



## **Children and Young People's Department**

### **Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2020-24**

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## **1. Introduction: Statutory Duties and Guidance**

The Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2020-24 sets out how Brent Council, as Corporate Parent, meets its statutory Sufficiency Duty as laid down in Section 22G of the Children Act 1989. The strategy draws on statutory guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children (DfE 2010), the Children Act 2004, the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

The strategy describes how Brent will meet the current and future placement needs of looked after children (LAC) and care leavers. It builds on existing duties in law to promote and safeguard the welfare and well-being of children and high quality care planning.

The strategy provides an update on progress in delivering the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Sufficient Strategy 2017-20 and details current and planned actions to meet placement sufficiency over the next four years in line with the demographic profile of Brent's population.

## **2. The Brent Approach**

The Brent Looked After Children and Care Leaves Placement Sufficient Strategy 2020-24 is based on Brent's vision, values and ways of working which aim to:

- Break down the cultural and structural divisions between service areas in the interest of improving outcomes for children and young people
- Look ahead to identify and plan for future changes and pursue continuous improvement
- Deliver evidence based services and foster innovation and creativity.

In Brent's Children and Young People's Department we:

- Put children and young people and their families at the heart of service design and delivery, and adopt a child/family journey approach to service delivery.
- Hold the views of children and young people and their families as of paramount importance.
- Ensure that frontline staff are able to spend as much time as possible with children and young people, and their families, so that they can make a real difference to their lives.
- Enable children and young people and their families to only have to tell their story once and be able to rely on long-term relationships with CYP professionals.

This strategy is informed by the Brent Practice Framework, evidence-based methodologies such as Signs of Safety and Brent's approach to contextual safeguarding, which seeks to understand extra-familial pressures and risks for children and young people. The strategy is aligned with the Brent SEND Strategy 2018-21 and the local CAMHSs Transformation Plan.

Brent's placement activity reflects a collaborative and partnership approach to ways of working. The following ambitions are informed by feedback from providers and carers, children and young people and staff. Brent seeks to:

- Provide LAC and care leavers with access to a range of placement options that meet their specific and diverse needs as identified in their care plan

- enable looked after children to be placed in a family setting where possible, whether with their own extended family members or foster carers, and provide staying put options for care leavers
- secure placements within or close to the local authority area, unless for safeguarding reasons this is not appropriate
- enable sibling groups to stay together or support sibling contact as outlined in their care plan
- minimise disruption to children and young people’s education or training, with this considered at all stages of placement finding
- provide LAC and care leavers with access to support and services of high quality that are appropriate to their needs as identified in their care plan or pathway plan
- ensure placements are subject to robust quality assurance by commissioners and social work teams to support placement stability, with further support and challenge provided by Independent Reviewing Officers.

### 3. The Brent Context

#### 3.1 Demographic profile of children in Brent

Brent is one of the most densely populated outer London boroughs. In 2019, the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) - Income Deprivation ranked Brent as the 65<sup>th</sup> most deprived local authority area in England (of 326 local authorities). Brent is the most diverse borough in London. The Greater London Authority (GLA) 2018 mid-year estimates show the ethnic breakdown of Brent’s 81,462 0-18 year old population (Table 1). This diversity is reflected in Brent’s looked after population - as at 31 March 2020, 81% of LAC were from black and ethnic minority groups and 19% were white (Table 2). The local authority faces the challenge of finding foster placements that are a suitable cultural match and placements that meet the diverse needs of LAC and care leavers.

Ethnicity	%	Total
White Irish	1%	969
White & Black African	2%	1533
White & Black Caribbean	2%	1909
White & Asian	3%	2324
Other Ethnic Group	3%	2358
Other Mixed	4%	3140
Black Caribbean	5%	4234
Other Black	6%	4843
Pakistani	6%	5033
Arab	7%	5814
Other Asian	11%	9322
White British	12%	9455
Black African	12%	10100
Indian	12%	10180
Other White	12%	10248
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>81462</b>

### 3.2 Levels of Need

At any one time, there are around 2000 children in need of support from Brent Children's (Social Care) Services and a 2550 children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans. Two groups of children require particularly intensive support:

- 254 children were subjects of child protection plans at the end of March 2020, having been assessed by the local authority and multi-agency partners as being at risk of significant harm and
- 294 children were looked after by the local authority at the end of March 2020.

In terms of placement demand, Brent has seen an increase in the number of babies where there are child protection concerns and where a residential mother or family and baby placement has been required to undertake parenting assessments, with the number increasing from an average of 4 per year to 8 in 2019/20. Given the scarcity of high quality placements to meet this need, the local authority is considering new commissioning approaches.

The number of LAC in Brent is low compared to other London authorities and neighbouring boroughs. Over the last five years the number of LAC in Brent has reduced from 325 (March 2015) to 294 (March 2020), although nationally the number of LAC has increased. The low number of LAC reflects a variety of contributing factors, including improved early identification and engagement of families at risk of escalating problems, which has reduced the numbers of parents entering voluntary Section 20 agreements.

The current LAC cohort represents a rate of 38 LAC per 10,000 head of child population in 2019/20. This contrasts with the rate for statistical neighbours (excluding Croydon) of 55 per 10,000 head of child population (2018/19). If Brent had the same rate as statistical neighbours, Brent would have an additional 132 LAC. The national rate for LAC per 10,000 of the population was 65 in 2018/19. If Brent had the same rate of LAC as nationally, Brent would have an additional 209 children.

Although the number of LAC is staying relatively steady in Brent, the profile of Brent's looked after population presents some particular challenges with regards to commissioning suitable placements as examined in the sections below.

Year ending	Brent	Statistical Neighbour	England
31 March 2015	44	60	60
31 March 2016	45	57	60
31 March 2017	42	56	62
31 March 2018	41	57	64
31 March 2019	38	58	65
31 March 2020	38	58*	65*

\*comparative figures from 31 March 2019

### 3.3 Profile of LAC

The age distribution of Brent’s looked after population is skewed towards older age groups, reflecting an increase in the number of young people entering care in their teenage years in recent years (Chart 1). At the end of March 2020, 21% of the LAC population was under the age of 10 and 61% was aged over 13 years old compared to 64% in March 2019 and 59% in March 2018. As at 31 March 2020, 42.2% was aged 16-18 (42% in March 2019). Of the 174 new LAC during the 2019/20 reporting year, 46 children (26.4%) were aged 13-15 compared to 26 (11.7%) in 2018/19. 62 (35.6%) of new LAC in 2019/20 were aged 16-18 compared to 43.5% in 2018/19.

The trend of a high proportion of children entering the care system at older ages over the past few years has in part been linked the number of young people entering the UK as unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). This number in Brent has recently stabilised at around 60 each year. After reaching a peak in March 2017 at 75, there were 60 USAC in March 2020.

There continues to be a high number of children in their late teenage years, who are experiencing family breakdown, entering the care system. Nationally it is recognised that adolescent entrants to the care system tend to experience a larger number of placements, a more disrupted experience of care, poorer outcomes in education and are at increased risk of struggling when they leave care. The challenge for the local authority is to find suitable family placements for these children to improve outcomes.

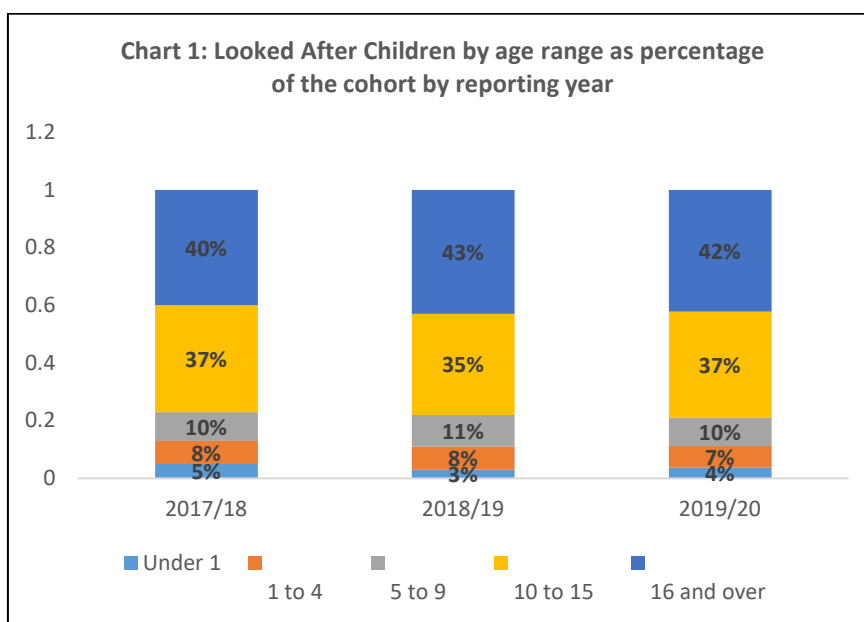


Table 3 shows a breakdown of LAC by gender, age and ethnicity as at 31 March 2020. 62% of Brent’s care population was male. While this is slightly lower than in previous years, it remains higher than the average of 58% for Brent’s statistical neighbours and 56% as the national average (in 2018/19). One reason for this variance is the high number of UASC, of whom the vast majority are male. Table 3 shows a breakdown of LAC by ethnicity. As at 31 March 2020, 81% of LAC were from black and ethnic minority groups and 19% were white.

<b>Table 3: Profiled of Looked After Children as at 31/03/2020</b>		
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Number of children in care	294	
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	111	38%
Male	183	62%
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian or Asian British	41	12.9%
Black or Black British	84	29.7%
Mixed/Multiple	54	17.5%
Not stated/Undeclared	0	0%
Other ethnic groups	59	20%
White	56	19%
<b>Age</b>		
0-4	<b>33</b>	11%
5-9	<b>29</b>	10%
10-12	<b>40</b>	14%
13-15	<b>68</b>	23%
16-18	<b>124</b>	42%

### 3.4 LAC Vulnerability

An independent review of LAC demand in 2016 identified key risks for Brent children that increased the risk of coming into care, particularly when experienced in combination: being in adolescence, gang involvement, domestic abuse, emotional health and substance misuse.

Recent data analysis suggests that Brent's looked after population face a range of vulnerabilities and contextual risks. These include missing episodes, risk of child sexual exploitation, county lines activity, children missing education and young people known to the Youth Offending Service (YOS). As at 31 March 2020, 91 of the 294 LAC had more than one vulnerability. Amongst the top 50 young people in the borough of most concern because of their multiple vulnerabilities, 54% were LAC. Table 4 provides detail of the vulnerabilities of this group of LAC and Table 5 shows the frequency with which vulnerabilities appear together for this group, with the most frequent combination being young people who go missing and are known to the YOS.

<b>Table 4: Vulnerabilities of LAC</b>	
<b>Vulnerability</b>	<b>Percent of total LAC</b>
Missing	82%
Known to YOS	22%
CSE Concerns	22%
County Lines	12%

Missing Education	8%
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Table 5: Risk combination frequency for LAC					
Vulnerability	Missing	Known to YOS	CSE	County Lines	Missing Education
Missing		16	12	9	2
Known to YOS	16		2	9	1
CSE	12	2		2	2
County Lines	9	9	2		0
Missing Education	2	1	2	0	

### 3.5 Placement Profile

Over the past 5 years, there has been a decline nationally in the proportion of children looked after placed in a fostering household. Of the 294 LAC on 31 March 2020, 60.5% were placed with foster carers, which is lower than in March 2019 (65.0%) and 30% were in residential and semi-independent settings. Brent's proportion of children looked after in fostering households remains below that of statistical neighbours (73%), London (70%) and England (72%).

Published data for the number and percentage of children placed in secure units, residential children's homes and semi-independent placement types has shown an increase across statistical neighbours, London and England over the past 5 years. In Brent, the increased use of semi-independent placements for the older cohort of children looked after accounts for most of this increase. Coupled by a national lack of sufficiency around foster carers for teenagers, including within Brent's in-house foster service, Brent places a high number of young people in semi-independent provision. 11% of LAC were in residential settings at the end of March 2020, many of whom are older children who present with complex behaviour that foster carers do not feel equipped to manage.

The proportion of LAC placed within the borough has increased - on 31 March 2020 41.2% of LAC were placed within the borough compared to 39.8% on 31 March 2019. Of the 58.8% (173) placed outside of Brent's boundaries, 49 were placed within a neighbouring borough. 58 LAC were placed further than 20 miles from their home address before they became Looked After. Some of these children were placed out of Brent for safeguarding reasons, reflecting that while the LAC population overall has reduced in recent years, there is a high proportion of older children, many of whom have multiple vulnerabilities such as the risk of exploitation by gangs or child sexual exploitation, that requiring placement away from Brent. In some cases, children are placed out of borough because it is difficult to source suitable specialist provision locally, in particular residential provision that offers a therapeutic setting.

LAC achieve better outcomes when they are in stable placements. During 2019/20, 15.3% (45) children had three or more placement moves, which is slightly higher than previous years. The local authority recognises that targeted action is required to reduce the number of children experiencing multiple placements, for example by holding placement stability meetings when issues start to emerge.



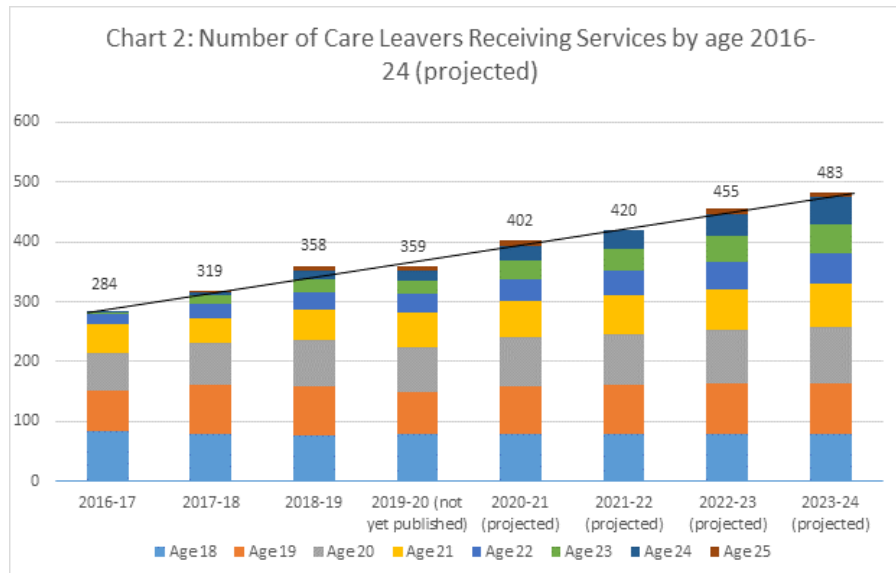
<b>Table 6: Placement Profile as at 31/03/2020</b>		
	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Placement type</b>		
Placed for Adoption	6	2%
Fostering	178	60.5%
Placed with parents	11	3.7%
Semi Independent	54	18.4%
Residential setting	34	11.6%
<b>Placement Location</b>		
In borough	121	41.2%
Out borough	173	58.8%
<b>Breakdown of Out of Borough Placements (173)</b>		
Within Neighbouring boroughs	49	28%
Outside neighbouring boroughs	124	72%
<b>Breakdown of Out of Borough Placements (173)</b>		
Under 20 miles	115	66.5%
Over 20 miles	58	33.5%
<b>Legal Status</b>		
Section 20	104	35.4%
Section 38	43	14.6%
Section 31	136	46.3%
Placement Order	7	2.4%
Detained on child protection grounds in LA accommodation	1	0.3%
Youth justice legal Statuses	3	1%

### **3.6 Profile of Care Leavers**

Local Authorities have a duty and responsibility to all care leavers up to the age of 25 regardless of their education or employment status (Children and Social Work Act 2017). As of 31 March 2020, Brent was responsible for the support to 281 Former Relevant Young People (aged 18 -21) and 18 young people aged 22-25 in higher education. A further 83 young people were eligible for a service, but were not currently seeking it. 85 care leavers were placed in semi-independent accommodation and 32 were in staying put arrangements as at 31 March 2020.

A dedicated Care Leavers' Team focuses on supporting and remaining in touch with the care leaver population. A small group of care leavers are considered to have multiple vulnerabilities (11 at 31 March 2020). The majority of these young people had at least one missing episode in the last year (73%). Other contextual risks experienced by the most vulnerable care leavers include CSE and involvement in county lines.

Brent has recently seen an increase in the need to provide accommodation for young people for longer periods of time beyond age 18, for example those who do not have recourse to public funds or who are struggling to live independently. The number of care leavers is forecast to increase over the next 4 years based on the current cohort of LAC (Chart 2) and it is anticipated that this will generate increased demand for placements and staying put arrangements.



#### 4. Views of Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Brent's Quality Assurance Framework outlines that everyone within the organisation has a responsibility to identify areas of learning, share good practice and develop services. One of the core principles of the Quality Assurance Framework is that the experiences and views of children, young people and their families are vital to understanding how well the system works. To inform the Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2020-24, children and young people's voices have been listened to through a range of different approaches. This includes: the Bright Spots Survey which is conducted every 2 years with looked after children between the ages of 4 and 18; Your Life Beyond Care survey carried out by Coram Voice and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford; discussions at Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action (Brent's Children in Care Council); feedback from IROs and LAC reviews and feedback from engagement with social workers and personal advisers.

#### **4.1 Bright Spots Survey (March/April 2018)**

The 2018 online survey had responses from 82 children and young people, a response rate of 29%.

##### **Feedback on placements:**

- All children in the 4-11 year old cohort said that they felt settled in their placement
- Two thirds (65%) of young people talked regularly with their carers about things that mattered to them. This is a comparable proportion to those in the general population.
- In Brent only 63% of young people 'always' felt settled compared to 78% in other authorities. Not feeling settled was the single factor most strongly associated with low well-being.
- In Brent, only 81% of young people trusted their carers which is significantly lower than in other authorities where 96% trusted the adults they lived with.

*"My current placement is very supportive of my hopes and dreams. I love being there". 11-18yrs*

*"I am fine at my placement. It feels like home". 11-18yrs*

*"I am unhappy with the area I live in. Since moving to [X] I've always wanted to move back to my hometown in [X]". 11-18yrs*

##### **How we are responding:**

The local authority is working with carers to ensure that young people feel settled in their placements. Relatively small changes such as encouraging young people to get involved in decorating their bedroom could help to promote a sense of belonging. Social workers are also working with young people to help them develop trusting and supportive relationships with their carers.

To help more young people stay close to Brent, the Commissioning and Resources Team actively seeks local placements through the West London Alliance Dynamic Purchasing Vehicles for residential homes, independent fostering agency provision and residential special schools. The local authority will also use a new DPV for semi-independent provision that will be operational from June 2020.

#### **4.2 Your Life Beyond Care Survey (February and April 2019)**

103 care leavers responded to the online survey - a response rate of 30%. 44% were in a rented flat or house, 39% were in supported accommodation or supported lodgings. None were in short-stay or emergency placements or described themselves as homeless and 6 were in a staying put arrangement.

##### **Feedback on placements:**

- Two-thirds (66%) of care leavers in Brent reported 'always' feeling safe in their home - a proportion similar to that seen in other LAs (63%).
- Just over half (54%) of the care leavers 'always' felt settled where they lived: a smaller proportion than the 63% of looked after young people in Brent who felt settled.
- Care leavers in Brent were less satisfied with their accommodation than their peers in the general population (71% vs. 80%).

- 29% of the young people did not rate their current accommodation as suitable
- 49 (48%) care leavers commented about where they lived. 14 young people shared entirely positive experiences: they expressed satisfaction with the safety or location of their accommodation, contentment with those they lived with and appreciation of the support they received. About half the care leavers who completed this section made mixed or negative comments about their housing. Young people complained about feeling unsafe or isolated, some were living in cramped or expensive accommodation, or were residing with people they did not want to be around.

*"I like my placement I feel safe there"*

*"I hate where I live but have no other option. I feel stranded."*

*"its a good fit for me right now and I am happy."*

*"I have my independence and I enjoy my space and privacy."*

*"I like where I live. The staff help me."*

*"I would like my own accommodation ASAP."*

*"I don't have peace and quiet and I feel very depressed where I live as I don't have a space to myself."*

*"I don't know anyone in the area. It's far away from everyone who I do know."*

*"My former foster family with whom I reside with have become my real family."*

*"It's not ideal. It's a downgrade from having my flat. It's not easy, don't like the people there. It's a rainbow of people with health issues, families."*

#### **How we are responding:**

Brent is developing a new quality assurance framework for semi-independent provision that has care lived experience at its centre and that the commissioning of placements reflects children and young people's voice. Alongside this the aim is to move to an outcomes-based commissioning model that captures defined outcomes for children and young people that are monitored through rigorous contract management. Within a contextual safeguarding framework, Brent will also continue to develop and deliver a training programme for semi-independent providers to ensure they can meet the needs of Brent's looked after children and care leavers.

#### **4.3 Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action**

Care in Action and Care Leavers in Action are consulted on a range of commissioning intentions which informs the commissioning process. Examples include consultation on mental health and wellbeing services which informed the commissioning of a new service targeted at children and young people in identified priority groups. Representative young people were involved in the procurement process for the service. Care Leavers in Action were recently consulted on the staying put policy and asked about their experiences of staying put arrangements and about what contributions, if any, young people should make.

*"I feel that I trust my foster parents as they are open with me. By contributing to the house you get to learn how to budget and save."*

*“I get help with things to help me improve myself like cooking and cleaning. My foster parents really help with getting me ready to live on my own and making me more responsible for my actions.”*

*“It helps with stability and feeling safe. I feel that it helps you financially too. You are better off financially when you stay put.”*

#### **4.4 Feedback from IROs and LAC reviews**

Looked After Children reviews provide the opportunity for a young person to speak to their independent reviewing officer about their Care Plan, including their accommodation. If issues about placements are identified by the IRO, the escalation protocol is followed and all escalations are tracked until resolution. The two thematic areas IROs have identified in relation to placements are placements to match the needs of sibling groups and that a large proportion of LAC are placed in semi-independent units, some of which are excellent and some of which are below standard. Placement issues are raised individually at the time and are responded to as appropriate, for example through quality assurance visits by the Commissioning Team with issues raised with providers or children moved.

**4.5 Independent Return Home Interviews** after a child returns from an episode of missing. The Child Exploitation and Missing Panel is reviewing how young people’s experiences of “difficulties at home” relate to looked after children, particularly around their views on their placement and whether this links to them going missing. Thematic feedback will be shared with frontline practitioners and the placement commissioning team.

### **5. Progress in delivery of the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2017-20**

The Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Sufficient Strategy 2017-20 identified a number of actions to address the challenges facing the local authority, as summarised below.

<b>Placement</b>	<b>Action in 2017-20 Strategy</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Brent Fostering	Increase in local carers by at least 5	11 new fostering households were approved in 2019/20. However, at the same time a number of carers have retired or ceased to foster. A new marketing and recruitment strategy has been developed with targeted focus on online marketing and awareness raising. This has been successful at increasing the number of contacts. Additionally, Brent has been successful in receiving a DfE grant to support a fostering feasibility study on establishing a targeted joint fostering service with other local authorities offering out of hours support for carers who provide for more complex placements.

Placement	Action in 2017-20 Strategy	Progress
Independent Fostering	Increase in the number of IFA placements made on the WLA framework utilising new Direct Purchasing Vehicle (DPV). Explore use of block contracts.	<p>The proportion of IFA placements made on the WLA framework via the DPV has increased from 47% (59) in 2018/19 to 74% (87) in 2019/20.</p> <p>The local authority has explored the use of block contracts, but has decided that before pursuing this, the council needs to ensure that it is fully realising the financial benefits offered through the DPV. Training of commissioning officers on how to maximise the benefits has commenced and will continue over the next year.</p>
Semi-independent provision	Expand number of placements commissioned through block contracts. Establish life-skills programme.	<p>The local authority had intended to expand the number of placements commissioned locally through block contracts via its current contract with Centrepont, but this has proved to be difficult due to high property purchasing costs and high rental costs in London. The local authority is considering options to block contract already existing provision.</p> <p>An ASDAN accredited life-skills programme has been established and staff are trained on delivering this. The programme involves a range of practical modules such as cooking and financial management to support the transition to adulthood.</p>
Residential Provision	Utilise WLA DPV. Explore potential for block contracts.	<p>The local authority is using the WLA DPV to commission residential provision. There continues to be, however, a need for some spot purchasing of specialist placements.</p> <p>The authority has engaged with providers about potential block contracts. However, there is very limited appetite for this from the market. Providers' primary concern when considering a placement is matching with other children accommodated, which could reduce the potential benefits of block contracts.</p>
Adoption	Support establishment of	The West London Regional Adoption Agency was established in September 2019 and is one of four

Placement	Action in 2017-20 Strategy	Progress
	West London Regional Adoption Agency.	sub-regional arrangements connected to the London Regional Adoption Agency. Ealing is the host of the RAA, but Brent has taken a leading role in supporting the establishment of the RAA.
Supporting Children on the Edge of Care	Reshape Early Intervention to support vulnerable teenagers	A new Accelerated Support Team (AST) has been established that is providing targeted support to families and an out-of-hours service in evenings and weekends. The AST is a multi-disciplinary team and includes mental health and wellbeing support. The AST is providing prevention and crisis support where risks are identified for vulnerable adolescents, with the aim of resolving issues quickly and keeping young people safe at home.

## 6. Current Commissioning Arrangements

The following commissioning principles underpin this strategy:

- understanding the needs of looked after children and care leavers through individual assessment and care planning
- a strategic assessment of need to ensure the right numbers and types of placement are anticipated and planned for
- developing the market to meet required needs so that appropriate placements can be commissioned and
- focusing on outcomes for children and young people through rigorous quality assurance and contract management and monitoring.

Brent commissions a range of placement types to meet the needs of Looked After Children, including foster care placements, semi-independent placements, residential placements (including secure arrangements), placements for children with special needs including residential schools and adoption. Care Leavers who are not considered ready for independence are offered a range of semi-independent options, including 'staying put' arrangements with foster carers.

Ofsted commented positively on commissioning arrangements for care leavers in a Focused Visit in November 2019 and in the report of Brent's Inspection of Local Authority Services in May 2018:

*"When children enter care, good commissioning arrangements ensure that, wherever possible, stable and high-quality placements are available. The vast majority of children and young people live with foster families. An increasing number are 'in house' due to successful recruitment*

*activity. Efficient screening and assessment processes ensure that only the most appropriate carers are recruited. Enhanced payment incentives are appropriately provided for carers who support children with more complex and challenging needs. This includes support for staying put arrangements. Local recruitment campaigns have been particularly successful in recruiting carers from a wide range of backgrounds. Foster carers have good access to regular training and support.*

*Fewer than 30% of children and young people live in residential care. All live in good or better homes. Placement planning ensures that, wherever possible, children's homes are able to meet the unique needs of each child or young person. If they are placed out of borough, this is most often in response to a safeguarding or complex need. Disruption rates are low but unavoidable for some children and young people. Good preventative support is provided if disruption is anticipated. Lessons are learned from reviews if placements break down. Short breaks for children who have a disability have been judged by Ofsted to be outstanding."*

## **6.1 Commissioning Approach and Quality Assurance**

Over the period 2017-20, Brent has continued to work in partnership with other local authorities through the West London Alliance (WLA), a collaboration of 9 local authorities, which was set up in 1998 to promote the interests of West London residents and businesses and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the provision of services. The areas of main activity for the WLA Children's Efficiency Programme are Direct Purchasing Vehicles (DPVs) for Independent Fostering Agencies, Residential provision and independent special schools, which Brent uses for the majority of commissioning activity. A new DPV for semi-independent providers is due to be operational from June 2020.

The aims of the WLA negotiated DPVs is to help secure local provision and to deliver cost and volume savings to member local authorities. In addition, the DPVs support shared quality assurance arrangements through accreditation processes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WLA has led sufficiency planning work across London, including contingency placement planning, as well as engagement with providers in relation to business continuity planning and provider delivery risk awareness.

The Commissioning and Resources Team (CRT) carry out additional quality assurance checks prior to any placement of children and young people with external providers not previously used by the local authority. This includes completion of a safeguarding questionnaire, review of published Ofsted reports and statements of purpose. Where placements are being considered in a residential or semi-independent setting that may not have been used before, references are sought from other local authorities who have placed children there. Brent monitors the submission of residential provider Regulation 33 reports.

The local authority regularly asks providers to complete a quality self-review, that sets out clearly the local authority's quality standards. Feedback from social work teams about any placement concerns or best practice is encouraged to ensure that CRT can address any issues with providers. Social workers review monthly child or young person placement progress reports that cover the support and care provided, and raise any quality assurance issues at relevant placement panels, such as the weekly Children's Placement Panel. CRT also carries out a schedule of quality assurance visits to residential and semi-independent providers. Brent is



planning to further develop its quality assurance framework to one that is more directly informed by care-lived experience and includes active participation by care leavers.

## 6.2 Foster placements

Foster placements include in-house foster placements, placements with family and friend carers, and independent fostering agency placements.

- **Brent Fostering Service**

Brent continues to actively recruit in-house foster carers (11 were approved in 2019/20). At the same time, however, carers have retired or ceased to foster. Recruiting local foster carers is difficult as there is a shortage of suitable, large housing within the borough which impacts on the pool of potential foster carers available in Brent. Next to Newham, Brent has the highest level of housing overcrowding levels within London, with the majority of housing for residents in multi-occupancy accommodation. Many new properties are flats that have limited potential to accommodate families with several children.

Feedback from Brent foster carers is consistently positive in relation to the support they receive from their allocated supervising social workers, their managers and the wider fostering service. Brent foster carers benefit from the support of a dedicated Fostering Development Co-ordinator and a training strategy built on foster carer development needs. 82 fostering reviews were undertaken in 2019/20 by an externally commissioned Fostering Review Service, which ensures in-house foster carers reviews are robust.

Brent foster carers attend a regular support group where they share common issues of concern with each other and the Supervising Social Worker leading the session. The Head of LAC and Permanency also meets quarterly with a foster carers' focus group where development issues are discussed and any areas of concern can be raised. In response the Fostering Development Coordinator has targeted training at areas identified by foster carers. In 2019/20 courses were offered on a variety of topics ranging in diversity from 'Key Legislation and Delegated Authority', to 'Child Sexual Exploitation' and 'Managing the challenges of conflict with De-escalation Techniques'. Feedback regarding the courses offered as part of the learning and development programme for Brent foster carers continues to be positive.

Recognising the need for foster carers and social work staff to improve the quality of relationships with children and young people, a programme of social pedagogy development was initiated in 2015. Focusing on placement stability, quality of relationships and outcomes for children, the programme has now become a part of Brent Council's Practice Framework. A Social Pedagogy Development Lead helps professionals understand the needs of children and young people with longer-term anticipated outcomes being greater placement stability and improved educational attendance and attainment. A cohort of supervising social workers and foster carers participated in 10-day introductory social pedagogy training in 2015. In 2018, three social workers who had prior social pedagogy training undertook the Crossfields Level 3 Diploma in Social Pedagogy Programme as part of the UCL Institute of Education-led Scaling Up Social Pedagogy project. They received mentoring by the Development Lead for Social Pedagogy, and all successfully completed the course after 9 months and hold the title Social Pedagogy Practitioner.

Diversity needs, including disability, race, religion, language and culture are always considered when placing a child. Overall Brent does well in placing children with foster families that reflect their ethnicity or culture. The profile of Brent foster carers broadly matches the ethnic and cultural background of many of looked after children, although some of the newer communities to have settled in Brent have not provided significant numbers of carers, in part because many are students or young professionals who are not interested in fostering. A high proportion of Brent foster carers are of Black Caribbean heritage and increasing the number of foster carers of Asian, White British and White European ethnicity remains a focus.

Brent has been successful in receiving a DfE grant to support a fostering feasibility study, which would involve establishing a targeted joint fostering service with other local authorities offering out of hours support for carers who provide for more complex placements. This feasibility study will be undertaken in 2020/21.

- **Independent Fostering Agencies**

Where placement with a family member or connected person has been ruled out, Brent considers a placement with an in-house foster carer. If a suitable placement with a Brent foster carer is not available, the council approaches the Independent Fostering Agency market, before extending its search to the private and voluntary sector. As at 31 March 2020, 79 LAC were placed with IFA carers. The WLA DPV is the main commissioning vehicle for IFA placements which supports greater consistency of provision, as the WLA quality assurance process provides a robust mechanism for holding providers to account in ensuring they continue to meet the requirements of the contract.

It is recognised that the needs of children and young people are increasingly complex and that there is a need for both more in-house carers and a supply of carers through Independent Foster Agencies equipped to meet the needs of the most complex children and young people. Scarcity in the market also puts pressure on resources. The local authority recognises a need to increase the sufficiency of specialist placements for adolescents and young people stepping down from residential provision.

### **6.3 Semi-Independent Living**

Brent's ambition is that all LAC and care leavers are properly prepared for the transition to adulthood and they are supported in a planned and effective way to achieve the best possible outcomes for each individual young person. High quality semi-independent living experiences can support the transition to adulthood, giving LAC and care leavers the opportunity to prepare and practice their independent living skills.

Brent commissions semi-independent placements in both private and voluntary sector provisions for young people aged over 16 and aged 18+. In 2019/20 54 LAC and 85 care leavers were living in semi-independent provision compared to 65 and 55 respectively in 2018/19. The increase in care leavers in semi-independent provision demonstrates how the local authority supports young people who are not yet ready for their own tenancies.

Brent currently has a block contract provision with Centrepont for 20 units, 15 of which offer low to medium support and 5 offer high support. The block contract is highly valued as young people benefit from access to a range of different services. As set out in the 2017-20 Placement

Sufficiency Strategy, Brent had hoped to expand the provision offered by Centrepont to 60 units, but this has proved to be difficult due to high property rental costs.

In addition, Brent spot-purchases semi-independent placements from a number of providers to meet the needs of individual young people. Many of these placements are commissioned through a WLA supported Semi-Independent List, a framework agreement that will be replaced by a new DPV later this year. Providers on the new DPV will have been through a robust selection process based on quality and price, with the aim of ensuring greater quality assurance for local authorities. The WLA has also established a quality standard accreditation process for semi-independent providers, which will support standardisation of quality and practice across the market.

To help prepare LAC and Care Leavers for independence, the local authority has developed an accredited life-skills programme for young people in semi-independent settings which is in the process of being rolled out by the Care Leavers Service. The local authority also holds a number of provider forums and training events to help the market understand the local authority's expectations in terms of quality and services to meet young people's needs. Topics covered since 2018 include contextual safeguarding, child sexual exploitation

Brent commissions placements from up to 35 semi-independent providers at any one time. It is recognised that there is a need to consolidate the number of semi-independent providers used by Brent. This could involve further block-contract arrangements that would create more local placements enabling young people to be housed close to family.

#### **6.4 Residential placements**

Brent currently spot-purchases placements in residential settings, including secure accommodation. The local authority does not manage any residential home provision, but is responsible for a residential short break unit for children with disabilities. The unit is Ofsted registered and graded as 'outstanding' in its most recent inspection in May 2019.

The threshold for children being placed in residential care is considered on an individual basis and when fostering options are not suitable. In March 2020 there were 29 children and young people in residential provision ranging from 10 to 16 in age, compared to 25 in March 2019.

Brent aims to use London based residential provision for young people in order to maintain their school placement and family/social connections where possible. Brent works with specialist providers that are able to offer immediate access to educational provision and therapeutic support for complex children. As there is scarcity of such specialist placements within the West London area, residential placements tend to be commissioned in other areas of Greater London or in other parts of the country. In many cases, children with complex needs are placed out of London for safeguarding reasons.

Brent aims to place children in homes that have achieved an Ofsted rating of 'Good' or 'Outstanding' and professional references are taken from other local authorities to ensure quality of provision. If the Ofsted rating of a provision where a child is placed falls below this standard, the Commissioning and Resources Team undertakes an immediate review of the individual circumstances in consultation with other practitioners, which includes scrutiny of the

improvement plan. A Director authorises the continuation of any such placements. Brent would only make a new placement in provision rated as 'Inadequate' with Director approval, after detailed scrutiny of the reasons for the Ofsted grading and the improvement plan.

Privately run children's homes based within Brent are supported through the West London residential children's home network that is facilitated through the WLA. Brent has held a number of forums with residential providers in 2018 and 2019 to explore the potential for block contract arrangements for residential provision, as set out in the 2017-20 Placement Sufficiency Strategy. However, there is very limited appetite for this from providers whose primary concern when considering a placement is matching with other children accommodated. Brent encourages new high quality local provision – in 2020 a new privately run home opened in Brent and it is anticipated that a further home will open in 2021.

There are established joint commissioning arrangements with Brent CCG for the placement of LAC who require access to therapeutic support or children with SEND. This includes the sharing of costs as appropriate for individual children.

### **6.5 Care Leavers Step-down Arrangements**

Improving outcomes for care leavers is a key local priority for Brent. The Brent Care Leavers Charter sets out how care leavers will be treated and the support they should expect to receive from the local authority. Brent recognises the challenges facing young people leaving care, such as moving into their first home as an independent adult and the practical support they need from across the council. The Care Leavers' Team is a dedicated team that focuses on supporting care leavers and remaining in touch with them into adulthood.

Care leavers are referred for permanent housing only when they are ready to manage and maintain their own tenancy, which means evidencing that the young person has acquired the appropriate life skills and emotional resilience and well-being. Where young people living in their primary placements (Residential Children's Homes or Foster Care) are assessed as requiring a semi-independent placement as a 'stepping stone' from care to independence, a range of semi-independent options are available. These options include registered social landlords and semi-independent accommodation, as well as staying put arrangements.

Brent encourages young people in foster placements to stay with their foster carers when they turn 18 and supports the continued relationship between the young person and carer through a detailed Pathway Plan. As of 31 March 2020, there were 26 young people in staying put arrangements in Brent, either with a Brent or independent agency foster carer, an increase on previous years.

Pathway Plans includes measurable outcomes that focus on young people obtaining life and independence skills ahead of their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and whilst there are in a Staying Put placement or a semi-independent provision after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Scrutiny of Pathway Plans takes place when young people are 17.5 with a focus on understanding what support is required for young people to successfully transition to their own accommodation when they become an adult, after a period of 'staying put' if this is what the young person wants.

Brent has increased the allowance for in-house foster carers to encourage young people to remain in their placement after their 18th birthday. IFAs within the WLA DPV have agreed on a set level of fee structure for staying put placements, aimed at securing a more consistent sub-regional approach. The Brent Staying Put Policy was refreshed in 2020 and, along with the associated Staying Put Agreement, sets out the expectations of all parties, including when housing benefit should be claimed and the circumstances in which young people are expected to contribute financially to the staying put costs. The Staying Put Policy aims to clarify expected outcomes for foster carers, in particular in relation to young people developing their independent living skills during the time period that they 'stay put'. It is anticipated that this will continue to lead to more young people remaining with their foster carers if agreed within their Pathway Plan.

Services across the council work together in partnership to support young people into their own accommodation. Care Leavers are given priority status for housing which reflects the responsibilities and duties placed on Local Authorities and other Corporate Parents outlined in Children Leaving Care Act 2000, The Children and Social Work Act 2017, Housing Act 1996 and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018. The Children and Young People and Housing departments jointly assess how the diverse housing and support needs of young people leaving care can be met to ensure that care leavers achieve a successful transition to independent living. This includes considering how to support and prepare young people and the provision of suitable accommodation that will enable them to become successful and responsible citizens. In March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, processes to move care leavers into their own tenancies were temporarily halted for safety reasons.

## **6.6 Adoption**

In 2019/20 4 children who were in care were adopted. In September 2019, Adopt London West, the West London Regional Adoption Agency was established, which is one of the four sub-regional arrangements connected to the London Regional Adoption Agency. All activity regarding adoption including recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, matching processes and post-adoption support is undertaken by Adopt London on behalf of Brent. Ealing has been secured as the host of the RAA but Brent has taken a leading role by coordinating a number of planning meetings to ensure there is direct involvement in every aspect of the development of the model.

The most recent set of national adoption scorecards was published in April 2019, covering the three year period 2015-18. The Brent three-year average time in days between a child entering care and moving in with his/her adoptive family was 391 days over this period, against a national average of 486 and a statistical neighbour average of 552. The local authority has maintained this level of performance in 2019/20.

## **7. Areas for development and actions for 2020-24**

There are a number of challenges faced by the Local Authority in meeting the placement sufficiency needs of vulnerable children and young people who require new commissioning solutions. Whilst the LAC population has reduced in size over recent years, the current trend of older teenagers entering care is expected to grow in line with Brent's forecast population

growth. A newly established Accelerated Support Team is providing prevention and crisis support where risks are identified for vulnerable adolescents, with the aim of resolving issues quickly and keeping young people safe at home. However, a number of teenagers are still entering the care system who present with a range of complexities and risks linked to gang affiliations, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, or substance misuse. The particular challenges that this presents are:

- Securing access to foster carers, both local and out-of-borough, who have the skills to support highly complex young people, as well as a consistent supply of good quality semi-independent provision.
- increasing numbers of care leavers who need support in their transition to adulthood, through staying-put arrangements, high quality semi-independent provision and support in their own tenancies
- Improving access to high quality residential placements that achieve timely positive outcomes for children

In addition, action is required to respond to the increase in demand for residential family assessments and the scarcity of high quality local family assessment provision and limited options for safe assessment within the community.

The following commissioning actions will help Brent to respond to these challenges and secure the right placement at the right time.

<b>Placement Type</b>	<b>Actions</b>	<b>Outcome measures</b>
Fostering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the number of local foster carers for children in older age groups through targeted recruitment campaigns.</li> <li>• Work with West London authorities to develop a regional approach to fostering services.</li> <li>• Work with the WLA to develop a market of high-support foster placements for complex children, including those stepping down from residential placements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More children and young people placed in foster placements, including as step-down arrangements from residential settings</li> <li>• A reduction in LAC experiencing 3+ placement moves within 12 months</li> </ul>
Semi-independent provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review block contract arrangements</li> <li>• Identify a small group of providers who can deliver local placements that enable young people to be housed close to family</li> <li>• Develop a quality assurance framework that is informed by care-lived experience and sets quality standards in line with or above national expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brent places in a smaller number of semi-independent providers</li> <li>• A reduction in LAC experiencing 3+ placement moves within 12 months</li> <li>• More care leavers moving into their own tenancies before the age of 20</li> </ul>

Placement Type	Actions	Outcome measures
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver a series of provider forums and training events to develop a market that meets the needs of Brent’s young people</li> <li>• Embed an accredited life-skills programme for care leavers through semi-independent providers</li> </ul>	
Residential provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed an outcomes-based commissioning approach with residential providers to develop a shared understanding of expected outcomes</li> <li>• Develop relationships with local providers who will work with the council to meet the needs of Brent’s most complex young people</li> <li>• Work closely in partnership with health partners in identifying provision that meets the needs of complex children and children with SEND</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More young people stepping-down to foster placements before the age of 16</li> <li>• A reduction in placements outside of London (unless for safeguarding reasons)</li> </ul>
Parent and baby assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commission a new service for independent community assessments</li> <li>• Work with local providers to develop family assessment services that meet Brent’s needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to a greater range of high quality family assessment options that reduce the need for use of residential settings.</li> </ul>