



**Report of: Susanna Daus Service Manager Adoption, Fostering and Contact**

Meeting of	Date	Agenda Item	Ward(s)
<b>Corporate Parenting Board</b>	<b>September 2016</b>	<b>Foster Carer Recruitment Strategy</b>	

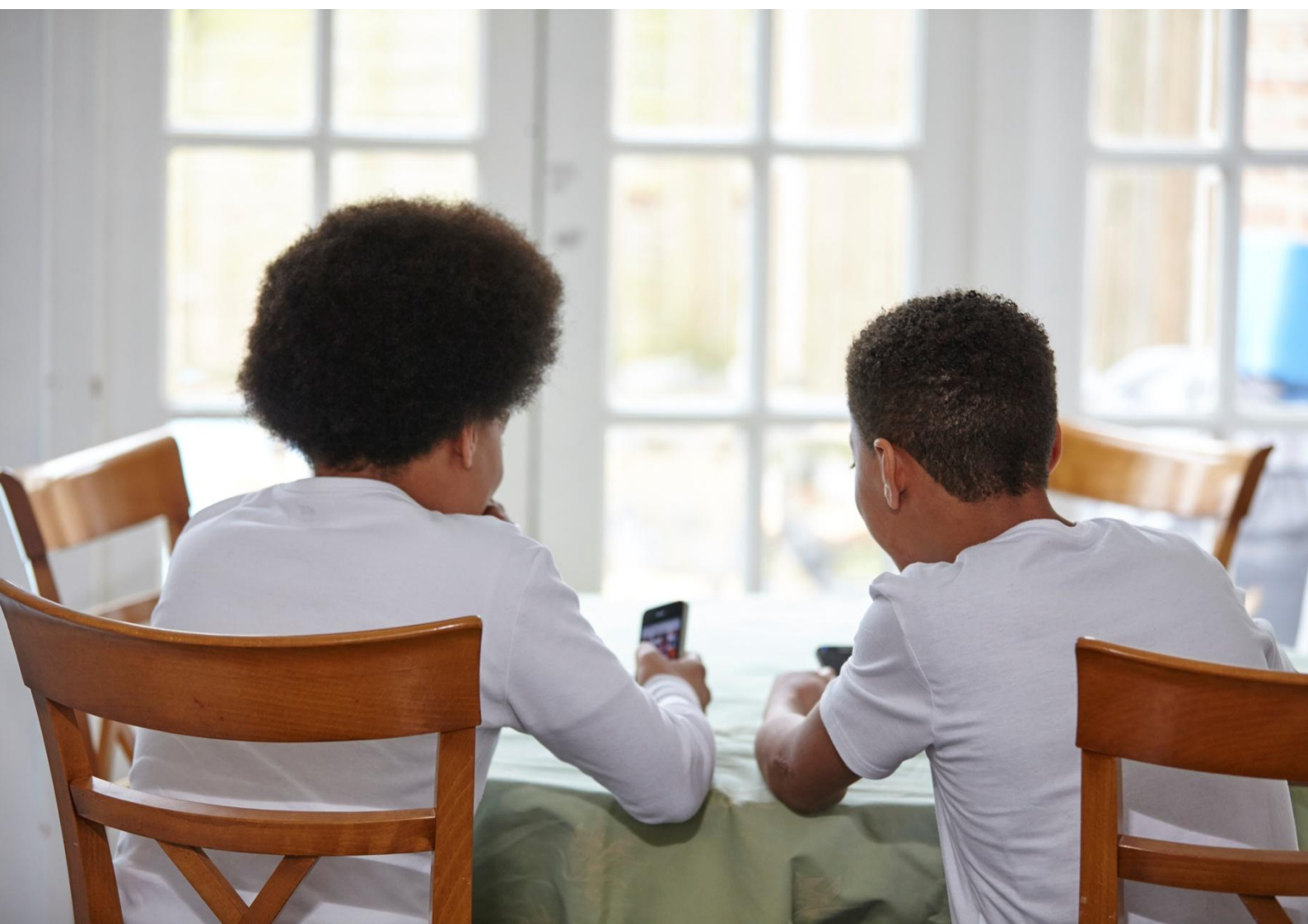
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**SUBJECT:** Islington Fostering Service Recruitment Strategy 2016/8

## Summary

1. This report sets out how Islington will recruit foster carers explaining the complexities in recruiting and maintaining enough fostering beds for Islington children. All London boroughs are struggling to recruit enough foster carers.
2. Islington fostering service is the main provider of local foster homes for currently 170 children and care leavers of all ages including parent and children together, Specialist foster care, parent and child placements, family based short breaks carers for disabled children and supportive lodgings for care leavers.
3. There are currently 127 foster carer households including family and friends foster carers and short breaks carers for disabled children. There are also four supportive lodgings carers.
4. On 31st March there were 138 children under 18 using fostering beds, additionally there were 25 young people Staying Put, there were 10 vacancies with seven families temporarily unavailable due to personal circumstances. This means a total capacity of 179 beds.
5. The costs are about £630 per child per week, with costs reducing yearly, compared to an average of £944 per week in the independent sector. Independent sector placements are being held at 2012 inflation rates but there is always pressure there for extras. Agency carers are often paid less than Islington's own carers, despite the higher costs to the Council.

6. This strategy sets out how further recruitment is planned, both by Islington and in partnership with the Fostering North London Consortium – a partnership of six local authority fostering teams.
7. The strategy sets out a range of methods to attract new foster carers including word of mouth, media advertising and includes social networking approaches.
8. Corporate parents are asked to help to spread the message in the community that Islington children need local foster carers.



## 1. Introduction

The DFE requires us to place children as near home as possible. Of Islington's current foster carers, 95% live within 20 miles. However, increasingly with carer shortage in both sectors, we are now having to place children further away in agency placements. Many older children settle permanently in short-term foster homes and therefore the need to recruit families for older children and teenagers is the most pressing. The cost of delivering in-house fostering has slightly reduced following staffing efficiencies in the last year. The staff team is experienced, stable and committed and offers a 24 hour service

Some older children and teenagers have had to be placed in children's homes because carers could not manage to meet their complex mental health, disability or behavioural needs. Islington Fostering Service provides a range of training to help foster carers to meet the complex needs of different ages of children and young people.

This Recruitment Strategy sets out how Islington will continue to recruit its own foster carers, offering as many good local placements as possible. The Fostering Service offers a range of placements for children of all ages from birth to parent and child including accommodation for care leavers. There is a particular shortage of carers for teenagers in North London, due in part to housing pressures.

The recruitment, supervision and support of foster carers is highly regulated and inspected by Ofsted. The Registered Manager is accountable directly to Ofsted for the quality of care provided including the process of recruiting suitable foster carers.

### Position as at 15 July 2016

For the first Quarter of 2016

- 83 families had enquired about fostering
- 36 families had attended information meetings at the Town Hall
- 23 families had attended preparation training before deciding whether to go ahead with their applications.
- 10 families are being assessed for their suitability for fostering and two families were approved between April and August 2016.
- In addition 3 long term foster carers have been approved for 7 children and young people and there are always more families coming forward.

Nationally we expect 5% to be approved as foster carers, so out of 266 enquiries last year, we could expect 11 new foster carers to have been approved by the end of this year.

The independent fostering agencies are facing the same shortages of foster carers and recruitment challenges.

## Approval outcomes

### 2015/16

Recruitment of carers (unrelated) was disappointing last year, partly because we had rejected applications of foster carers for babies, as we had a surplus of foster carers for this age group and this has reduced our overall number approved. 9 new foster families were approved last year. However, the team also recruited and approved seven **Family**

**and Friends** foster care families. These placements can be excellent for young people who have struggled to settle with foster carers (unrelated), often diverting them from residential care. Eight of these foster carers were approved for younger children where the carers plan to take Special Guardianship for the child, leaving the Council's care.

In the 2013/4 10 families were approved, in 2014/5 13 families were approved.

#### Diversity of provision

Islington foster carers come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, reflecting Islington's diverse community of families.

#### North London Fostering Consortium sharing scheme

In the last year 13 of our children have been placed with Consortium foster carers. Camden has been particularly helpful. This has been excellent for young people with a high level of needs who require a specialist placement, with one child being adopted by her foster carers.

In the last year we have provided 18 placements to the Consortium and one to another Local Authority (LA). These placements offer the best placement choice to meet the children's needs and generate income towards staffing overheads. In 2015/16, 40 children were benefitting across the six Consortium boroughs and we aim to increase this number in the future.

Each LA must prioritise their own children and the acute shortage of placements in all the North London Fostering services means that this will not solve all our difficulties.

#### Creative solutions to housing shortage

We have created more bedroom space for foster children. Two overcrowded foster families have been moved by the Council to make space for children. Adult sons and daughters have been moved by the Council to make additional space for more foster children and another family created an extra room to make space for a child. A foster carer's own child gave up his own bedroom for 12 weeks to accommodate a young person. A foster family gave up one of their sitting rooms to enable a foster child to **Stay Put**.

#### Helping with the bedroom tax

The first fostering bedroom is tax free and the fostering service offers to pay for the second bedroom as an incentive to encourage people to apply to foster.

## **Islington schemes needing foster carers**

#### Foster care placements for babies

Demand for baby placement fluctuates and at times foster carers have had to wait several months for placements, because of faster progress through Court processes, which means children stay for much shorter periods. We are now recruiting again for carers for babies, in particular for babies with health needs or developmental difficulties, as we cannot completely rely on the Consortium sharing scheme for baby placements, due to fluctuating demand in all 5 Local Authorities.

#### Placements for brothers and sisters together

Demand for these placements remains a challenge, partly because of the shortage of space locally where children need separate bedrooms. Large sibling groups who need to

stay together tend to be placed further out of London in agency placements because of this shortage of enough bedrooms in Central London.

### Placements for teenagers

There continues to be high demand for foster carers for teenagers and applicants are often fearful of fostering teenagers exacerbated by media fears about violence affecting teenagers. There are 112 beds currently occupied by young people over 13 years old.

### Unaccompanied asylum seekers

Meeting the needs of asylum seeking children and young people continues to be a challenge. At December 2015, we had 47 unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Islington's own fostering beds, 39 of whom were seeking asylum from Albania. Although these young people are vulnerable because they are separated from their families and adapting to a different culture, they are not necessarily wanting or needing therapeutic placements for child protection reasons. Recent changes in the children's asylum system will result in less new unaccompanied children needing Islington placements, except for brief assessment periods.

### Specialist fostering

Since the Specialist fostering scheme started in 2014, it has provided 14 placements for young people with a background of offending, remand into care, aggressive and out of control behaviour, serious sexual exploitation, sexual offences against children or adults and psychosis. The scheme offers 1-1 clinical and group supervision from the team psychologist as well as two supervisory meetings per month with their fostering supervisor. The scheme is being widened across the North London Fostering Consortium but collaborative recruitment is not yet effective.

### Short breaks for disabled children with severe and complex needs

Following the review of the Lough Road Centre for disabled children, there is now a shortage of these placements. Eleven children are currently receiving short breaks with approved foster carers. These many needs include Autism, with some children requiring tube feeds or suction support.

### Parent and child together placements

There is a growing need for these placements, as Courts are reluctant to separate parents and children until the proceedings end. However, these placements can be quite high risk with parents affected by substance use, mental health problems, domestic violence and learning difficulties. We provide these placements in partnership with the North London Fostering Consortium and undertake joint advertising campaigns for recruitment. A number of other Islington foster carers are also approved to provide parent and child placements where the primary need is for support and not assessment, although the changing needs of each family can be unpredictable.

### Supportive lodgings

Supportive lodgings carers help Care Leavers to prepare for independence up to the age of 21 years old. Ten young people have benefited from this service with some young people preferring this type of arrangement.

## Foster carer workforce challenges

Foster carer availability constantly fluctuates, with carers resting from time to time or resigning when fostering no longer suits their family. Over the last year we lost 26 families, mainly carers who had gradually stopped fostering and some who became Special Guardians for their foster children.

### Islington's approach to foster care recruitment

#### Foster carer recruitment advertising

The fostering service targets advertising for carers for teenagers, older children and siblings of all ages. We always welcome carers who are experienced in caring for disabled children and children with complex health needs

#### Competition in North London for Foster carers

Competition is fierce across over 100 independent fostering agencies, as well as all the Greater London local authorities competing for foster carers. Our fostering allowance rates are average for London and we have a North London Consortium arrangement not to raise rates without agreement amongst the 6 boroughs. Independent fostering agencies charge Islington an additional 100% for overheads, although the foster carers are actually paid similar rates or lower than our own foster carers.



#### Maintaining word of mouth recommendation recruitment

Word of mouth recommendation from satisfied foster carers is mentioned as the source of enquiry by 25% of newly approved Islington foster carers. We prioritise our working partnerships with foster carers. Managers meet regularly with Islington Foster Care Association (IFCA), which receives a small grant from the Council to provide activities for carers and children.

We provide legal protection insurance, public liability cover and membership to The Fostering Network. The fostering service hosts a yearly Thank You Lunch and Awards event with the Mayor and Council leaders. Islington Fostering Service also offers a range of comprehensive training and support groups that are well attended. All these services promote the good reputation of the Islington Fostering Service and encourage foster carers to

recommend the service to others.

There is a £500 'Find A Foster Carer' reward for existing foster carers who recommend a successful applicant, encouraging foster carers to spread the message about fostering. We would like to widen this offer to all Islington staff.

#### Transfer of agency foster carers in to Islington

We encourage foster carers to transfer to our supervision, having regard to our contracts with agencies and we offer tailored support packages to these carers. Last year five foster families transferred in this way saving Islington £1200 per week for three Islington children who had been placed with those families at that time. We offer incentives such as payment of the second bedroom tax and honouring their existing fostering allowances. This information is documented on our website and there is a specific leaflet. Currently three more families are discussing their transfer to us, although they will not all complete the process.

#### Efficient responses to enquirers

The fostering team ensures that enquirers are responded to quickly on the Freephone number. There is a maximum one-hour response time to enquirers, who are immediately invited to an information meeting and sent an information pack. They are then visited and invited to a four-day preparation group to learn more about fostering.

Ensuring the recruitment of the most suitable foster carers is a challenge. Applicants withdraw at each stage, from enquiry to information session, from home visit to preparation group and then to full assessment and approval. On specialist schemes there is a higher rate of success. The assessments are thorough, to ensure that each family can provide safe care in this highly regulated sector but we keep reviewing our processes to minimise bureaucracy. .

Although 266 people enquired about fostering in 2015/16, suitability has been a concern, with many enquirers not being able to speak adequate English or having a space for a child to sleep.

We undertake some shared advertising although this does not entirely solve our recruitment challenges as Consortium wide campaigns have to be general and do not necessarily benefit Islington. Specific Consortium projects are designed for general recruitment such as the campaign to attract carers for Muslim children, in partnership with Regent's Park Mosque.

#### Fostering North London Consortium website

The Consortium's six borough fostering website has been refreshed to make fostering seem easier to understand. It has links to Facebook and Twitter, (Linkedin address and Pinterest?) The Consortium's teenage fostering film made with our carers and young people is on all the websites and has now had over 1k YouTube viewings:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZiHScYJw7M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZiHScYJw7M)

Further layout improvements are being planned to keep the website up to date and easier to navigate. Over 7,400 people looked at the shared website last year.

It is difficult to measure the impact of Consortium advertising to the benefit of Islington, however joint consistent messages and shared resources should take effect in due course.

A digital campaign is being considered, with an external provider who can measure the impact and results of the campaign more accurately.

## **2. Advertising plan to attract foster carers**

### The fostering recruitment seasonal timetable

The Fostering Service plans to continue to advertise for carers with a seasonal pattern. The New Year is a new resolution stage in many people's lives and a good time to attract potential carers with a New Year; New Start campaign. In Spring and early Summer, National Foster Care Fortnight campaigns raise awareness and attract enquirers. More people are willing to stop and speak with fostering staff at community events. In the Autumn, many prospective carers approach fostering services at the start of the new academic year.

### Islington's own foster care recruitment

The Fostering Service advertised at local tube stations and on the backs of buses in Spring 2016, which generated extra interest. Some bus adverts have not been taken down although we are no longer paying for them. We plan to continue to advertise locally and to increase the use of Internet and social media to attract foster care enquirers. In Spring 2016 we also ran newspaper campaigns in London, Essex and Herts, but there was little response from outside North London.

### Continued community recruitment activity

The Fostering Service undertakes their street campaigns targeting specific community outlets including cafes, hairdressers, nail-bars, children's centres and schools. The Fostering service gets editorial into community newsletters, staff newsletters and arranges posters to be displayed. They attend community events such as the Cally Festival and other local events. The recruitment officer welcomes all invitations to attend any event or centre to talk about fostering.

### Improved support from the Council's Corporate Communications team

Over the last year we have more support from the Council's communications, with adverts in Islington life, seasonal intranet promotions and a banner outside the Town Hall. It is critical that the wider Council continues to help spread the message that we are looking for all different people to foster Islington children. The Council's fostering webpages have had 8000 views last year and feedback is that they are very informative

### Islington Fostering service Facebook account

[www.facebook.com/islington.fostering/](http://www.facebook.com/islington.fostering/)

In the last year we launched the Facebook account which is visited about 5000 times per month. We were able to measure that our largest audience in March was women aged 35-44 (18%) viewing our Facebook page on mobile devices (89% of views). We are considering a digital marketing campaign to make the best use of Facebook advertising, either Islington alone or in partnership with the Consortium.

## **3. Conclusion**



More local foster carers are still urgently needed for a range of children and young people. Local placements are critical to good outcomes to avoid disrupting the education of children who are already vulnerable.

#### Recruitment strategy overall recommendations

In order for Islington Fostering Service's fostering recruitment strategy to meet its aims and objectives the following is recommended:

1 That foster carer advertising and recruitment remains a high priority for Islington council and is funded adequately to deliver good outcomes. This includes continuing to develop Internet and social networking advertising as well as community and staff involvement.

2 Ensuring that the Council's new website meets the needs of the Fostering service.

3 Continued contribution to joint recruitment advertising campaigns with the North London Fostering Consortium. This includes better use of the Fostering North London website and social networking accounts.

4 Continue to promote the Find a Foster Carer reward amongst foster carers and encourage them to spread the word that Islington needs foster carers, for children, for teenagers, for siblings, for disabled children and for care leavers, consider promoting this reward scheme across the Council.

5 Continue to encourage the transfer of foster carers from independent fostering agencies having regard to contractual agreements.

6 That all Corporate Parents help to spread the message that Islington children and young people need local foster carers and that fostering is a rewarding career.

7 That all Corporate Parents spread the message that Islington needs foster carers for teenagers.

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