design for 2021-2021 including our out of hours support offer to carers launched during foster carer fortnight in May 2021.

Covid – 19 Pandemic

At the start of the year, the country and the world faced unprecedented times with the emergence of Covid -19. By the 23rd March 2020 the UK went into a national lockdown, and Barnet Family Services quickly responded to the need for remote working and virtual support with creativity. All children and the fostering households were reviewed and RAG rated (Red – Amber – Green) according to their level of need and complexity. Visits to carers and children continued to take place using the hybrid model implemented across Family Services, using video calls and online mediums such as Skype and MS-

Teams alongside face to face doorstep and garden visits, and when possible during period of eased restrictions, visits in the community. Legislative changes including The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations allowed local authorities flexibility in using fostering panels as decision making forums and guidance on approvals to ensure all children coming into care and those needing to move between placements were provided with safe and caring homes to meet their needs.

Like families across the world, foster carers also experienced the challenges of living in isolation, managing the needs of home schooling and home working, often with limited support available from wider family and friends. Whilst all looked after children were considered vulnerable children and therefore able to continue attending schools during closures throughout much of the year, many carers preferred to keep children at home and reported that this unique time provided them with opportunities they would not have otherwise had, such as gardening together, learning to cook, playing games and bonding moments watching films and reading books. Whilst this year was difficult and challenging, with everyone experiencing some level of grief and loss in their personal lives, feedback from carers suggest the year also contained moments of joy and a community spirit, as people came together to support and acknowledge each other. Virtual events such as Foster Carer Appreciation Day in October with an award ceremony for carers long service, the Christmas Party in December and fortnightly foster carer drop-in Skype meetings with the fostering team and guests provided unique opportunities to come together and celebrate and gain support during the most trying of times.

Recruitment and Assessment

In January 2020, the Carer Recruitment and Assessment Team formerly separated into two distinct teams, the Carer Assessment Team and the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team. The Carer Assessment Team is now responsible for assessing prospective connected carers through Viability Assessments, Special Guardian Assessments and Regulation 24/25 assessments (also known as kinship assessments), while the Fostering Recruitment team are responsible for the advertising, recruiting and the assessment of prospective foster carers. 2020-2021 was the first full year with these changes being in place.

The Fostering Recruitment team are involved with prospective carers from the point of initial enquiry, until they are formally presented to the Fostering Panel for approval, after which their approval as foster carers are ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. Once approved, fostering households are

allocated a supervising social worker in the Fostering Support team, who will then oversee their development as carers, provide them with regular supervision and support them in their care of Barnet's looked after children.

Our placement demand transformation is underpinned by developing our in-house offer for foster carers and supported lodgings hosts. To aid the program of development, the foster care services have undergone a review focusing on a needs led analysis of the service. The analysis has enabled the service to implement systemic changes to how we deliver services across fostering, utilizing virtual working mechanism such as virtual fostering panels and hybrid models of assessment and supervision, alongside continuing to develop our online social media presence through Instagram and Facebook as both a recruitment tool and a support service. Despite the challenges of the pandemic the Recruitment team has continued to recruit foster carers utilizing social media platforms alongside more traditional means of print advertising. The service has also seen some foster carers leave or retiring from fostering, whilst the demand for carers to provide warm and loving home for the most vulnerable children has continued to increase.

Enquiries & Approvals:

In 2020/2021, following the creation of a separate team for recruiting foster carers and supported lodgings host, the target for recruitment was set to 35 fostering households. Unsurprisingly we were unable to meet this target, given the challenges of recruiting in a year of global lockdowns and living in isolation. However, using creative and dynamic approaches on social media platforms and our more usual campaigns we were able to successfully recruit 11 foster carer households and 5 supported lodgings hosts. This is significantly more than other local authorities within the North London Fostering and Permanency Consortium, and is considered a real achievement for the service.

As outlined in our improvement plan of 2018/2019, we introduced our digital application process in 2020 to ensure consistency and ease of the application process. There was an expectation that the number of enquiries would reduce after the introduction of this 'screening form', although there would be an increase in the quality of applicants coming through.

A reduction in enquiries was visible from the start of the year with only 11 enquiries being placed in April. During 2019/2020 there were 201 initial enquiries up from 194 in 2018/2019. This reduced to 168 in 2020/21. However, despite a lower number of enquiries Barnet's conversion rate from enquiries to approval increased from 2019/2020 at 3.98%, to 8.92% in 2020/2021, closer to the

national average. This also evidences the success of the digital screening process ensuring the most appropriate applicants are applying.

Enquiries	Total
2019/20	201
2020/21	168

Table 1: **Barnet Fostering Enquiries 2019/2020 – 2020/2021**

Contrary with previous year’s data where the majority of enquiries originated from outreach recruitment (36), the top performer of this year was Barnet’s own website enquiries (35), followed by Facebook (31). As can be seen in the virtual way of working, web-based sources have become the most popular mechanisms for generating enquiries. Word of mouth remains a significant source of enquiries, generating 27 enquiries this year. The following table details the breakdown in enquires throughout the year.

Source	Approved	Closed	Enquiry	Screening/IV	Screening/IV (On Hold)	Stage 2	Grand Total
Bus Stop Ad	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Consortium	0	2	0	1	0	0	3
Facebook	1	24	4	1	1	0	31
Internal Comms	0	2	0	0	1	0	3
Leaflet	0	1	0	2	0	0	3
Online	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Other	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Previously enquired	1	2	0	3	1	0	7
Publication	0	0	1	2	1	0	4
Referral	0	8	0	0	0	0	8
Search Engine	1	14	0	2	1	2	20
Website	0	28	0	0	4	3	35
WOM	1	21	0	3	1	1	27
Unknown	0	16	0	2	3	1	22
Grand Total	4	121	5	17	13	8	168

Table 2: **Barnet Fostering Enquiries analysis 2020 - 2021**

Review of targets for 2020/21

As targets for 2020/2021 of 35 foster carers / Supported Lodging Hosts were unfortunately not achieved, we have reviewed our targets for fostering households and supported lodgings hosts in consultation with our placement sufficiency program. Despite acknowledging the challenges of recruiting fostering households within a context of Covid-19, our placement demand and sufficiency strategy indicates the need for us to continue to be ambitious to best meet the needs of Barnet's looked after children. Our recruitment strategy was set for 2020- 2022. The targets set remains and include:

- 30 mainstream foster carers
- 2 Parent & Child foster carers
- 4 specialist carers for teens
- 4 respite carers for children with disabilities
- 10 supported lodgings Hosts

Fostering Households

As of 31st March 2021, Barnet have 95 approved mainstream foster carers, totalling 208 placements for children within these homes, as well as 24 connected carers.

Fostering household resignations

During the period from April 2020 – March 2021, 13 foster carers resigned from Barnet.

The reasons were:

2	As a result of death or due to Covid 19 impact
2	Following the granted of Special Guardianship Order
1	Transferred to IFA
4	Due to changes in personal circumstances
1	To progress to Staying Put arrangement
1	Moved to a new house outside of authority
2	other

In addition, 19 Regulation 24/25 (Kinship) carer were deregistered with 7 of them converting to Special Guardianship arrangements. The other 12 are no longer caring for children, who have either returned to their parents' care, or moved to approved foster carers with care plans of long term fostering.

Fostering Support and Development

Foster care is the right choice for the majority of children in our care. High-quality foster care in a stable family-like environment can be a protective factor in supporting and enabling children to achieve positive outcomes and thrive throughout their lives. When we place in foster care, we focus on the needs of the child, the quality of the care and the outcomes we want to achieve for the child. We think systematically about their relationships and networks in their local area and the support that will enable them to thrive, including aiming to place siblings together where possible. We also weight in cultural matching and other individual factors. Our goal is to find an alternative home where they are loved, kept safe and are encouraged to be the best they can be.

The fostering support and development team are responsible for the support and development of foster carers to ensure that they meet National Minimum Standards as underpinned by the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, providing care for Barnet's children which supports their overall well-being resilience and aspirations. The team of social workers have several years of experience in child protection and fostering. They have also attended training offered to foster carers in Attuned Therapeutic Care, PACE and working with the mental health needs of children and young people looked after to support them in working therapeutically.

The team supports foster carers in providing a good standard of care, providing challenge, reflection and support to develop foster carers practice. They have prioritised support to foster carers throughout the pandemic in recognising that the support needs of foster carers in meeting the needs of children in their care. Some carers have required additional support around maintaining education at school and sometimes at home whilst keeping safe has required them to be resourceful, flexible and creative. During this time face to face foster carer support groups which would usually be held monthly evolved into weekly virtual coffee mornings also attended by members of the Senior Management team and other colleagues from across Family Services including the paediatrician and health team, the clinical team and caseworkers from the virtual school.

Foster carers very much appreciated having dialogue with senior managers and immediate responses to their questions and concerns. Providing access to PPE and COVID 19 vaccine for foster carers early on in the vaccine program was also much appreciated by foster carers. Supporting them throughout 2020/21 has required sensitivity, flexibility and resilience.

Training for foster carers has been provided via virtual platforms and via e-learning, with attendance at and completion of courses remaining at consistently high levels. A number of carers, whilst

missing the face to face training have also found the flexibility of out of hours training schedules helpful to their busy lives.

The development of foster carers skills base is integral to meeting the needs of Barnet's children, whilst building foster carers capacity to care for children with complex needs. In addition to this the team supported foster carers to explore and develop to expand their approval age range or approval numbers where possible and explore permanence and post 18 staying put arrangements.

Foster carers access support from BICS (Barnet Integrated Clinical Services) through consultations and therapeutic sessions with the child in their care, enhancing the support provided to children and carers in the home. Training opportunities for Barnet foster carers is also accessible via the North London Consortium of which Barnet is part of along with Camden, Haringey, Hackney, Enfield and Islington. The North London Consortium also provides training for men who foster which is a valuable resource.

As of March 2021, Barnet had 95 approved mainstream fostering households, a slight decrease from the 102 fostering households in the previous year. In regard to demographics, 65% of foster carer households live within the Barnet area and 35% of households are based out of borough. In terms of diversity 84% of foster carers are female, 38% are of White British origin with second largest groups being of Caribbean origin and African. 35 of our foster carers over 60 years old.

Barnet has continued to offer our foster carers a comprehensive training offer, and this was also reflected in the feedback from a Foster Carer survey that took place (see below for further details); with 75% of foster carers rating the training as very good/good. 88% of foster carers have attended training within the last year.

Staying Put

The 'Staying Put' Scheme allows care leavers to stay with their foster carers after they turn 18, if the young person and foster carer agree to this arrangement. As at 31 March 2021, Barnet had 16 care experienced young people remaining living with their former foster parent. The data evidences a significant drop of young people remaining living with their carers under Staying Put arrangements, in comparison to 2019/20, when 27 young people remained living with their foster carers post 18. This is attributed to a variety of reasons including, young people being accommodated later in adolescence and preferring to move into their own accommodation. Staying Put placements supports young people continuing to engage in education while providing a gradual transition to living independently.

Conditions conducive to the Staying Put arrangement include a positive placement that meets the young person's needs, and the will of both the young person and foster carer to continue with the arrangement. Staying Put living arrangements are reviewed annually with the carers, young person, Personal Adviser and Supervising social worker.

Supported Lodgings

Barnet's Supported Lodgings scheme was introduced in 2018/2019 with 2 supported lodgings carers were successfully recruited in the first year. Capacity increased with a further 3 in 2019, to 5 being approved in 2020-2021, following a targeted recruitment campaign.

Foster Carer Survey

In the context of this peculiar year and in honor of our commitment to working collaboratively we designed the foster carer survey with current and newly approved foster carers. Completed in December 2020, the survey had a response rate of 45% (41 out of 92 fostering households) and demonstrated that the majority of foster carers (63%) felt good about fostering for Barnet. The results also highlighted areas where we can work together to develop the service, particularly around our support offer and how we communicate and work with foster carers as professionals. In follow-up interviews, foster carers reflected on how they appreciate the support that they receive from their social workers, but also that there are moments when communication is not as efficient as they would like. This feedback has informed the service delivery improvement plan for 2021 -2022.

The majority of foster carers (78%) feel that their relationship with their social worker is good or very good. The relationship has been key to how services and support has been provided. Survey responses indicated that foster carers thought the service as a whole is good, with one carer explaining how she has been a foster carer for 18 years, and that 'Barnet had always been outstanding'. She explained that she feels that she has always had support from her supervising social worker for anything she has ever wanted. However, staff and foster carers also commented on the need to improve relationships, and the need for the relationship between carer and social worker to be framed in a professional context. This would include open communication and appreciation. While 63% rated the availability of support during office hours as very good or good, only 30% were satisfied with the out of hours support. This feedback has informed the newly developed out of hours offer, launched as part of Fostering Fortnight in May 2021.

Review of objectives - what we have done

- Improved handover process from Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team to Fostering Support team to ensure stability of carers and placements
- Improved induction for newly approved foster carers and developed a 2 year newly approved Foster Carer Support Offer
- Supervising Social Workers now lead on Skills to Foster Training in partnership with foster carers provided through virtual mediums of MS Teams.
- Developed training to enhance knowledge and skills of foster carers, such as attuned therapeutic training and PACE training
- Progressed therapeutic training opportunities for foster carers through the Reflective Fostering Project running in partnership with the Anna Freud Centre and University of Hertfordshire
- Staying Put carers have named supervising social worker
- Developed virtual support groups for foster carers to provide spaces for reflection, challenge and learning
- Progressed therapeutic training opportunities for foster carers through the Reflective Fostering Project running in partnership with the Anna Freud Centre
- Continued focus on individual development plans for foster carers
- Progressed recruitment activities to virtual events, such as our information sessions, Skills to Foster and our development of social media platforms

Objectives for 2021 - 2022

- Develop Barnet Fostering Web pages and ensuring consistency across Barnet's website for an improved journey, including monitoring and reviewing the online enquiry submission, information sessions and initial visit booking systems
- Increase focus on social media presence and campaigns, including Facebook boosts, google AdWords to increase website views alongside Barnet fostering Instagram page (@barnetfostering and hashtag #more2give).
- Improve and expand internal communications with staff and current cohort of foster carers to increase recruitment, including financial incentive with the refer a friend scheme
- Consistent transition between assessment social work and supervising social worker from Fostering Support Service to ensure carers feel supported, held and contained throughout their first child being placed.

- Recruitment and retention of permanent staff members to ensure better service user experiences.
- Transferring the Foster carer handbook to more accessible online version and consideration of progressing to a more user-friendly platform for ease for foster carers
- Update Policies and procedures to ensure effective support for the Fostering service and our Foster carers.
- Foster carer case file audit template to be developed for the development of a Fostering specific audit programme at intervals throughout the year.
- Themes from audits to be analysed and used to continue to develop the service.
- Progression of the annual Foster Carer Survey to be completed to understand the strengths and challenges within the service and aid service development.
- Review virtual fostering panel with a view to move to a hybrid model to allow prospective applicants to attend panel in person and provide better real-life experience
- Work and consult with Foster carers to develop a Foster carers charter to support a shared understanding of expectations of the fostering service and of our foster carers
- Development of therapeutic foster carer cohort to support our inhouse therapeutic children's home Green Bank House
- Continue with online support groups and celebration events, including Foster Carer Appreciation Day and Foster Carer Fortnight