



THE LONDON BOROUGH
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**London Borough of Bromley
Children, Education and Families
Children's Social Care**



**PDS DEEP DIVE REPORT ON RECRUITMENT & FOSTERING ACTIVITY
JANUARY 2022-JUNE 2022**

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1. Introduction:

The report outlines fostering recruitment and retention activities during the period of January to June 2022 in response to key questions from the PDS chair. In the first quarter of 2022, recruitment activity continued despite still operating within Covid restrictions and within significant concerns about the Omicron variant. Recruitment activity was maintained, and we also utilised this time to work on the aspects of the revised website and advertising materials.

2. Recruitment of Foster Carers:

Alongside our annual target of 20 new foster carers, the Bromley Children Looked After Placement Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy 2022-24 presents how the Council intends to meet its 'Sufficiency Duty' set out in Section 22G of the Children Act 1989, '*to take steps to secure, as far as reasonably practicable sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area*'.

During the first quarter (January to March) **2** foster carers were approved. In the second quarter (April to June) we had **34** initial enquiries and **7** completed applications to foster for Bromley. **5** initial home visits were undertaken and progressed to the stage 1 process of the assessments, the other **2** were not yet ready to progress their applications due to family circumstances.

With reference to Skills to Foster training (STF), **4** applicants attended the training and the fifth applicant asked for more time at this stage. **1** foster carer was fully approved following attendance at the Fostering Panel and ADM (Agency Decision Maker), Richard Baldwin DCS (Director of Children's Services) decision. This was an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) transfer. Currently, we have **10** assessments of prospective carers being undertaken, which is higher than this time last year and shows that we continue to move in the right direction.

The breakdown of recruitment performance data (January to June 2022) is set out below as follows:

Jan-March 2022 (Quarter 1)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Initial Enquiries	13	4	12	29
Initial Enquiry application completed	1	0	0	1
Initial visits completed	1	0	0	1
Initial visits progressed to stage 1	1	0	0	1
Applicants attending STF (Skills to Foster) training	0	6	0	6
Newly approved foster carer households	0	0	2	2
Newly approved foster carer individuals	0	0	4	4
Newly approved individuals - CUMULATIVE	0	0	4	

April-June 2022 (Quarter 2)

	Apr	May	June	Total
Initial Enquiries	18	7	9	34
Initial Enquiry application completed	3	2	2	7
Initial visits completed	2	1	2	5
Initial visits progressed to stage 1	2	1	2	5
Applicants attending STF training	0	4	0	4
Newly approved foster carer households	0	0	1	1
Newly approved foster carer individuals	0	0	2	2
Newly approved individuals - CUMULATIVE	0	0	2	

The data indicates there have been some marginal increases for the period April to June 2022 over the last quarter, resulting in more enquiries with **10** prospective carers currently in the assessment process. This is higher than last year, and should they all move to full approval, we will have approved more carers than last year. In total **11** were newly approved in 2021/22, whereas we have already approved **2** so far with **10** more in assessment and we are only halfway through this financial year.

From experience, that first quarter from January to March is generally a much quieter period as it relates to fostering enquires, as most families are still in the planning stages for the new year. This was particularly true for this specific period within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The returns we gained in the second quarter is because of the work / fostering recruitment activities undertaken in the first quarter.

We are confident that our recruitment activity is going in the right direction based on the current trajectory of enquiries, assessment in process, and the added investment of a Marketing Officer and Social Work Assistant to progress our recruitment strategies. With

reference to our conversion rate, our research based on data analysis undertaken by Ofsted indicates that our conversion rate is in line with national trends. Citing Ofsted's Annual Fostering Statistics for England – 2020-2021.

Our new recruitment drive was launched in January 2022 and has already generated good interest and initial enquiries. Therefore, we anticipate we will have more approvals with the trend of recruitment drive by the end of the year. The summer period is generally quiet due to people being on their holidays and often wait for the summer months to pass before moving forward with their enquires.

With reference to how we continue to improve and boost our recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers this continues to be a significant element of our day-to-day work and is central to the aims and objectives of the Service. Since April we have reviewed and developed our previous recruitment strategies and have put in place several new initiatives which offer flexibility and opportunities for people interested in fostering to contact us:

- 1) Our monthly information evenings continue to take place; we have introduced a lunchtime virtual information event held fortnightly for one hour, which enables a perspective carer to use their lunch break for example as opposed to information events on Fostering only being available in the evenings.
- 2) We also continue to arrange for coffee mornings and evening support groups for perspective foster carers in the assessment process to meet and support each other. These events are very popular with carers and provide an opportunity for us to remain connected as a Fostering Service to our perspective carers to reassure and provide confidence of the supportive services they can expect as Bromley foster carers.
- 3) With support from our Communications and Website Development colleagues, we have now reviewed our current website and our publications to ensure we are making the process as easy as possible and attractive for perspective foster carers to engage with us and obtain the information necessary for their decision to foster for Bromley.
- 4) We continue to work with our London Permanency Consortium partners (previously the *South London Consortium*) which consists of nine Local Authorities on joint

recruitment ventures. These include Merton, Lewisham, Greenwich, Southwark, Richmond & Wandsworth, Bexley, Waltham Forest, Barking, Newham, Redbridge, Havering, and Essex. Our most recent recruitment activity with the Consortium involved a joint advert on all our websites encouraging residents in the different Boroughs to foster for their Local Authority.

- 5) We have encouraged and facilitated training and discussions with our current cohort of carers to join us in our recruitment drive as our partners of recruitment. The feedback from this exercise has been overwhelmingly positive with foster carers inviting us to their faith groups and other community events.
- 6) We have changed the way work within our assessment and recruitment team and have ensured that our assessment and recruitment team Social Workers no longer have case responsibility for support and supervision of foster carers instead their primary focus is on assessments and recruitment activities.
- 7) The team's capacity increased to include a dedicated Team Manager with oversight from the Group Manager to drive and progress recruitment activities. The number of Social Workers has also increased from two to three Senior Practitioners responsible primarily for assessments of prospective foster carers.
- 8) A newly appointed Social Work Assistant and a Recruitment and Marketing Officer both due to commence their roles in August 2022 will join the current, well-established Recruitment Officer to progress recruitment activities as outlined in our forward plan.
- 9) There is new momentum and energy within the recruitment team as roles have become clearer and focused. Our action plan, vision, and urgency to recruit foster carers as priority one, have seen a shift from business as usual instead, we are innovative in our practice and recruitment strategies which has seen new initiatives such as our support groups for prospective foster carers, developed relationships with faith groups in our Borough and the development of additional information sessions to encourage and support potential foster carers to choose Bromley as their preferred agency.
- 10) The streamlined approach on practice for our recruitment team and the focus on recruitment activities, will free our recruitment team to attend and hold fostering recruitment events with colleagues from across Children's Social Care (CSC) with the opportunity to showcase our support systems and wrap round services to prospective foster carers and why they should foster for Bromley.

- 11) Our recruitment strategy includes a whole service approach, as such we have encouraged our support and supervision colleagues in the service to inform us of any additional capacity within current foster carers' homes. In our support groups for existing carers, we have had discussions about additional bedrooms within the home for an adult child for example who is no longer permanently residing in the home and the possibility of extending their approval range for us to use this bedroom for fostering. As a result, more recently we placed a child with our carer on a respite basis in her spare bedroom.
- 12) The service is working in collaboration with our young people including via LinCC (Living in Care Council) facilitated by the Active Involvement Team, who are actively involved in the training and support workstream of our foster carers. In June this year the young people provided training to our foster carers and our panel members which gave a perspective of the young people's experiences of being in care and what they would expect from our foster carers. The training was well received, and it is now part of the training program of prospective foster carers and our approved foster carers. The young people are working on producing a training video which is part of the training package for prospective foster carers

3. Training and Support to Foster Carers:

We are acutely aware of the valuable role of our foster carers in ensuring our corporate parenting responsibility for our children to be looked after in safe and caring families. The recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care (McAllister Report) 2022 stressed this and is a key recommendation for foster carers to be included as part of the professional network. We have encouraged our foster carers to join our team meetings. This will ensure that as well as hearing their views in our monthly Fostering Advisory Partnership (FAP) meetings, the joint team meetings will provide additional opportunities for our carers to contribute and shape the development of the service. We acknowledge our shared goal of ensuring the best outcome for our children.

In response to our carers and to ensure that their concerns are being responded in a timely manner through the management channel, a Team Manager has been given the additional responsibility of being the fostering liaison person who the carers are assured will listen to their concerns and escalate when necessary. An additional forum of open discussion and

questions has been created for foster carers and facilitated by the liaison officer and a co-worker who can step in when required.

Development of additional support for our foster carers with the aim of setting up an innovative method of supporting foster carers using an extended family model which provides respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. This will be like an 'extended family' and will provide additional support for our carers and our children.

From research we can see that when working well it will improve the stability of fostering placements and strengthen the relationships between carers, children, and young people, fostering services, and birth families. (Similar models have been set up and based around the 'mockingbird' system, - Fostering Network).

The programme creates a "group" of fostering families and at the heart of this is the 'hub home/carer' – this will be an experienced fostering household where the carer or carers provide practical and emotional support, including respite, for the families in their group. The expectations and role will be what might be seen within a large family and the role is much the same as an active grandparent figure, within an extended family. They will be expected to take time to get to know all of the adults, children, and young people in their matched group.

We plan that the hub family would be paid a fee and would have no placements but would therefore have the time and resources to dedicate to the 'group' around them.

The Fostering Team have delivered or commissioned specialist training for foster carers on the following themes:

- Working with Roma / Travellers communities
- Supporting transracial placements
- Therapeutic parenting for foster carers
- Trauma informed practice
- Secure base training

- Managing the risks of self-harm
- Understanding adolescent mental health
- Race, culture, and spirituality

Our team offers out of hours advice and support to foster carers, weekdays from 5pm to 10pm and at weekends and bank holidays from 9am to 10pm. This is provided by Senior Practitioners and managers on a rota basis. The team supports foster carers out of hours in a number of areas.

The team undertakes welfare checks on new placements with foster carers to ascertain if there are any special or emerging issues they can be supported with. We recognise sometimes not all the information is provided in the referral due to the nature of the placement, for instance, if it is an emergency placement. So, practitioners link up with carers to offer the necessary support.

Practitioners receive update on children's behaviour that might need additional support and offer the relevant interventions and or advice to foster carers.

Other areas we make enquires from our carers include:

- Missing children
- Children in hospital / monitoring and advice
- New placements / checking to make sure all is ok
- Injuries / reporting and advice given
- Contact concerns
- Mental health issues / self-harm
- Arrests

Understanding the retention of foster carers is critical. Research by Fostering Network in 2017 noted that on average a service will lose 10% of carers annually through retirement, adopting, changing career, and de-registration. The total number of foster carers leaving our Service during January-June 2022 was 11, which was due to:

- 9 resigned due to family circumstances (finances / employment, health, personal reasons, moving house to different areas)

- 1 retired from fostering
- 1 resigned as a result of a Standards of Care investigation

In addition to this, our core offer of support to carers includes the following:

- A comprehensive Training and Development programme
- Placement Emergency support available 24/7, 365 days a year via the Emergency Duty Service and Fostering Out of Hours Support
- Weekly daytime fostering support groups
- Fortnightly evening support groups
- Men's support groups
- Allocated Supervising Social Worker who visits the fostering family a minimum of every 4 weeks, and is the main contact for support
- Unique therapeutic support via our in-house Therapeutic Hub "THRIVE" (Trust, Hope, Respect, Inspiration, Vision, Empathy)
- A fostering professional fee
- Appreciation events
- Access to Bromley Virtual School who provide support with educational needs
- Bromley nurses who are available to provide medical support and advice to children in care
- Foster carers' views are valued and encouraged, providing an opportunity for their voice to be heard within the Service and via the Fostering Advisory Partnership
- Permanency Service App compiling useful easy to access support inform

4. Trends and Demand for Placements:

During January-June 2022, we had **142** referrals into duty fostering for placements. These referrals were for a mixture of new placements, children moving placements, or for respite arrangements. This is a considerable increase from previous years and our capacity to place children in-house is decreasing. For example, in the quarter April-June 2022 alone, we had 71 referrals for placements, out of which we were able to place 10 in-house. A further 33 were placed with IFAs and in residential placements. 9 of the referrals for placement were no longer needed as children were able to stay in their extended families and 19 referrals were still active searches at the end of the quarter.

Demand on our Fostering Service has seen increasingly complex needs, which includes mental health needs, among the children who require foster care. Whilst the full impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children is yet to be fully analysed, the trauma experienced by children during this period is becoming increasingly evident in the complexities of their needs. We are extremely fortunate in Bromley with our in-house therapeutic team, THRIVE, who have supported our carers to manage and understand the individual needs of these children and support them in managing their behaviours.

In discussions with our carers, it is acknowledged that whilst they value the support from THRIVE, for some children, talking therapy might not be what they need when they are experiencing heightened and traumatic behaviours. Instead, a Social Work Assistant who takes the child out for a walk, engages them in activities to distract them, and helps them to regulate can be crucially important in these instances and stop the placement from breaking down or the carer being disengaged with fostering.

We provide different types of fostering in Bromley. These are:

5. Fostering Mainstream Schemes:

Short-term foster carers look after children taken into care at short notice until their family situation has been resolved for up to a maximum of 2 years.

Permanent / Long-Term Matched foster carers look after children who require care for an extended period of time, usually up until the child is aged 18.

Respite foster carers give other parents and foster carers a break from caring for their child for up to 7 days.

Short Breaks are when foster carers look after disabled children for less than 75 days in the year to support the family to continue to care for them.

Family and Friends / Connected Persons carers are foster carers who are family members or people who had a previous relationship with the child in care before looking after them.

6. Specialist Schemes:

Emergency Bed foster carers who provide care at very short notice within 24 hours for a short period time of up to 7 days.

Parent and Child foster carers have a parent and their child(ren) in placement whilst an assessment is undertaken by the child's social worker.

New Horizons specialist foster carers are carers who take children stepping down from residential homes who hitherto had challenging or complex needs, but which have witnessed some improvements.

7. Review of Wider Homes National Issues:

Today, over 70,000 children nationally are living with almost 56,000 foster families. With record numbers of children in care and around 13% of the foster carer workforce retiring or leaving every year, the Fostering Network estimates that Fostering Services across the UK need to recruit at least a further 9,300 foster families in the next 12 months alone. This represents a need of 1,180 more foster carers for London and 1,340 for South-East.

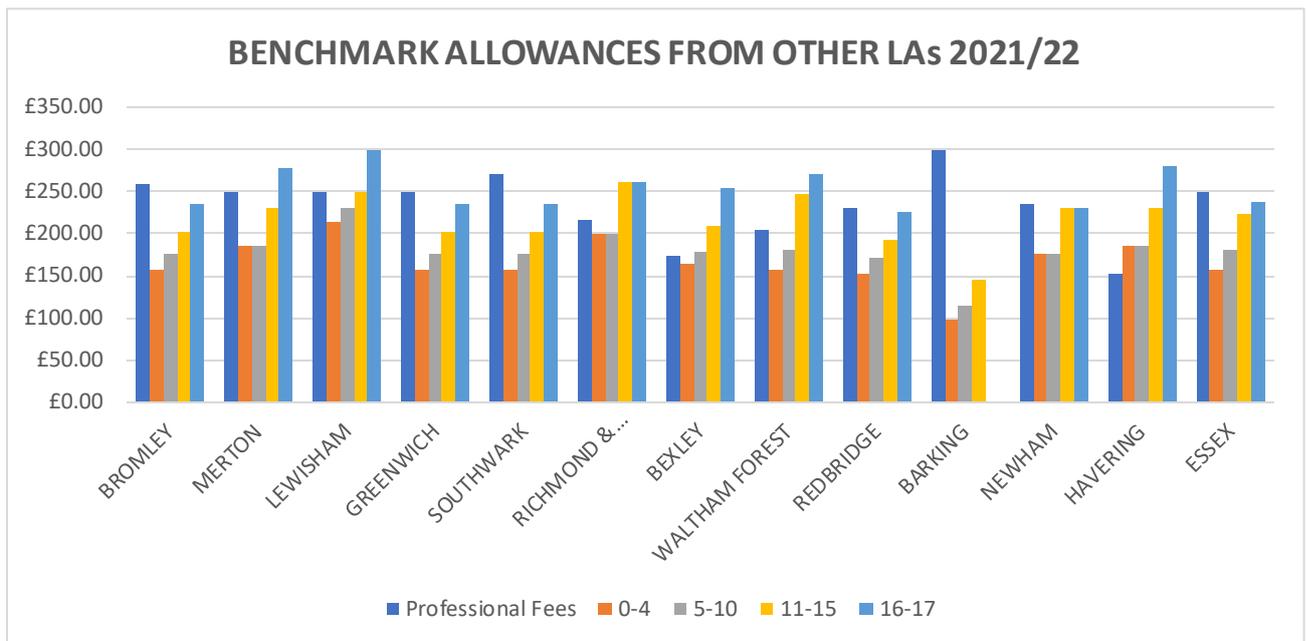
Fostering Services continue to report that in some parts of the country there are simply no available foster carers or specific shortages of households willing/able to care for teenagers, sibling groups, disabled children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and so on. Fostering Services work all year round to find and recruit the foster carers they need locally to look after these children. Without enough foster families willing and able to offer homes to these groups, some children will find themselves living a long way from family, school, and friends, being split up from brothers and sisters, or being placed with a foster carer who does not have the ideal skills and experience to meet their specific needs.

This picture is not dissimilar to Bromley's experiences in recruitment and retention of foster carers. We are considering creative ways of increasing capacity within the current cohort of carers, checking if our foster carers are willing to take on more young people and whether they have the capacity to do so. At a recent focus group, we discussed with our foster carers on increasing capacity, some of the recommendations they made to enable them to extend their terms of approval were in relation for increased fostering payments in line with neighbouring Local Authorities to enable carers to fully commit to fostering and not have to seek employment alongside fostering.

A recent benchmarking exercise with our statistical neighbours and those outside our Consortium as per the chart below shows that Bromley's fostering allowance is competitive. For instance, our immediate neighbours Lewisham, Wandsworth, and Richmond are paying a slightly higher fostering allowance than Bromley as evidenced in the chart below. Our fostering payments are guided by the DfE guidance as stipulated below.

2021-22				
National Minimum Allowance 21-22	0-4yrs	5-10yrs	11-15yrs	16-17yrs
DfE England rate (rest of England)	134-138	152	173	202
DfE England rate (South East)	149-153	169	193	226
DfE England rate (London)	155-158	177	201	235

	BROMLEY	MERTON	LEWISHAM	GREENWICH	SOUTHWARK	RICHMOND & WANDSWORTH	BEXLEY	WALTHAM FOREST	REDBRIDGE	BARKING	NEWHAM	HAVERING	ESSEX
Professional Fees	£258.27	£250.00	£250.00	£250.00	£272.00	£217.40	£174.82	£205.00	£231.48	£300.00	£235.00	£152.00	£250.00
0-4	£158.06	£184.48	£215.00	£158.00	£158.00	£200.70	£163.77	£158.00	£152.00	£98.00	£175.00	£186.00	£157.99
5-10	£177.10	£184.48	£230.00	£177.00	£177.00	£200.70	£177.50	£180.00	£171.00	£114.50	£175.00	£186.00	£180.04
11-15	£201.04	£229.72	£250.00	£201.00	£201.00	£261.10	£208.51	£248.00	£193.00	£144.40	£230.00	£231.00	£224.00
16-17	£235.06	£278.97	£300.00	£235.00	£236.00	£261.10	£254.13	£271.00	£226.00		£230.00	£281.00	£238.35



As members of the London Permanency Partnership (LPP), we recognise our shared challenge of recruiting foster carers and the benefit of sharing resources where feasible. As such we are in conversation to work out the practicalities of offering each other foster placements as first option before going to Independent Fostering Agencies. We recognise that in some instances, one Local Authority could potentially have an abundance of baby placements and the other with no baby placements. In these instances, we are considering how we share these resources reciprocally without it being too onerous on the other Local Authority. Similarly, we have started the conversation as the recent Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (McAllister Report) 2022 in relation to Local Authorities becoming fostering cooperative. As a Consortium, we want to be the first of such cooperative initiatives in London and reap the benefits of working together, increase our foster carers both in number and choice for our children.

There is a particular need for foster carers to look after teenagers and sibling groups. As such, this area of need is discussed during our information evenings and Skills to Foster training of prospective foster carers. This is to generate their interest and enable them to make informed decisions about the type of children they would foster bearing in mind the service needs for children. More information on fostering national data can be found here on the below link:

[Fostering in England 2020 to 2021: main findings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/reports/childcare/fostering-in-england-2020-to-2021-main-findings)

8. Payments and Enhancements:

As stated above with reference to the benchmarking exercise some Local Authorities are paying slightly higher than Bromley and their fees to foster carers. Data from our Central Placement team who commissions IFA (independent fostering agencies) placements confirm that for the financial year 2021-2022 for example, we purchased 38 IFA placements for our Bromley children, with a weekly cost ranging from £850- £2,592 per week. The total weekly cost for all these 38 placements being £26,592.

9. Projections/Forward Plan:

The Fostering Service intends to work with the following projections to boost enquiries:

We plan to organise a monthly '*Ask Anything Fostering*' event two weeks after each information evening/lunchtime session as opportunity for further Q&A for prospective foster carers. The event will include colleagues from our in-house Therapeutic Service, Active Involvement Team, Court Team, and Children Looked After Service to demonstrate our strong wrap around services and our Bromley Relationship Model which supports placement stability for our children.

We will be sharing a stand with colleagues within Bromley Adult Services in The Glades in Bromley: during the week currently Thursday and Friday and further opportunities on the weekends in the future to share and give out information to Bromley residents and shoppers about fostering for Bromley. The first scheduled appointment is for 25th August 2022 and subsequent arrangements are being put in place.

Other areas to enhance recruitment strategies include:

- Follow up on website improvement
- Undertake outreach activities i.e., faith groups, associations, Police, Health, educational institutions, leisure centres, etc.
- Publicise posters in public spaces e.g., Market Squares, The Glades, rail & Police stations

- Implement coffee mornings for prospective foster cares
- Drop-in sessions for information events
- 'Ask Questions' sessions for Enquirers & Stage 1 applicants
- Support Group for applicants undertaking assessments; (Assessors to lead)
- Organise a summer fair

We recognise the need to increase our foster carers' provision for children with disabilities, this is something we would be including in our recruitment drive. We would be targeting hospitals and other health facilities to create awareness for people who would be interested to make enquiries about fostering children with special needs and disabilities.

10. Analysis:

The recruitment and assessment team will continue to work on the recruitment and assessment strategies and the projections identified whilst working on areas of continuous progress.

As part of their continuous professional development (CPD) foster carers have been encouraged to attend both mandatory and core training to enhance their knowledge and skill set. CPD is a combination of approaches, ideas, and techniques that helps foster carers in their learning and growth. CPD enables foster carers to reinforce and enhance their current skills while reducing any knowledge shortfalls. They access these trainings online and practitioners enforce and motivate carers during supervisory visits to ensure they are accessing training the meet their development needs.

Research has shown that, in general, the features of foster care that enable young people to develop emotionally and to be able to control their anti-social behaviour can be summarised by having a carer to offer stability, security, and a good relationship. In order to provide the best possible care for the children they look after, and to provide the children with stability, security, and a positive experience of family life, foster carers in Bromley have been supported by the Fostering Team in various areas as discussed. This is to enable our foster carers offer children day-to-day care within their homes and feel satisfied they are being acknowledged and supported.

Some foster carers have resigned but this falls within the national threshold of any service losing 10% of its foster carers based on the research undertaken by Fostering Network in 2017. In our unique case we have accounted for the various reasons why this occurred. Whilst some were due to personal circumstances, like retirement, others were due to disaffection because they were investigated under Standards of Care for breaching some National Minimum Standards of the Fostering Regulations, 2011. Overall, we have managed to replace those foster carers that have left with newly approved carers. Over the course of the last year (April 21-March 22) 11 carers left, and 11 were newly approved.

During the period under review, we have had a high demand for placements for children with very complex and challenging needs which we could not appropriately match with our in-house carers. The needs of these children have further informed our recruitment strategies and how we will progress targeted recruit strategies going forward.

We have explored benchmarking with our statistical neighbours in terms of how much remuneration they offer their foster carers as well as incentives. We recognise that fostering is rewarding but also challenging so we are doing all we can to ensure our allowances are competitive with our neighbours as presented in the above chart. We observe that a few Local Authorities (2) within our statistical area pay marginally higher allowances than us while Bromley also offers better rates than others.

11. Conclusion:

Our conclusion is that as fostering is competitive, we have reviewed our marketing strategies by improving our websites, using digital marketing, social media such as Facebook, and integrating foster carers as partners of recruitment. We will be more creative and focused on visiting communities, associations, and faith groups to create more awareness and identify champions to sustain the recruitment drive. We will work in a more collaborative way with foster carers and put in the necessary support such as respite and training for carers who take challenging placements. Our in-house therapeutic team will continue to offer support to our foster carers to ensure stability of placement and strengthen our carer's ability to support our children with complex needs.

Our target is to recruit 20 foster carers within this financial year, which we feel is achievable with the current number in assessment and are plans for the next quarter to drive our recruitment campaign forward.

Addendum: Acronyms:

- 1) Agency Decision Maker – ADM
- 2) Director of Children’s Services - DCS
- 3) Children’s Social Care – CSC
- 4) Children’s Social Care Review – CSCR
- 5) Continuous Professional Development – CPD
- 6) Department for Education – DfE
- 7) Fostering Advisory Partnership – FAP
- 8) Independent Fostering Agency – IFA
- 9) Living in Care Council – LinCC
- 10) Local Authority – LA
- 11) London Permanency Partnership – LPP
- 12) Policy Development and Scrutiny – PDS
- 13) Skills to Foster – STF

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