Hackney

REPORT OF THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMISSION		
	Classification	**Enclosures**
Recruitment and retention of foster carers in Hackney. Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission – March 19th 2017 Cabinet – 16 July 2018 Council – 18 July 2018	**Public**	

Foreword

For a number of years the Children's Social Care Bi-Annual Report has highlighted that there had been difficulty in recruiting and retaining local in-house foster carers. This has meant that more looked after children in Hackney have needed to be placed with a foster carer working for an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA), indeed, about two-thirds of looked after children are now cared for by a foster carer working for an IFA. Similar recruitment and retention problems are experienced across a number of other London boroughs.

Whilst using an IFA provides additional choice, flexibility and capacity for local fostering services, such placements are generally more expensive than in-house foster care provision and less likely to be located within Hackney, which can present challenges to supporting these fostering households and the children who are placed there. The Commission have therefore sought to assist local recruitment and retention of foster carers by conducting this review.

At the outset, the Commission wish to note the good work of the service already taking place to support the recruitment and retention of local foster carers, which according to the most recent figures has begun to turn things around with more people applying to become a foster carer in Hackney, more people being recruited and fewer choosing to de-register. Indeed, the Fostering Network, a leading policy and research agency in this field, commended Hackney on the range of support services it provided to local foster carers.

This being said, in terms of the number of in-house foster carers in the borough employ of the fostering service, Hackney is at a relatively low base and has fewer than many comparator boroughs. With over 400 local authority and independent fostering agencies seeking to recruit, and the prospect of a significant number of retirements in the medium term, it is clear that a step change is needed locally to drive and improve local recruitment. To this end, the Commission has recommended new recruitment

targets as well as adjustments to the focus of the local recruitment strategy to help achieve these.

Our investigation has indicated that the level of support provided to foster carers by both professionals and their peers is of particular importance to retaining them in the service. In this respect, as Corporate Parents the Council, local councillors and council officers all have a duty to make sure that foster carers are recognised and valued for their work, and properly supported for their role in caring for some of the most vulnerable children in our community. The Commission therefore make a number of recommendations to extend the corporate offer to foster carers to better enable them to support our looked after children in Hackney.

I would like to extend my thanks to officers and external agencies who gave their time to speak to members of the Commission for this review, and to members of the Commission for their support in conducting this review. I look forward to future Social Care reports detailing increased retention and recruitment in our excellent team of Hackney foster carers.

Cllr Christopher Kennedy
Chair- Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission

CONTENTS

1.   Introduction

Background

1.1   Nationally, the number of children within the local authority care system has increased year on year since 2008 and, as of March 2016, the total number of looked after children and young people stood at 70,440 (DfE, 2017).

1.2   Depending on the needs of the looked after child, there are a number of placement options for children in the care of the local authority, these include foster care, residential children's homes, residential schools, secure units and other community settings. Of all the children looked after by a local authority in 2016, 74% (51,850) were placed with a foster carer (DfE, 2017).

1.3   In seeking to place a child or young person in foster care, a local authority can use an in-house foster carer, those foster carers retained and supported by a local authority, or an Independent Foster Agency (IFA), those agencies operating from within the private or voluntary sectors. National data indicates that about 2/3 of all foster care placements are made to in-house foster carers (DfE, 2017a).

1.4   Finding an appropriate in-house foster carer for looked after children has become more challenging however, as local authorities face a number of recruitment and retention issues with foster carers in their service. The main challenges include:
   ▪   A high attrition rate, with 12% of foster carers leaving the service each year;
   ▪   A low conversion rate, with just 10% of enquiries to become a foster carer actually progressed to approval;
   ▪   More varied and complex needs of children entering care which have become more difficult to match with the skills and experience of foster carers (DfE, 2017).

1.5   Given the above challenges with recruitment and retention, the Fostering Network estimate that in England alone an additional 5,900 foster carers will need to be recruited each year to help match supply with demand (The Fostering Network, 2017).

1.6   Independent Fostering Agencies have been used by local authorities to support the placement of looked after children as these offer additional capacity, flexibility and choice in meeting the needs of looked after children. Their use has continued to grow, and now account for approximately 1/3 of all placements of looked after children in England.

1.7   There are however, significant differentials between the costs of placing a looked after child with a foster carer from the IFA sector compared to in-house local authority provision. National data has suggested the average annual cost of a local authority foster care placement to be within the range of £23,000 to £27,000, compared with a range of £41,000 to £42,000 for a placement within the IFA sector (NAO, 2014). Local data would suggest that this cost differential is mirrored in Hackney (LB Hackney, 2016).

1.8   Whilst the needs of the child are of paramount consideration in the placement of a looked after child in foster care, local authorities are increasingly looking to increase in-house provision to reduce budget pressures and ensure the financial sustainability of fostering service provision.

1.9   Many of the concerns with recruitment and retention of foster carers described at the national level (above) are mirrored locally in Hackney. Local foster carer data for 2015/16 would suggest that:
- The number of approved foster carers households has decreased;
- The number of de-registrations of foster carers exceeded those approved;
- Converse to national trends, the number of looked after children placed with a foster carer within an IFA (151) is more than double that placed within the in-house team (72) (Hackney, 2017).

1.10   Children's Social Care services are required to regularly assess and report on the sufficiency of local social care placements. The most recent local sufficiency assessment has highlighted the need to significantly increase the number of in-house foster carers (LB Hackney, 2016a) and a recruitment and retention strategy has been produced to support this objective (LB Hackney, 2017a). Whilst this strategy has delivered some recent improvement to in-house foster care provision, given the centrality of foster carers to the care of looked after children, this service has been identified as an area which may benefit from external scrutiny to maintain and improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers locally.

1.11   In light of the evidence of the above challenges, the Children and Families Service, the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission decided to conduct a review of the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Hackney. This review, which was undertaken through a 'scrutiny-in-a-day' exercise, involved a wide range of local stakeholders and informed contributors.

1.12   The following report provides a summary of this piece of work by the Commission, including its conclusion and recommendations on those policies and practices which may assist the local authority to increase recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers in Hackney.

Aim and objectives of the review
1.13   The Commission agreed the following overarching aim for the review, to guide and inform the strategic direction of its work:

> *'To identify and assess the challenges which impede the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Hackney and to identify those policies and practices which can help to overcome them.'*

1.14   Within this overarching aim, the Commission agreed that the review should be guided by a number of component objectives which were as set out below:

a) To assess the nature and level of foster care provision in Hackney and to identify:
(i) The most effective use of the skills and experience of the pool of local foster carers in meeting the needs of looked after children;
(ii)The key priorities and challenges for current and future service delivery;
(ii) Any 'pinch points' in the mismatch between the demographic profile of foster carers and looked after children and how these can be overcome.

b) To ascertain key elements of the foster carer recruitment and retention strategy in Hackney, and to assess:

(i) The key factors in the pathway to successful recruitment and retention of foster carers;

(ii) How this compares to other boroughs, whether these can inform local policy and practice or if there are further opportunities for collaborative provision;

(iii) How the involvement of local foster carers and looked after children might assist in the recruitment of new in-house foster carers;

(iv) If there are any further regional or national developments which could inform local recruitment and retention policy.

c) To assess the local in-house offer to foster carers (e.g. remuneration, training, benefits, support and advice) and to identify:

(i) How this contributes to the recruitment and retention of foster carers;

(ii) How this compares to other offers for in-house provision at other local authorities;

(iii) How this compares to other offers foster carers working for an Independent Fostering Agency;

(iv) Whether other council departments can contribute to an improved local offer to foster carers.

Methodology

1.15 A range of evidence gathering processes was used to support the Commission in meeting the review objectives set out above. The programme for evidence gathering included the following:

- Desk based research (e.g. local policy and practices, best practice from other boroughs);
- Evidence presented in person at a day-long CYP Commission meetings;
- Primary research (e.g. with local foster carers and young people about their foster care);

1.16 The review was primarily conducted through a scrutiny-in-a-day exercise, which allowed a short but focused review of the evidence. There were five themes within the evidence collected at the 'scrutiny-in-a-day' exercise for the review, which were:

- Local policy and practice;
- Comparative policy and practice;
- Specialist insight;
- The views of foster carers;
- The views of looked after children in foster care.

1.17 Ahead of the scrutiny-in-a-day exercise, a review of the background literature pertaining to the recruitment and retention of foster carers took place. This identified:

- Policy documents (legislative framework, duties of the LA);
- Indicative data on looked after children, fostering and use of in-house placements;
- Foster carer research and development; and
- Comparative recruitment and retention strategies used in other boroughs.

1.18 Key documents outlined above were presented to the Commission ahead of the scrutiny-in-a-day exercise to help prepare members, to guide and inform questioning and to generally assist the scrutiny process. These are included within the bibliography at section 8 of this report.

1.19   As data from local foster carers was central to the review, data collection was both quantitative and qualitative in nature to maximise the contribution of this group of informants. To this end, a survey was developed and distributed to all in-house foster carers (circa 80) ahead of the planned scrutiny, which enabled local foster carers to participate in the review is they so wished. This data was also used to inform questioning within the focus group held within the 'scrutiny-in-a-day' exercise.

1.20   In agreement with the Children and Families Service, it was agreed to consult a small number of children in foster placements in Hackney ahead of the 'scrutiny-in-a-day' exercise. To this end, the Chair and Vice Chair met young people from Hackney Gets Heard, Hackney's Children in Care Council, and reported back their findings to the Commission.

1.21   The plan of the evidence gathering session for the scrutiny-in-a-day exercise, with all key contributors to this review, is detailed in Appendix A at the end of this report.

2.   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1   Executive Summary with recommendations

2.1.1   The Commission made the following recommendations, which are derived from the evidence and conclusions presented in sections 5 and 6 respectively of this report.

1.   *Improving the retention of foster carers*

Foster carer agencies make significant investments in both time and resources to recruit, train and develop foster carers. In addition, the skills, knowledge and experience that foster carers accrue over time provides an incalculable resource to help cater for the needs of looked after children. In this context, it is of critical importance to develop those strategies which seek to support and retain in-house foster carers in the service of LB Hackney.

Evidence presented to the Commission highlighted that there were a number of key elements to retaining local in-house foster carers which included the provision of support (both professional and peer led), individual training programmes, being valued by local professionals and the receipt of an appropriate financial package.

It is recommended that when the local looked after children sufficiency strategy is updated, measures to ensure the retention of foster carers are included which:

(i) Provide for individualised training programmes for in-house foster carers;

(ii) Are informed by regular surveys and consultations with foster carers where such information will help to identify where the local support offer is sufficient and what could be improved;

(iii) Are informed by systematic exit interviews conducted with all those foster carers who deregister from the in-house service, to help identify those trends or patterns which may impact on a decision to leave;

(iv) Are underpinned by a package of remuneration which is regularly benchmarked against other neighbouring local authorities;

(v) Ensure that foster carers are provided with training and development opportunities which enable them to progress through the foster carer banding system so that each year (at least):
      - 8 level 1 carers progress to level 2; and
      - 4 level 2 carers progress to level 3

(vi) Set out how to increase the number of in-house foster carers that are trained to become Foster Carer Ambassadors from 6 to 12.

(vii) Ensure that foster carers who are the subject of allegations or concerns about their practice or standards of care should have access to independent support to assist them to clarify the stages of the procedure and help them to represent their point of view;

(viii) Ensure that there is sufficient respite (in respect of duration and quality) for foster carers.

2. *Improve recruitment of in-house foster carers*

A wide range of evidence was collected to support the improvement of the local foster carer recruitment strategy throughout this review and this has informed a number of recommendations.

There was broad unanimity within the evidence base that fostering agencies must reflect the needs of local looked after children in their foster carer recruitment strategies. Evidence from both the Fostering Network and IFAs clearly pinpointed the need to conduct a local needs analysis of its population of looked after children to determine the types of care placements required, this in turn should subsequently guide and inform the local foster carer recruitment strategy. National and local evidence would indicate that such needs analysis will most likely reflect a need to focus recruitment on those who have the skills and experience to support placements with teenagers.

There is considerable evidence, at both the national and local level, to suggest that the number of de-registrations could increase in the medium term as the demographic profile of carers indicated that many will be approaching retirement age over the next 5-10 years. This would suggest the need for a more ambitious recruitment target for both the medium term and beyond.

Local recruitment strategies have underlined the need to attract highly skilled and competent carers to the local in-house foster carer pool. Hackney Fostering service has had a 'stretch target' to recruit 20 new foster carers each year, and although it has come close it has not reached this for the past 3 years. This underperformance in local recruitment had contributed to the position where there were substantially fewer foster carers within Hackney's in-house pool in relation to comparator boroughs.

Whilst the focus of recruitment should always be to attract highly skilled and competent foster carers, it is clear that local recruitment needs to be up-scaled to reflect local needs. The Commission were impressed with the recruitment approach of a neighbouring borough which had adopted an 'everywhere and anywhere' approach to local foster carer recruitment, which had helped to develop the profile of the service and ultimately helped recruitment.

In this context, it is recommended that the Fostering Service should develop a new, ambitious and long-term local foster carer recruitment strategy. This strategy should:

(i) Be informed by a local needs analysis of its population of looked after children to determine the types of care placements required and the skills and experience required of foster carers (e.g. those looking after teenagers, complex needs and SEND);

(ii) Set ambitious targets for the recruitment of in-house foster carers in the short, medium and long term:
  ▪ 23 new recruits per year should be the new target.

(iii) Adopt an 'Always Be Recruiting' approach, which seeks to maximise Hackney Fostering Service presence, engagement and recruitment at all council and other local events;

(iv) Seek to encompass and target under-represented groups, who may not traditionally associate themselves with fostering or do not feel that they have the right skills or experience (e.g. the childless, under 35s, single people, men and the LGBTQi community);

(v) Develop recruitment campaigns which focus on the specific needs of looked after children and the required skills of foster carers (e.g. teenagers, complex needs, parent and child);

(vi) Maximise the use of word of mouth interventions, such as through the Foster Carer Ambassadors scheme;

(vii) Ensure that there is a dedicated and high profile on-line foster carer recruitment presence (given the importance of this and the limited local resource, it should be explored whether this function could be provided jointly across participating boroughs in the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium);

(viii) Ensure that recruitment campaigns are responsive and enquiries for in-house foster carers are dealt with promptly (at the latest, the next day).

(ix) Seek to refocus recruitment across a broader range of housing tenures, seeking potential recruits in both the privately owned and privately rented sector (where there may be greater housing capacity).

3. **Improving the Council wide offer to in-house foster carers**

As corporate parent the Council has a legal duty to care for the needs of looked after children. In this context, the Council should consider the nature and level of support it can offer to foster carers across the range of its corporate services which could assist in caring for looked after children. The development of an improved corporate offer to foster carers which reflects the range of council support available (e.g. housing, local taxation and benefits, leisure service) may improve recognition and value of the in-house foster carer role, increase the appeal of the foster care role and contribute to improved local retention and recruitment.

As a priority the Council should further investigate the following in developing an improved package of support:

(i) Housing

It is clear that housing is a significant issue in the recruitment and retention of foster carers, where over 1/3 of applications are closed due to prospective applicants having no spare room. In addition, initiatives to promote continuity of care for looked after children, such as the Staying Put initiative, also limit the local capacity of foster carers to provide additional placements.

The Commission understands that the Council has been running a pilot scheme offering up to 4 larger properties to experienced foster carers to enable them to take on additional placements of looked after children. It would be beneficial if this scheme was formalised and agreed, reflecting approaches taken in the neighbouring boroughs of Camden and Islington.

It is therefore recommended that the Council:

(a) Allocate 4 larger (2-4 bedroom) properties to the Fostering Service each year to enable experienced, long term foster carers to provide additional placements, particularly for teenagers (as per the Camden model);

(b) Give priority to adult children in foster carer households in local social housing allocation policies, to enable foster carers to take on additional placements for looked after children (as per the Islington model).

(ii) Council Tax

To bring the Hackney offer into line with other north east London boroughs (e.g. Waltham Forest, Redbridge), the Council should consider the introduction of a Council Tax reduction scheme for foster carers. Such a scheme should:

(a) Reflect a level of discount commensurate to the experience and longevity of foster carers (e.g. in alignment with the current banding system e.g. 33% for level 1, 66% for level 2 and 100% for level 3);

(b) Provide greater discounts for the care of looked after children who are difficult to match to suitable placements (e.g. children aged 13-17, or parent and child placements);

(c) Acknowledge that not all foster carers live within Hackney and will not be eligible to benefit from such a scheme, and therefore provide them with an annual retainer payment (also based on experience).

(iii)) Wider corporate offer to foster parents

(a) The Commission understands that Hackney foster carers already have access to cultural, leisure and other opportunities to support their role. The Commission recommends that the Fostering Service reviews these and explores other opportunities that might be available for foster carers through other services of the Council and local community and voluntary sector (and consult with current foster carers about what would be helpful or appealing to them).

4.   **Developing the capacity of the in-house pool of foster carers**
Evidence within the review has suggested that better use could be made of the existing pool of foster carers, not only in reducing the time that they may be without a placement but also by ensuring that they have the right skills, training and experience to meet the needs of looked after children in Hackney. Such measures will ensure that foster carers remain engaged and are retained within the Fostering Service as well as being better equipped to meet the needs of local looked after children.
Peer support was identified as a key process for sharing learning, skills and experience within the local pool of foster carers, and as something which also helped to engage and retain foster carers. Whilst the Commission was pleased to note that peer support mechanisms were provided for foster carers in Hackney, the Council may wish to identify ways in which this approach could be developed further in

relation to support provided to individual carers and increasing the skills and knowledge of carers across the in-house foster carer pool.

Whilst the vacancy rate in Hackney is on a par with, if not better than, the national average, evidence given to the Commission from foster carers would suggest that foster carers are not being utilised as much as they would like, and was a factor in some carers' decisions to de-register. Thus, as well as recruiting more in-house foster carers, it was evident that better use could be made of the existing pool of foster carers. It is recommended that the Council:

(i)   Consider the implementation of the 'Step Up Step Down' programme - which seeks to utilise in-house foster carers to provide additional preventative support to those children on the edge of the care system;

(ii)   As per the Islington model, consider whether in-house foster carer vacancies can be used to support placements in other boroughs, such as within the NL Consortium or further afield;

(iii)   Increase the number of Foster Carer Ambassadors in Hackney to extend the capacity for targeted outreach recruitment and to support newly appointed foster carers (increase from current 6 to 12);

(iv)   Consider further ways in which peer support mechanisms can be used to support fostering practice and increase the skills and knowledge base of local in-house foster carers and their ability to provide a wider range of foster placements;

(v)   Develop the skill base of the existing pool of foster carers to better enable them to support the needs of looked after children in Hackney, particularly those looking after young adolescents aged 13 and above and parent and child placements.

5.   Working with the IFA sector

The IFA sector is important to foster care provision as it offers additional capacity, flexibility and specialised placements for looked after children. The proportion of looked after children in Hackney that are placed with an IFA foster carer has remained at approximately 2/3 for some period of time, which is substantially higher than the national average. The average cost of an IFA placement however, is more than twice that of a child placed with an in-house foster carer, and in addition, the majority of children placed with IFA foster carers are located outside the borough.

There are however tensions between local authorities and the IFA sector, not only in terms of the cost of placements within this sector, but also in respect of monopolisation, where there are now fewer but larger IFA providers. Concerns were raised also within the review about the quality of the service provision and support to foster carers within this sector.

Whilst there was substantive evidence at both the national and local level to indicate the cost differentials both within and between the different types of foster placements, there is little evidence to indicate how the quality of such placements or the outcomes

for children and young people placed in them vary between and across foster care settings.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the matching of skills and experience of foster carers to the needs of looked after children is of paramount importance, further work needs to be done to develop quality standards and measures to inform placement and commissioning decisions.

IFA's provide an important role in the provision of foster care services and a positive working relationship between IFAs and the statutory sector is necessary to ensure that looked after children have access to the right placement at the right time. The Commission were interested in the collaborative approach taken in Leeds, in which local authorities worked with IFAs to ensure that more children were looked after locally, where they can be better supported.

To this end it is recommended that the Council develop a joint working protocol with partner IFAs which:

(i) Addresses issues around the quality and cost of foster care placements[1];

(ii) Seeks to develop usage of foster carers in the IFA sector in a planned way which enables both IFAs and the LA to plan more effectively;

(iii) Allows for more effective commissioning and contract management (quality and outcomes of placements);

(iv) Enables IFAs and the LA to work cooperatively in line with the Leeds model which seeks to increase the number of 'local solutions for looked after children' by seeking to maximise the use of foster care placements in Hackney (irrespective of which sector foster carers may work for) to help develop and maintain strong support networks for children and their carers.

6. **North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium**

Given the speciality and scale of local fostering services, collaborative partnerships represent a logical way in which to operate services more effectively and efficiently. There was evidence to suggest that the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium (NLAFC), of which Hackney is a member, has helped to pool resources (of finance and expertise) to support more effective and efficient recruitment of foster carers and the provision of training to foster carers. It was also noted that participating boroughs were cooperating in respect of service commissioning.

It is recommended that the Council and Fostering Service continue to engage and further develop its relationship with the NLFAC and identify additional opportunities for collaborative partnerships, particularly in relation to:

(i) Effective commissioning of services to support the training and development of foster carers, particularly specialist support

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[1] How does placement stability compare between those looked after children with an in-house foster carer and those with an IFA? How many re-enter care from different placements? To what extent do the health, social and educational outcomes of different placement types impact on children?

(ii) Increased capacity (finance and expertise) for the recruitment of foster carers particularly those with specialist skills or experience (e.g. looking after teenagers, SEND, parent and child etc.);

(iii) Identify ways in which it can work collaboratively with the IFA sector.

7. Education Select Committee Fostering Inquiry and the Department of Education Fostering Stocktake

The Education Select Committee at the Houses of Parliament conducted a review of Fostering Services in 2017 and has published its report in January 2018 (House of Commons, 2018). This report has in turn contributed to the Government's fostering stocktake, which has been undertaken by Sir Martin Narey on behalf of the Department of Education (Narey & Overs, 2018).

The report of the Education Select Committee makes a number of recommendations, including the establishment of a national foster carer recruitment campaign.

(i) It is recommend that when the Fostering Service report back to the Commission in 6 months, it also includes a response to those recommendations contained within both the Education Select Committee and Department of Education national stocktake reports, particularly those relating to recruitment and retention of foster carers.

8. Mockingbird

The Commission took evidence from both local officers and national bodies on the Mockingbird Scheme, a hub and spoke approach to establish a network of support to local foster carers. Evidence presented to the review suggested that this model can offer more support to foster carers, maintain and engage local foster carers and improve the nature and level of care provided to looked after children.

The Fostering Network is working with a number of areas to pilot the Mockingbird approach.

(i) It is recommended that the Fostering Service should actively engage with the Fostering Network to identify if Hackney can be included within the existing pilot scheme or within any planned future roll-out of this approach to foster care.

3. FINANCIAL COMMENTS

3.1   The report aims to identify and assess the challenges which impede the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Hackney and to identify those policies and practices which can help to overcome them. Foster care recruitment and the impact this has on the financial forecast has been reported through the Overall Financial Position report over a number of years. As stated in this scrutiny report the average unit cost of an in-house foster care placement is around double that of a placement through an independent agency. The table below sets out the overall cost of foster care placements and average unit costs over the last three years.

	2015/16				2016/17				2017/18 Forecast as at Jan 2018			
	Ave. No. of children	Budget £'000	Spend £'000	Ave. unit cost £'000	Ave. No. of children	Budget £'000	Spend £'000	Ave. unit cost £'000	Ave. No. of children	Budget £'000	Forecast £'000	Ave. unit cost £'000
External Fostering (IFA)	157	4,666	6,966	44	151	5,714	6,866	45	154	6,124	6,931	45
In House Fosters	73	2,320	1,640	22	72	2,000	1,541	21	74	1,500	1,568	21

3.2   The recent profile of foster care placements is the reverse of historical patterns. As at the end of January there were 154 placements in independent foster care compared to 88 in March 2012. Conversely, the number of looked after children placed with in-house foster carers has fallen from 133 in March 2012 to 74. This along with the increase in the number of residential placements has driven an ongoing cost pressure in the Children and Families Service which has been mitigated by the application of a commissioning reserve set up by the Group Director of Finance and Corporate Resources.

3.3   The recruitment of foster carers is a priority for the Children and Families Service and as this report notes there has been some success in recent years. However, as yet this has not translated into a shift in the profile of placements and therefore a reduction in cost.

3.4   The majority of the recommendations in this report will not result in additional financial cost to the service. Where a cost is likely, for example, the Mockingbird Scheme, the service should continue to work with financial colleagues to determine the financial impact. In particular to ensure that any investment will be offset by the reduction in cost resulting from improvement in recruitment and/or retention of foster carers.

3.5   Recommendations at section 3 relate to housing allocations and council tax. The potential benefits of such policies need to be considered in the context of other priorities and include a full analysis of the potential cost to the services involved. For example, the competing demand of allocation priorities against the availability of Council social housing is not increasing at the same rate. Also the administrative burden and the loss of income resulting from the introduction of a Council Tax reduction scheme for foster carers need to be fully understood before such a policy is progressed.

4.   LEGAL COMMENTS

4.1.   The Role and function of the Overview and Scrutiny Commissions, including the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission is contained in Article 7 (Part 2) of the London Borough of Hackney's Constitution, which includes undertaking reviews and making recommendations following such reviews to the Executive, Full Council and external partner organisations.

4.2.   The Commission, in the exercise of its review and scrutiny function, has conducted a review which seeks to identify ways of assisting in the local recruitment and retention of foster carers in Hackney.

4.3.   Legal Services note that the Commission has made a number of recommendations in the report with a view to improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Hackney. The recommendations made in this report do not have direct Legal implications presently, as the Commission is not a decision making body but one several bodies which monitor and influence those that are making decisions, such as the Cabinet.

4.4.   If however, the Commission's recommendations are adopted, then there may be potential legal implications such as issues arising under employment law, health and safety and a conflict of interest situation (such as where allegations are made either against foster carers or their family members or against the looked after child). Legal Services will of course provide advice as and when required, should any legal issues arise, in relation to implementation.

5.   Findings

5.1   Looked after children – national data

5.1.1   As of the end of March 2016 there were 70,440 looked after children in England (DfE, 2017). This number has risen steadily for a number of years, and represented a 5% increase in the total number of looked after children compared to 2012 (DfE, 2017).

5.1.2   The reasons behind the rise in the number of children that are taken in to the care of local authorities are multiple and complex. Such contributory factors behind the rise in looked after children could include:
- A greater appreciation by professional services of the detrimental impact of neglect, emotional abuse and domestic violence;
- Application of differing threshold assessments which may determine whether a child is best cared for by the local authority or their parents;
- More young people aged 15-17 entering care under voluntary section 20 agreements (1989 Children Act);
- The rise in the number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK.

5.1.3   In terms of the national demographic profile of looked after children (DfE, 2017), there are a number of key issues:
- The proportion of male looked after children (56%) is consistently higher than females (44%);
- The age range of looked after children has changed; proportionally, there are now more older children aged 10 and above in care (62% in 2016 compared to 56% in 2012) and fewer younger children aged 1-4 years (13% in 2016 compared to 18% in 2012);
- Looked after children are predominantly (75%) from a white ethnicity, followed by children of mixed ethnicity (9%), Black or Black British ethnicity (7%) or Asian or Asian British ethnicity (4%).

5.1.4   The legal basis in which a child can be taken into the care of the local authority varies. A summary of the legal bases through which looked after children were taken into care in 2016/17 is given below in Table 1.

Table 1 – Legal basis for taken into care	Number of looked after children
Care Order – made under the 1989 Children Act by application of a local authority.	45,440 (65%)
Voluntary Agreement – under section 20 of the 1989 Children Act.	18,730 (27%)
Placement Order – giving a local authority a legal basis to place a child for adoption.	5,990 (8%)

5.1.5   The transient nature of children and young people in the care system should be acknowledged however, in that there is a significant flow of children and young people both into and out of the care system. Thus, whilst 32,050 children started to be looked after by a local authority in 2016, a similar number (31,710) left the care of a local authority (DfE, 2017).

5.1.6   Whilst children and young people entering the care system may do so under legal provisions set out in 5.1.4, there may be a number of reasons why children cease to be looked after. The main reasons why children leave the care of the local authority are that they are either returned to the care of their parents (34%) or are adopted (15%) (Table 2). Other reasons why children are no longer looked after are given below in Table 2.

Table 2 – Reason no longer looked after (DfE, 2017)	Number and proportion in 2016
Returned to live with parents	10,880 (34%)
Adopted	4,690 (15%)
Independent living	4,150 (13%)
Special guardianship order	3,830 (12%)
Other (e.g. reached age of 18, transferred to adult residential care, sentenced to custody)	8,160 (26%)

5.2   Looked after children in Hackney

5.2.1   As of 31st March 2017 there were 371 looked after children in the care of the local authority in Hackney, which was a 14% increase in the figure recorded for the end of March 2016 (LBH, 2017). The actual rate of looked after children in Hackney in 2017 was 60.6 per 10,000 children which was the highest recorded figure for a number of years (LB Hackney, 2017).

5.2.2   The inter-flow of looked after children entering and leaving the care system exhibited at the national level, is also seen at the local level in Hackney, where a significant proportion move both in and out of the care system. Data for the year to the end of March 2017 recorded that 246 children and young people entered care in Hackney whilst 200 left the care of the authority (LB Hackney, 2017).

5.2.3   Also similar to the national picture, those children and young people entering the care system in Hackney in the 12 months to March 2017 were more likely to be adolescents: 148 (60%) of the 246 children and young people entering care in Hackney were aged 10 years and above (Table 3). The full age profile of looked after children entering care in Hackney in 2016/17 is as set out below in Table 3.

Table 3 – Age of looked after children entering care in Hackney 12 months to end of March 2017 (LB Hackney, 2017)	No. (%)
Under 1 year	28 (11%)
1-4 years	27 (11%)
5-9 years	43 (17%)
10-15 years	73 (30%)
16+ years	75 (30%)
Total	_246 (100%)_

5.2.4   The overall demographic profile of looked after children in Hackney as of the end of March 2017 is given in Table 4. This demonstrates that 72% of looked after children in Hackney at the end of March 2017, were aged 10 years and above.

Table 4 – Age of all looked after children in Hackney as of March 2017 (LB Hackney, 2017).	No. (%)
Under 1 year	14 (4%)
1-4 years	27 (7%)
5-9 years	61 (16%)
10-15 years	153(41%)
16+ years	116 (31%)
Total	*371 (100%)*

5.2.5   Data from the Bi-Annual Children's Social Care Report of children looked after by LB Hackney suggests that almost one-half (49%) of children in care are aged 14 years and over (LB Hackney, 2017). This particular group of young people tend to have more complex needs and require higher levels of support. As a result, it can be difficult to source appropriate placements to support such needs. Many of those older children entering care are those for which their relationship with their birth parents has broken down.

5.3   Foster care - national data

5.3.1   Looked after children can be cared for in a number of settings, including (for example) with a foster parent, in a children's home, residential school or secure unit. As of March 2016, there were 51,850 (74%) children being cared for by a foster parent, making this the most common care setting for looked after children (DfE,2017).

5.3.2   The number of fostering households has failed to keep pace with the increase in the number of children entering care; thus whilst the number of looked after children has grown 5% since 2012, the number of fostering households has remained broadly static (DfE, 2017). Indeed, as of March 2016, nationally there were 44,320 approved fostering households which was a 1% decrease on the previous year's figure (DfE, 2017). Similarly, there were 62,625 *individual* approved foster carers as of March 2016, which was also a 1% decline on the previous year (DfE, 2017).

5.3.3   In terms of the national demographic profile of foster carers, national data and commentary would suggest that this group:
- Is predominantly white, where 83% were white and 15% from a BME group'
- Consist of a generally older proportion of the population (90% aged over 40 years, 50% aged over 50 years) where almost half indicated that they would retire in the next 5-10 years (The Fostering Network, 2012; Fostering network, 2016a);
- Is predominantly (90%) female (The Fostering Network, 2012);
- Has an under representation of LGBTQi carers (Community Care, 2017).

5.3.4   The care needs of children and young people entering care are varied and as a consequence there are numerous types of foster care placements which can support these needs. The types of foster carer placements generally available are summarised in Table 5 below.

Table 5 – Types of foster care placements	
Emergency	When children need somewhere safe to stay for a few nights

Short-term	Where children are looked after for a few weeks or months while plans are made for the child's future
Short breaks	Respite care for parents or foster parents where children are disabled, have special needs or have behavioral difficulties.
Remand	When young people are remanded by a court to be looked after by a specially-trained foster carer.
Fostering for Adoption	When babies or small children stay with foster carers who may go on to adopt them.
Long-term	Not all children who need to permanently live away from their birth family will be adopted, many children will be matched with a long term foster carer who they will live with until they reach adulthood.
'Connected person' (formerly known as 'Family and friends' carers)	A child being cared for by the local council goes to live with someone they already know, usually a family member. This carer is assessed as a connected person foster carer and approval is only provided for the carer to look after a specifically named child (unlike mainstream carers).

5.3.5   A foster carer can be approved for a specific type of fostering care or choose to specialise themselves. In 2016, approximately 37,000 (83%) of the 44,320 fostering households in March 2016 were approved for long term care and 1,850 (4%) exclusively provided short-term care (DfE, 2017).   Local authorities are therefore mindful of the need to maintain a wide range of fostering placement options to help meet the varying needs of children in their care.

5.3.6   Irrespective of the nature or the duration of the placement, foster carers undertake a wide range of responsibilities for the looked after child. Foster care roles are set out in law and require carers to:
- Care for looked after children as if they were their own child;
- Ensure the child attends school, health appointments, contact sessions and report to authorities if they go missing;
- Provide care and support in a stable and safe environment;
- Advocate for the needs of their looked after children;
- Make decisions for a child (under delegated authority) though some decisions may be taken with the social worker.

5.3.7   Fewer foster care placements generally suggest greater stability for the looked after child, which in turn, is linked to improved outcomes (NICE, 2015). Sometimes however, a foster care placement can break down which may necessitate that the looked after child is transferred to a new foster care placement. National data from 2016 indicated that 68% of looked after children had one placement, 21% had two placements and 10% had three or more placements in a 12-month period (DfE, 2017).

5.3.8   Looked after children and young people may not always be placed with a foster carer within the boundary of the local authority under whose care they are, as not all foster

carers may reside in the local authority area irrespective of which agency (local authority of IFA) to whom they are in service. In addition, in some instances, it may not always be in the best interests of the child to be placed within the area in which they live (e.g. where there may be a gang related concern). Of the 51,850 children in foster care in England in 2016, 62% (32,240) were placed with a foster carer within the local authority boundary and 38% (19,610) were placed externally (DfE, 2016).

5.3.9   The placement of a looked after child can either be made to an unrelated foster carer, or to a family relative or friend (a 'connected person'). As of March 2016, proportionally more looked after children were with a foster carer (84%) than with a 'connected person' (16%) (DfE, 2016). There is however, a growing trend to maintain looked after children within existing family networks when this is in the interest of the child. There were 4,665 connected person fostering households in 2016, a 13% increase on that recorded for 2015 (DfE, 2017).

5.3.10   Many local authorities do not have the in-house capacity to look after the number of children entering the care system themselves, particularly where those children may require a specialised placement (e.g. where the child has a disability, SEN or has very challenging behaviour). In addition, a number of other factors have driven the growth of foster care placements within the IFA sector, which include:
- A decrease in the number of in-house foster carers;
- The need to accommodate emergency requests for foster carers which cannot be provided in-house;
- The need to place children out of borough boundaries for welfare or safeguarding concerns.

5.3.11   As a consequence, local authorities now commonly use IFAs (for profit and voluntary agencies) to provide additional scope, capacity and flexibility to meet the needs of looked after children in their care. Indeed, national data would suggest that approximately 1 in 3 placements of looked after children are now made with a foster carer within the IFA sector. Therefore, of the 51,805 children and young people in a placement on 31 March 2016, 66% (34,395) were with an in-house local authority foster carer and the remaining 34% (17,410) were within the IFA sector (Ofsted, 2017).

5.3.12   Increased usage of IFA's by local authorities has precipitated an increase in their number, therefore as of the end of March 2016, there were 297 active IFAs in England (Ofsted, 2017). Of these IFAs, over three-quarters (79%) were in the private sector and the remainder (21%) were in the voluntary sector (Ofsted, 2017).

5.3.13   There is a significant differential between the cost of placing a looked after child with a foster carer within the IFA sector compared to in-house local authority provision. National data has suggested that the average annual cost of a local authority foster care placement to be within the range of £23,000 to £27,000, compared with a range of £41,000 to £42,000 for a placement within the IFA sector (NAO, 2014). That is, the cost of foster carers through an IFA is generally twice that of in-house provision.

5.3.14   The use of IFA's for fostering placements however varies widely across regions in England and indeed, from one local authority to another. Evidence to the Education Select Committee on Fostering has suggested that this could be as high as 70% in

some authorities whilst conversely in a small number of local authorities, over 90% of foster care placements were made in-house (House of Commons, 2017).

Grants and allowances for foster carers

5.3.15　Foster carers are entitled to an allowance to cover the cost of caring for a looked after child placed with them. Whilst such allowance schemes are determined and agreed locally, these conform to national guidelines and specifications. The minimum weekly allowance for foster carers by region is as set out below.

Minimum weekly allowance for foster carers 2017-2018 (direct.gov.uk)

	Babies	Pre-primary	Primary	11 to 15	16 to 17
London	£144	£147	£165	£187	£219
South East	£138	£142	£158	£179	£211
Rest of England	£125	£128	£141	£161	£188

5.3.16　Additional funding may also be provided to foster carers:
- If the child has specific needs (e.g. SEND);
- If the foster carer has specific skills or training to support children in need;
- Where there is a longstanding commitment to foster care (i.e. years' experience).

5.3.17　Foster carers are exempt from tax up for £10,000 per year (which is shared equally among any foster carers in the same household). Thus foster carers do not pay tax on the first £10,000 that results from the payment of foster carer allowances. In addition, on top of the £10,000 tax exemption, tax relief of £200/250[2] is allowed for every week a looked after child is placed with a foster carer.

5.3.18　Local schemes may provide additional allowances to foster carers to reflect local need and circumstances. In addition, local schemes may offer additional financial discounts and incentives (e.g. Council tax reduction, leisure-services discount passes).

5.4　Foster care in Hackney

5.4.1　Of the 371 looked after children in Hackney in March 2017, 25% were cared for within a range of care settings within Hackney, the remainder being cared for out of borough (Table 6). Although this is substantially lower than the national figure of 62% (as in 5.3.7) it is comparable to figures in other London boroughs (LB Hackney, 2016). Of those Hackney looked after children who are cared for outside pf the borough, to the borough, 17% were placed in a neighbouring borough, 37% in another London borough and 19% outside of London (Table 6).

Table 6 – Looked after children in Hackney: Placement location and type as of March 2017 (LB Hackney, 2017)			
Placement Location		**Placement type**	
Hackney	91 (25%)	Foster carer	288 (78%)
Neighbouring LA	68 (17%)	Placed for adoption	10 (3%)
Other London LA	139 (37%)	Placed with parents	7 (2%)
LA at a distance	35 (9%)	Semi-independent	38 (10%)
LA adjacent to London	38 (10%)	Residential home	21 (6%)

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[2] £200 tax relief for a child aged 11 and under, £250 for a child aged over 11.

(e.g. Herts, Essex, Kent)		Other (secure unit, youth offending unit)	7 (2%)
Total	371 (100%)	*Total*	371 (100%)

5.4.2   At the end of March 2017, 288 (78%) of the 371 looked after children in Hackney were placed with a foster carer (Table 6), which corresponds to the national figure (5.3.1). Relatively few (6%) looked after children are cared for in a residential setting, which reflects the approach of the Council to use residential placements (children's homes) only if an appropriate placement in a family setting (i.e. foster carer or with other family members) cannot be found. Of the remainder of local looked after children, 10% were living semi-independently, 3% were placed for adoption and 2% were placed with a parent (Table 6).

In-house foster care
5.4.3   As of September 2017, there were 89 fostering households within the in house foster care pool in Hackney. The pool of in-house foster carers consisted of 122 carers; 90 of which were female and 32 were male (LB Hackney, 2017). In terms of the age group, a majority (75%) of in-house foster carers were aged over 50 years (Table 7). The age of foster carers in Hackney ranged from 31-40 through to 81-90 years age group (Table 7).

Table 7 – Age, ethnicity and religion of individual foster carers in Hackney (September 2017).	
Age of carers (years)	**Number.**
31-40	8 (7%)
41-50	23 (19%)
51-60	63 (52%)
61-70	23 (19%)
71-80	4 (3%)
81-90	1 (1%)
Total	**122**

5.4.4   In terms of the ethnicity of foster carers in Hackney, a majority are Black or Black British and 30% are White (Table 7). This broadly corresponds to the demographic profile of looked after children in the borough (Table 7a).

Table 7a – Ethnicity of in-house foster carers and looked after children in Hackney.		
Ethnicity of carers	**Percentage of carers at September 2017**	**Percentage of LAC at March 2017**
Black or Black British	52%	42%
White	30%	29%
Mixed	7%	19%
Asian or Asian British	7%	5%
Unknown	3%	0%
Other Ethnic Groups	1%	5%

5.4.5   Analysis of the length of time that in-house foster carers have been approved by LB Hackney suggest that over ½ (54%) have provided placements for looked after children in Hackney for 5 years or more (Table 8). Conversely, 1/3 are relatively new to working for LB Hackney, having provided placements for less than 2 years (Table 8).

Table 8 – Length of time as an approved in-house foster carer and geographic location of in-house foster carer (Sep. 2017).			
Time approved in-house foster carer	No. of foster carer households	Location of in-house foster carer	No. of foster carer households
<2 years	28 (32%)	Hackney	53 (60%)
2-4 years	13 (15%)	Neighbouring borough	13 (15%)
5-9 years	20 (23%)	Other London	19 (21%)
10 years	27 (31%)	Out of London	4 (4%)
Total	**88 (100%)**		**89 (100%)**

5.4.6   Analysis of the geographical location of in-house foster carers indicated that 53 (60%) of the 89 foster carer households lived in Hackney (Table 8). This is in contrast to the overall data for the placements of looked after children where just 25% were placed (in any setting) in Hackney (Table 6). It is reasonable to deduce from this data that IFA foster carers are predominantly located out of borough.

5.4.7   There are 3 levels of in-house foster carers (1, 2 and 3) in Hackney which are linked to competency, experience and training and, which in turn are linked to fees and allowances for foster carers. Level 1 is the status which most newly approved foster carers are accorded and Level 2 can only be achieved after a carer's second or third year of fostering. Level 3 foster carers are those foster carers who have developed an understanding of child development and behavioural issues and obtained accredited training.

5.4.8   Data would suggest that as of the end of September 2017, over one-half (53%) of in-house foster carer households in Hackney were Level 1 and 42% were at level 2 (Table 9). Just 5 (6%) foster carer households operated at Level 3 (Table 9).

Table 9 - Level of foster carer	
	No. of households
Level 1 (Newly approved)	47 (53%)
Level 2 (2-3 years' experience and training)	37 (42%)
Level 3 (Accredited child dev./behaviour training)	5 (6%)
Total	**89 (100%)**

5.4.9   The proportion of looked after children in Hackney who are placed with an in-house foster carer is approximately 1/3 (34%), which is converse to national figures (in 5.3.11). Therefore, foster care placements in the IFA sector in Hackney outnumber that of in-house placements by a ratio of 2:1.

5.4.10   The average weekly cost of placements for looked after children in Hackney varies widely, depending on the nature of that placement. The average weekly cost of a placement with an in-house foster carer is approximately 1/10 (£376) of that for a placement in a residential care setting (£3,571) (Table 10).

Table 10 – Placement type and cost in Hackney march 2016 (LB Hackney, 2016).	
Placement type	Average Weekly costs as of 31 March 2016
In house foster care placements	£376
Independent Fostering Agency placements	£819
Residential & Secure placements	£3,571

5.4.11   A comparison of the cost of in-house and IFA fostering placements in Hackney shows that the average weekly cost of a foster carer placement within the IFA sector is approximately double that of an in-house foster care placement (Table 10).   This is broadly comparable to national figures (5.3.13).

5.4.12   Given that approximately 2/3 of foster care placements in Hackney are made within the IFA sector, the annual total spend on these two forms of foster care provision is therefore substantially different. The total expenditure for 2015/16 for the different types of placement of looked after children in Hackney is given in Table 11. The total cost of foster care placements through an IFA in 2015/16 was £6.97million, more than four times that of the cost of in-house foster care placements (£1.64 million).

Table 11 – Annual cost of types of placement of looked after children.		
Placement type	Volume	Cost 2015/16
In house foster care placements	71.9	£1,639,553
Independent Fostering Agency	156.1	£6,966,295
Family & Friends	26.7	£512,224
Residential Care	10.1	£2,178,890
Semi-independent (<18)	24.3	£956,714

5.4.13   Whilst many foster carers may care for just one looked after child, with the approval of the local authority, foster carers can provide multiple placements. Thus, whilst there were 84 approved fostering households in Hackney in 2015, there was capacity for 138 placements for looked after children (LB Hackney 2016a).

5.4.14   The nature and duration of foster care placements can be varied which can present some logistical problems for local authorities seeking to match the needs of looked after young people with foster carer households. As a result, it is inevitable there may be some times when not all foster carers will have a child in their care (vacancy rate). The average vacancy rate for mainstream foster carers in Hackney was 15% in 2015. This equates to 13 fostering households having vacancies at any one time (LB Hackney, 2016a). In 2016, the national vacancy rate for fostering households was 23% (Ofsted, 2017).

5.5   Recruitment and retention of foster carers – national picture

5.5.1   With increased numbers of children entering care and around 12 per cent of the foster carer workforce retiring or leaving each year (The Fostering Network, 2017), foster care agencies, both local authority and IFA, are facing increasing pressure to recruit and retain foster carers.

5.5.2   Indeed, such are the recruitment pressures, it is estimated that fostering services across the UK will need to recruit an additional 7,180 foster families over the next year to maintain service provision (The Fostering Network, 2017). In London, it is estimated that an additional 830 new foster carers will need to be recruited across the capital to meet expected care needs of looked after children.

5.5.3   Data on the recruitment and retention of foster carers is collated annually by Ofsted, the inspection agency for all education and children's services. Data is collected on a wide range of indicators including the number of new foster carer applications received, completed and approved as well as data on those foster carers that leave (de-register).

Figure 1 - Foster carer applications considered, concluded and approved 2012-2016 (Ofsted, 2017)
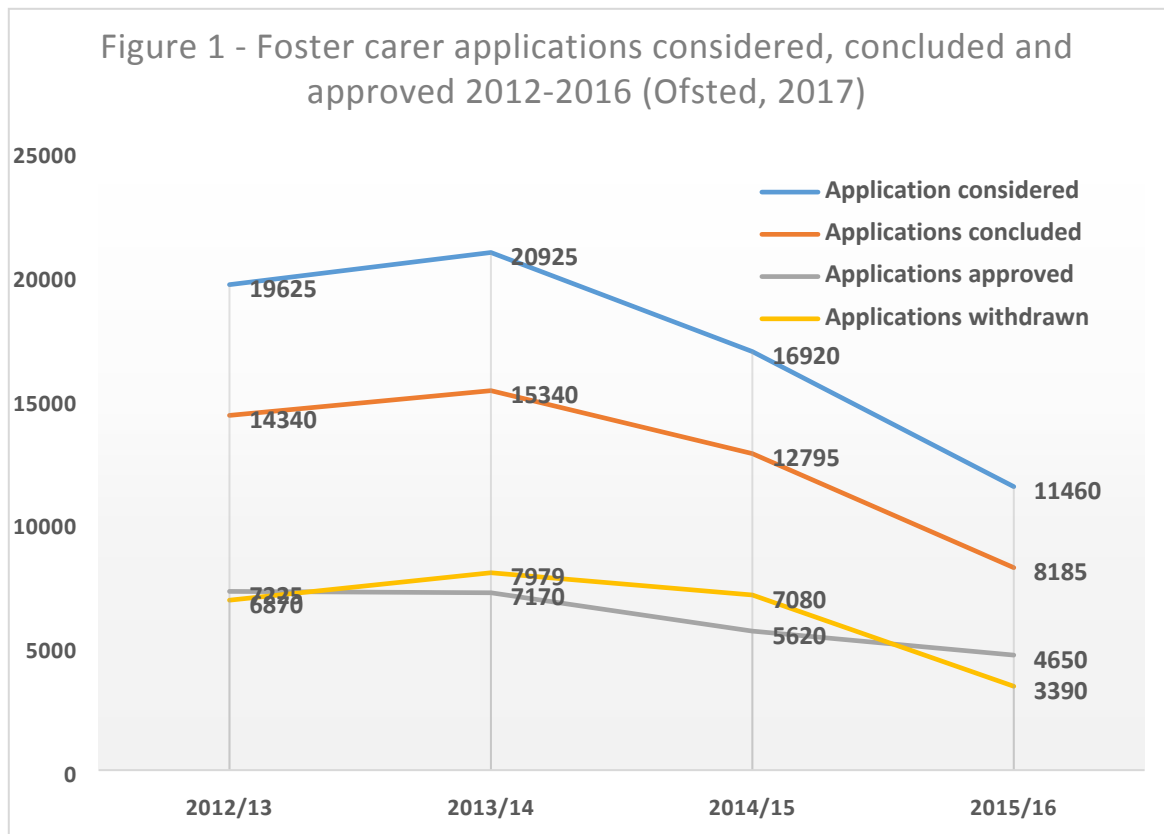
5.5.4   The key findings from the most recent published data (2015/16) concluded:
- The downward trend in the number of new applications to any agency (LA or IFA) has continued: there were 101,795 new applications in 2015/16 compared to 103,355 in 2014/15;
- The number of applications actually <u>considered</u> by an agency (LA or IFA) fell by one-third: 11,460 foster carer applications were considered in 2015/16 compared to 16,920 in 2014/15 (Figure 1);
- The number of foster carer applications that were <u>concluded</u> also fell by one-third: 8,185 foster carer applications were concluded in 2016 compared to 12,795 in 2015 (Figure 1);
- The number of foster carer applications that were <u>approved</u> fell by 18%: 4,650 applications were approved in 2016 compared to 5,620 in 2015 (Figure 1).

5.5.5   Although the number of approved foster carer applications fell, this was proportionally fewer than the number of applications that were actually completed, therefore there

was an increase in the proportion of completed foster carer applications that were approved. This was the same for both IFA and LA agencies:

- 57% of completed foster carer applications in the LA setting were approved in 2015/16 compared to 48% in 2014/15;
- 56% of completed foster carer applications in the IFA setting were approved in 2015/16 compared to 40% in 2014/15 (Ofsted, 2017).

5.5.6   The number of foster carers that de-registered however decreased; there were 5,380 de-registrations in 2014/15 compared to 4,610 in 2015/16, a fall of 14% (Ofsted, 2017). A majority of de-registrations recorded for 2015/16 were initiated by foster carers themselves rather than the agency (Ofsted, 2017). It would appear that only a small proportion of de-registrations were attributable to foster carers moving between different IFAs or across agencies (between LA and IFA).[3]

5.6   Recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers in Hackney

Children's Social Care Sufficiency Strategy

5.6.1   Each local authority is required to undertake an assessment of the sufficiency of social care options for looked after children within its care. To this end, L B Hackney has produced a *Children's Social Care Sufficiency Strategy 2016-2018* (LB Hackney, 2016a). This strategy assessed the needs of looked after children, the prospective demands placed on children's social care and how the Children and Families Service will meet current and future needs.

5.6.2   The *Children's Social Care Sufficiency Strategy* highlighted a number of key issues for children's social care in Hackney, which included the following:
- That the number of children entering care, although difficult to predict, would continue to rise, with an estimated 377 in care by the end of March 2018;
- The number of young adolescents entering care with multiple and complex needs was rising, which presented significant challenges in providing suitable placements;
- Housing pressures within Hackney and across London limits local recruitment of foster carers and restricts capacity of existing foster carer households, and results in more children being placed out of borough;
- The increasing use of IFA's for foster care placements was a 'significant factor' within service budget pressures;
- If no action was taken, trend data suggested that use of foster care placements within the IFA sector would make up over 80% of all foster care placements (up from 66%) and contribute to ongoing service pressures.

5.6.3   The sufficiency strategy also identified how it will meet the challenges set out above and developed a number of indicative targets to support the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers. These included:
- The recruitment of 15-20 mainstream in-house foster carers per year over the 3-year period 2015/16 to 2017/18;
- The number of children placed with in-house foster carers to increase by 20%;
- To train and develop the pool of in-house foster carers to progress 5 foster carers to level 2 status per year, and 3 foster carers to level 3 status per year;

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[3] Foster carer applications are not 'passportable', thus a foster carer moving between agencies will need to re-register and apply.

- To recruit or develop 2 foster carers per year for each of the following specialisms: parent and child fostering, teenager and respite;
- To increase the conversion rate (the number of approvals derived from applications) to national level i.e. 10%;
- To aid retention, the training and support offer to in-house foster carers will be continuously assessed and evaluated.

Local marketing and recruitment strategy

5.6.4   Hackney has produced a dedicated marketing strategy to support the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers (LB Hackney, 2017a). This strategy sets out those activities and interventions that will be used to meet those objectives and targets set out in the sufficiency strategy (as set out in 5.6.3).

5.6.5   The recruitment strategy focuses on 4 areas to help recruit and retain in-house foster carers in Hackney. These are:
- **Traditional marketing activity:** keep potential foster carers engaged and informed about fostering opportunities, and associate the Council with fostering;
- **Community engagement:** using events to build relationships with community organisations and promote the Fostering Service;
- **Holistic approach:** interventions which recognise the whole customer journey from before initial contact to approval;
- **Collaborative work model (fostering unit)**: to ensure that foster carers are engaged, feel supported and motivated by the Fostering Service and their peers.

5.6.6   The Fostering Service operates a programme of interventions that aim to support the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers. These include:
- **Outreach events** – to build and develop relationships with religious, community and voluntary organisations, to promote the Fostering Service and to identify potential foster carers;
- **Foster Carer Ambassadors** - experienced foster carers (6 active) who attend outreach events to provide first-hand experience to support engagement and recruitment;
- **Social media** – an Instagram and Facebook presence is maintained by the Communications department to promote awareness and recruitment:
- **Traditional marketing** – 'Little Things' campaign, leaflets, banners marketing materials - including bags, t-shirts, pens and trolley coins;
- **Cooperative marketing**: undertaken in collaboration with 5 other North London boroughs as part of the North London Adoption and Fostering consortium;
- **Incentive schemes**: for both foster carers and LB Hackney staff.

Local recruitment and retention data

5.6.7   Analysis of local recruitment and retention data is collated by the Fostering Service in Hackney (Table 12). Analysis of this data highlighted the significant challenges that the service has faced to recruit and retain in-house foster carers, which overall has seen a 12% decline in the pool of in-house foster carer households in the period 2014/15 to 2016/17 (Table 12). The number of approved in-house foster carer households is also markedly and consistently below other comparator authorities (Table 12).

| Table 12 - Foster carer recruitment and retention data for Hackney |

2014/15- 2016/17			
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Approved mainstream foster carer households			
Hackney	102	85	90
Statistical Neighbour Average	165	109	*
Number of initial enquiries from new prospective fostering households			
Hackney	189	230	338
Statistical Neighbour Average	209	234	*
Number of applications approved (mainstream foster carer households)			
Hackney	9	11	18
Statistical Neighbour Average	16	11	*
Number of de-registration's (mainstream foster carer households)			
Hackney	10	15	8
Statistical Neighbour Average	15	13	*

* Data unavailable

5.6.8   The reason behind the declining pool of in-house foster carers in Hackney, put simply, is that the number of newly approved foster carers has failed to match the number who have been deregistered (this includes terminations as well as those who have resigned). Thus, in both 2014/15 and 2015/16, more in-house foster carers were de-registered as a foster carer in Hackney (25) than were approved (20) (Table 12).

5.6.9   In 2015/16, there were 15 de-registrations (termination and resignation) from the pool of in-house foster carers in Hackney, which would suggest that the local attrition rate for foster carers was close to 20%, which is higher than the national average (12%). The Fostering Service acknowledge that a number of the de-registrations in recent years were foster carers that were no longer active and willing to take placements, or no longer met the high standards expected from Hackney foster carers. The most recent data however would suggest an improved performance, where there were just 8 de-registrations in 2016/2017 (Table 12).

5.6.10   Further analysis of foster carer application data within Hackney would suggest that the following interventions consistently deliver significant numbers of applications, where in 2016/17:
- Outreach events   - 74 applications received;
- Word of mouth   - 37 applications received;
- Internet/Web page   - 31 applications received;
- Posters   - 24 applications received.

5.6.11   For all local foster carer recruitment and retention metrics, a marked improvement was recorded in 2016/17. This demonstrated:
- A substantial rise in local applications to become a foster carer;

- An increase in the number of approvals;
- A decline in the number of de-registrations (Table 12).

5.6.12   Despite the improved recruitment and retention performance of the Fostering Service in Hackney, it should be noted that the service has not achieved the key recruitment target of 20 newly approved foster carer households per year in any of the 3 previous years (2014/15-2016/17). It will therefore be important to ensure that the upward trend in this performance data continues to 2017/18 and beyond.

5.6.13   The number of applications received from prospective fostering households has increased substantially over the period 2014/15 to 2016/17 (Table 12). In 2016/17 there were 338 foster care applications, which was a 79% increase on the number of applications in 2014/15, this is clearly encouraging and a reflection of the increased recruitment activity by the Fostering Service.

5.6.14   The proportion of the foster care applications that were considered and approved (the conversion rate), has however reduced and is currently around the 5% level (Table 13). The local conversion rate is well below the national conversion rate of 10% (Fostering Network, 2016) and the local recruitment strategy target (also 10%).

Table 13 – Conversion rate for in-house foster care applications (Approved applications divided by number of applications)	
Year	Conversion rate
2014/15	8.4%
2015/16	4.7%
2016/17	5.3%

5.6.15   The low conversion rate would suggest that whilst the service has been successful in increasing the number of foster care applications, further work may be necessary to ensure that such recruitment interventions are more appropriately targeted to reach more suitable foster carer applicants.

5.6.16   More detailed analysis of application data reveals that of 338 enquiries to be a foster carer in Hackney in 2016/17, 244 (72%) were formally closed and did not progress. Analysis of why foster carer applications which were not progressed indicated that housing was a significant issue, where almost of 1/3 (32%) of applications were closed because the applicant did not have sufficient housing capacity to foster a looked after child (Table 14).   A further ¼ (24%) of cases were closed as there was no further contact from the prospective foster carer applicant (Table 14).

Table 14 – Foster carer recruitment data 2016/17		
Analysis of enquiries	No.	%
Closed	244	72
-Due to no spare room	79	32
-Due to no further contact	59	24
On-hold	5	1
Home visit (completed)	61	18
Completed Skills to Foster (Form F)	24	7

In Stage 2 assessment	10	3

Key local recruitment and retention schemes

5.6.17 Hackney Fostering Service operates a number of schemes to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers, the key schemes are presented and discussed below.
- Collaborative approach
- Foster carer banding system
- Foster carers ambassadors
- North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium
- Social Pedagogue
- Mockingbird

Collaborative approach

5.6.18 The Fostering Service in Hackney offers a 'wraparound service offer' to support local in-house foster carers. There is a dedicated team of supervising social workers who work closely with foster carers and children's social workers. The Fostering Service, as with other areas of the Children and Families Service, operates a 'Unit Model' which aims to develop working relationships between practitioners and foster carers. The Fostering Units meet on a weekly basis and discuss the support needs of all foster carers within the unit, meaning that there is always someone in the unit who is able to provide support to foster carers when they need it. A child's social worker can attend the fostering unit meeting and vice versa to ensure wraparound support is provided to the child and foster carer and the Commission heard that this collaborative approach is one of the advantages of an in-house fostering service that is co-located with the wider Children's Social Care Service.

5.6.19 In addition, the Fostering Service offers a network of more specialised support including specialist health services, clinical services and community services offered through Young Hackney (e.g. youth services and opportunities for young people). The nature of support provided is constantly assessed and developed to improve the support offer to local foster carers.

Remuneration and banding of foster carers

5.6.20 As has been presented above (5.4.8) the Fostering Service supports a banded approach to remuneration, where there are 3 levels of in-house foster carers (1, 2 and 3) which are linked to competency, experience and training. Higher levels of experience are linked to higher fees and allowances. To ensure parity and that the authority remains competitive and attractive to foster carers (both existing and new), these fees are benchmarked against other local authorities.

5.6.21 At present, there are just 5 level 3 foster carers in Hackney, and the Fostering Service is looking at innovative ways to support more foster carers to progress from level 1 and 2. This will ensure that foster carers are rewarded for their experience, skills and training that they undertake and this is reflected in levels of remuneration.

Foster Carer Ambassador Scheme

5.6.22 The foster carer Ambassador Scheme uses experienced foster carers from the in-house foster carer pool to promote awareness of the Fostering Service and to support the engagement and recruitment of potential foster carers. In this context, ambassadors attend a range of outreach events to raise awareness of fostering and

to provide potential recruits with first-hand experience and knowledge of the foster carer role. In addition, the scheme allows more experienced foster carers to mentor and support more recent recruits.

5.6.23   It is widely recognised that 'word of mouth' is an important factor in the recruitment of potential foster carers both nationally (Community Care, 2015) and locally (as seen in 5.6.10). At present there are 6 Ambassadors in the Fostering Service in Hackney.

North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium

5.6.24   Along with five other North London Boroughs (Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Haringey and Islington), Hackney is part of the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium. The Consortium works collaboratively to help recruit and train potential foster carers, as well as in commissioning specialised foster care services.

5.6.25   The Consortium also works collaboratively in the placement of looked after children, in which a child from one authority may be placed with a foster carer within another participating authority. This cooperation ensures that looked after children are placed locally, ensures greater use of in-house foster carers and provides a more cost-effective option than IFA alternatives.

5.6.26   The Consortium aims to move away from having 6 different advertising budgets and strategies, but to pool resources more effectively where there is one advert, one website and common training and development programmes for foster carers. Whilst this work is still in development, it is suggested that this approach has many benefits, including:
   ▪ Increased capacity and resources for recruitment of foster carers, particularly to meet specialist needs;
   ▪ Improved efficiency in commissioning and provision of training and development opportunities for in-house foster carers;
   ▪ More effective and efficient commissioning arrangements (specialist foster care options and relations with IFAs);
   ▪ More efficient use of local in-house foster carers, including access to more specialised placement opportunities.

Head, Heart and Hands (Social Pedagogy)

5.6.27   Head, Heart and Hands is a programme of support based on social pedagogy, which aims to translate academic theory into practice. Social pedagogy focuses on supporting foster carers to help children in care build stable and positive relationships, which in turn helps them achieve better outcomes and improve their long term wellbeing. It is based on a blend of academic knowledge (head), an understanding of emotions (heart) and practical daily activities (hands), to help children in care thrive.

5.6.28   To September 2017, 47 in-house foster carers in Hackney have been supported through this programme.

5.7   Evidence from local foster carers

5.7.1   A number of in-house foster carers were invited to attend a focus group with members of the commission to provide feedback on recruitment and retention within Hackney. Although there were just 4 participants, the discussion was insightful, wide ranging and highlighted a number of possible ways to improve local recruitment and retention strategies.

Training support and development

5.7.2   Foster carers present indicated that they had a good relationship with their social workers and found them very supportive to both their foster child and to themselves in their role as a foster carer.

5.7.3   There was broad appreciation of the network of services which were available to support local in-house foster carers, which included training, professional advice and peer support. This range of support was felt to be critical in helping foster carers to manage the complex and varying needs of the children that they looked after.

5.7.4   It was also felt that the range of training and support available to in-house foster carers was better than that offered to those in the IFA sector. Focus group participants indicated that, on the basis of their discussions with foster carers in the IFA sector, there was a perception that training and support was not of the same quality as in-house provision and was more fragmented.

5.7.4.1 The foster carers present outlined the role of Hackney Foster Carers Council (HFCC). This is an independent organisation (funded by the Fostering Service) which aims to ensure that all foster families are well supported by sharing information, providing guidance and offering friendship and opportunities for foster carers to spend time together. The forum enables timely sharing of relevant information and provides foster carers with an opportunity to share their views and help shape the Fostering Service and relevant policies and procedures. HFCC also organises fun trips and activities for Hackney foster families.

Financial support

5.7.4.2 All of those foster carers present, stated that they had become a foster carer as a vocation and through their desire to support local children and that remuneration was not a motivation. It was acknowledged however, that given the current financial pressures on many households, the package of fees and allowances available to support local foster carers could be a factor in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

5.7.5   Whilst acknowledging that greater financial support would always be welcome, there was an acceptance that the current level of financial support available to in-house foster carers within Hackney was sufficient, with a wide range of fees and allowances available to support looked after children, including school-clothing, trips, social activities and holidays. Foster carers also indicated that there was considerable flexibility in the scheme, in that if a sufficient case could be made, then the Fostering Service would generally consider funding a wide range of support.

5.7.6   In their encounters and meetings with foster carers that worked for an IFA, in-house foster carers were able to draw some comparison with the level of remuneration that

they received. Here, in-house foster carers acknowledged that there was a significant disparity between the financial packages offered. In-house foster carers suggested that many IFA foster carers were being remunerated at a level comparable to the most experienced and qualified in-house foster carer (Level 3) in Hackney.

5.7.7   It was felt that this financial disparity could discourage potential foster carers from applying for in-house positions or encourage in-house foster carers to transfer to an IFA provider. Furthermore, as was testified by in-house foster carers in the focus group, it may encourage IFAs to 'poach' recruits from the public (in-house) sector.

Barriers to retention

5.7.8   The focus group discussed possible barriers to recruitment and retention of foster carers. Aside from the package of financial assistance (as discussed above), a number of other barriers were identified by local in-house foster carers which included:
- Not enough placements;
- Lack of information provided to foster carers about placements;
- Lack of support for foster carers when dealing with allegations made against them by looked after children.

5.7.9   A number of foster carers suggested that the lack of placements was a contributory factor within some in-house foster carers decisions to de-register. Here it was noted that some foster carers may be without a placement for long periods of time which left them feeling disengaged and demotivated. Comparatively, foster carers were of the view that foster carers within the IFA sector were given more placements and had less downtime as a foster carer.

5.7.10   Whilst foster carers understood it was of paramount importance to match the skills and experience of foster carers with the needs of looked after children, further developments might be necessary to ensure that foster carers remain engaged with the Fostering Service. Discussions here centred on the need to improve the training and skills of in-house foster carers and to further refine and develop the matching process between foster carers and looked after children.

5.7.11   An allegation is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or another member of the fostering household has or may have behaved in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence against a child or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. In this context, an allegation has to be investigated under local child protection procedures.

5.7.12   In the context of the above, it is important that foster carers have access to independent advice and support to help them understand what can be a very complex and challenging process, and to ensure that their views are represented fairly in proceedings.

5.8   Evidence from the Fostering Network

5.8.1   The Fostering Network, a national policy and development organisation working in this area provided evidence to the Commission. A summary of the key evidence and suggested priorities to improve local recruitment and retention is summarised below.

State of Fostering Survey

5.8.2   The Fostering Network undertake an annual state of fostering survey among foster carers. The most recent survey undertaken in 2016 received over 2,500 responses. The key findings were reported to the Commission:

- There is a perception that the job of foster carer is becoming harder, with children coming in to care later, with more complex needs;

- Given the higher disproportionate number of elderly foster carers, it was estimated that 70% could retire in the next 10 years, as a consequence, there will be an urgent need to recruit new foster carers in the short to medium term;

- Only 42 per cent of foster carers felt their allowance covered the full cost of looking after fostered children. This means that more than half of all foster carers feel they have to cover the cost of looking after the child from their own resources;

- Only a quarter of foster carers described respite support as excellent or good;

- 31 per cent of foster carers reported that they were rarely or never given all of the information about a fostered child prior to placement;

- Improved communication and being treated as a professional within the care team helped develop commitment to the role, yet only a third of foster carers felt that children's social workers treated them as an equal member of the team;

- The provision of individualised training plans is important to foster carer retention, yet 49% of carers had no training plans;

- Formalised training can be a deterrent to potential foster carers, hence the need for individual training plans.

Improving the retention of foster carers

5.8.3   Given the time and resources taken to recruit, train and develop in-house foster carers, the Fostering Network suggested that the retention of existing foster carers should be a priority for local authority fostering services.

5.8.4   It was suggested that research evidence shows that what motivates foster carers to apply and stay with a fostering service was not financial reward, but a sense of their own role and purpose in providing care for a child in need.   In general, as with any other parent, foster carers wanted to make a difference to young people's lives through their own experience.

5.8.5   The Fostering Network noted that being utilised as a foster carer and the support provided to foster carers were important factors in retention. Two schemes were identified which could help to make better use of foster carers and provide additional support:
- Step up – Step Down;
- Mockingbird.

Step Up - Step Down

5.8.6   Step Up Step Down, is based upon the support care fostering model where trained and experienced foster carers provide time-limited, preventative support care to families whose children may be on the periphery of care. The foster carer

role is broadened and expanded to enable the foster carers to work intensively alongside birth families to build their skills, capacity and networks.

5.8.7   This approach gives parents the support of a foster carer who can 'step up' if the family needs additional support and 'step down' when parents are in a better place to support their children. If the family experiences a crisis situation, the child /children can stay with a foster carer for a short period of time, rather than being placed with strangers.

5.8.8   The principle of this project is to use those underutilised foster carers to provide additional family support to children on the edge of the care system which may prevent them becoming a looked after child. This model can also ensure that better use is made of the local pool of in-house foster carers and ensure that they remain engaged and feel valued within the fostering service.

Mockingbird Scheme

5.8.9   The Mockingbird scheme was developed in the USA and has been introduced in the UK by the Fostering Network as an alternative approach to delivering foster care. Mockingbird increases the protective factors around children through the provision of an extended network of family support. It uses the concept of a 'constellation' where between 6 to 10 satellite families of foster and kinship carers live in close proximity to a dedicated home-hub of specially recruited and trained carers offering respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities. This approach provides experienced, on-hand support for foster carers.

5.8.10   The hub empowers families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate, and can offer children a more positive experience of care. The constellation approach can also help to builds links with other families and to other resources in the wider community which can provide children with enhanced opportunities to learn, develop and succeed. The hub also provides additional support to foster carers in caring for looked after children.

Improving the recruitment of foster carers

5.8.11   The Fostering Network noted that whilst Local Authorities had improved recruitment strategies, they generally needed to create more nuanced messages to ensure that such strategies focused on those foster carers who had the right skills and experience to meet the needs of their local looked after child population. Whilst there was a place for more generalised recruitment programmes, greater focus was needed to recruit those foster carers who had the right skills and experience to look after, for example, teenagers, children with complex needs, and parent and child placements.

5.8.12   The Fostering Network noted that there were some good examples of really targeted recruitment which had been successful in engaging and recruiting foster carers needed. It was noted that Coventry and Hertfordshire had developed focused campaigns, for siblings and for children with additional needs respectively, which had yielded very positive outcomes.

5.8.13   It was noted that many potential foster carers do not feel confident, or think they have the right skills or training to be able to foster a child and so local fostering agencies need to challenge the traditional narrative around foster carer recruitment. It was suggested that for too long recruitment has been driven by traditional narrative of what

a fostering family should look like, which potentially excludes many suitably qualified and experienced households who could offer care for a looked after child.

5.8.14   In this context, recruitment strategies need to broaden out to encompass non-traditional foster carer recruits such as single people, younger people, people with no history of child raising and people from the LGBTQi community.   Research demonstrated that young people empathise with younger carers better and this may help with successful placements. The same applies to single people, including single men who traditionally might not see themselves as a potential foster carer.

5.8.15   It was also suggested that it was important to make clear within recruitment strategies, that fostering was not a solitary activity where foster carers were left to cope with a looked after child in isolation.   It was important to ensure that recruitment clearly communicated the support which is available to foster carers, not only professionally, but through peers and other less formal sources.

5.9   Evidence from other LA's

5.9.1   A representative from the LB of Islington fostering and adoption service attended and gave evidence to the Commission on recruitment and retention within that borough.   It was noted that within the LB Islington:
- There were 171 in-house fostering households;
- 251 children moved through the fostering service in 2016/17;
- Of those Islington looked after children who are fostered, 56% were with an in-house foster carer, 31% with an IFA provider and 14% were with a family or friend carer;
- The service worked with 14 different IFAs to support the needs of looked after children.

Improving retention of foster carers
5.9.2   In respect of retention, the support provided to foster carers was of paramount importance, in particular that offered through foster carer peers. A key approach within Islington was the provision of facilitated support groups which enabled foster carers to come together, share their concerns and experiences and to support each other. The groups are offered on a specialism basis (such as those supporting teenagers) and were very successful.

5.9.3   Ensuring that foster carers were engaged and utilised was also perceived to be important in the retention of foster carers in Islington. Here it was noted fostering opportunities were maximised for the in-house pool of foster carers by offering such placements to children from other local authorities if there were no suitable matches with looked after children in Islington. This was primarily undertaken through the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium.

5.9.4   Maximising opportunities for in-house foster carers not only kept carers engaged, but also helped to build and extend skills, knowledge and experience which would increase placement opportunities in the future. In addition, this approach also helped to develop an income stream which could further support other fostering services.

Improved recruitment

5.9.5   Islington is also a member of the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium. It was felt that given the relatively small scale of fostering services within each authority, cross borough cooperation through the consortium offered the most effective and efficient way to support improvement to fostering services.

5.9.6   It was felt that there was considerable duplication across the boroughs in seeking to recruit foster carers, and that recruitment through the Consortium would offer considerable benefits, not only in terms of economies of scale, but also allowing for more targeted recruitment which may be more difficult and expensive for one borough to undertake alone.

5.9.7   With the Consortium, there is one brand, one message, one direction and one reputation to maintain and this approach should be developed further among participating Councils. Whilst accepting there will always be a need for more bespoke recruitment at the local level to reflect local needs, opportunities to pool resources and work more effectively together offered significant benefits.

Relationship with IFA's

5.9.8   In Islington, 58% of looked after children in foster placements were cared for through an in-house foster carer and 31% were with an IFA. The Commission were keen to understand why these figures were converse to that recorded in Hackney (where 2/3 were placed with an IFA). It was noted that some 10 years back Islington was in a similar position to Hackney, where almost 2/3 of foster care placements were made with an IFA. Given the financial pressures of outsourcing and the difficulty of engaging with such a large number of IFA providers, the service made a number of changes to turn this position around.

5.9.9   The fostering of more teenagers within the in-house foster carer service was identified to be critical to turning this issue around, as it had become commonplace to place such looked after children with an IFA carer. The service embarked on a training and development programme of staff within the fostering service to challenge views about teenage fostering and to ensure that they were confident talking about teenage issues, such as sex, drugs and challenging behaviours.

5.9.10   A similar programme was devised for in-house foster carers, to raise awareness of the needs of teenage looked after children and how these could be supported locally. It was hoped that this approach would encourage in-house foster carers to be more open to fostering a teenager.

5.9.11   The Commission noted that Islington also operates a specialist fostering scheme (similar to Camden) which seeks to recruit foster carers who can provide specialist support to children with particularly challenging behaviour. In this scheme, foster carers are paid £750-800 a week which is substantially more than others within the in-house pool. This in-house service can help prevent looked after children being placed with an IFA foster carer or in a more secure setting.

5.9.12   The Commission also noted that Islington had significantly increased the proportion of looked after children that were being cared for by other family members or family friends through connected fostering. This had also contributed to a reduction in the portion of foster care placements made with an IFA.

<u>Housing</u>

5.9.13   Like many other London boroughs, housing is a significant issue for foster carers in Islington. In recognition of this, Islington provide additional support to fostering households that are overcrowded to help them get re-housed into larger accommodation.

5.9.14   Foster carers living with an adult child may be restricted from taking on a further placement as there is insufficient space within the home. Therefore in Islington, fostering capacity can be created where the adult child is allowed on a priority list for new accommodation, which can reduce overcrowding and releases a bed for a new foster child within the household.

5.10   Evidence from IFA's

5.10.1   The Commission received evidence from the National Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP), the representative trade body for independent fostering agencies in both the for-profit and voluntary sector. NAFP represents over 100 IFAs. The Commission also heard evidence from Anchor, an individual IFA provider. Anchor works with approximately 80 foster carers across London and the south east of England, including those caring for Hackney looked after children.

<u>Improving retention</u>

5.10.2   The Commission noted that given the level of resource devoted to recruitment, IFAs were keen to ensure that recruited foster carers were retained within their service. In terms of retention, maintaining a low vacancy rate was perceived to be of critical importance as this kept foster carers sufficiently engaged, motivated and recompensed. Anchor noted that its vacancy rate was low, at about 8%, which was well below the national average of about 20% (Narey and Offers, 2018).

5.10.3   Peer support was also identified to be key to the retention of foster carers. Here it was noted that peer support mechanisms, as offered through a buddy system for example, provided accessible, informed advice to foster carers at the front line.

5.10.4   Also cited as important to foster carer retention, and possibly related to the level of support provided to foster carers, was ensuring the stability of foster care placements for looked after children. There are clearly many factors associated with placement stability, including ensuring that carer and looked after child are appropriately matched and both parties are provided with adequate support, but this is clearly of benefit to both parties and when matching is successful and contributes to the retention of foster carers.

<u>Improving recruitment</u>

5.10.5   As has been noted within other evidence presented to the Commission, the needs of looked after children within individual foster care agencies should be central to the recruitment strategy of that agency. Failure to adopt this approach will create a mismatch between the skills and expertise of foster carers and the needs of looked after children, which will limit opportunity for successful matches or lead to more disrupted placements.

5.10.6   Within this approach, IFA representatives indicated that it was important to be frank with foster carers and acknowledge that the majority of looked after children placed with the IFA sector were teenagers, many of whom had multiple and complex needs or challenging behaviours. This ensured that the expectations of foster carers were aligned to the needs of looked after children.

5.10.7   It was also noted that in terms of recruitment marketing, IFAs had generally moved away away from traditional advertising mediums (hard print in newspapers or in public transport settings) to on-line focused recruitment. This was supplemented by outreach work in areas of high footfall, which allowed officers to meet potential recruits face-to-face, and allowed them an opportunity to speak to existing foster carers in person.

5.10.8   IFAs acknowledged that word of mouth was very important in recruitment strategies, and where possible this was incorporated into recruitment processes.   Thus, (like the LA sector), IFAs also offered financial incentives to existing foster carers who could assist recruitment. In addition, within Anchor, all potential foster carers attend a 'warts and all session' with foster carers, so recruits are clear about the nature of the task and role before the recruitment process actually begins.

IFA relationship with LA

5.10.9   It was suggested that whilst there were evidently examples of good partnership working between individual IFAs and local authorities, in general, the level of collaboration across the sector could be improved. It was suggested that there were two areas where there could be greater collaboration:
   ▪ Specialist recruitment;
   ▪ Ensuring children are placed locally (Leeds Project).

5.10.10 Collaborative working within recruitment recognised that different agencies, across both sectors, serve the needs of different pools of looked after children, and that potential applicants with specific skills sets, might be best placed working for a particular agency more than another. To some degree advertising by different agencies cross subsidises and supports recruitment across the sector as a whole, but it was suggested that it would be helpful to develop a more collaborative approach to recruitment which filters potential recruits to the most suitable agency.

Leeds Collaborative scheme

5.10.11 There was broad consensus, that keeping looked after children as close to home as possible was beneficial in that it allowed children to enjoy existing social and familial networks, and allowed for more coordinated support from fostering agencies. The NAFP identified a scheme in Leeds in which both the IFA and LA sectors collaborated to ensure that children were placed locally. Thus the placing authority would first check in-house provision availability within the area, but if none were available, then would check with providers within the IFA sector who might have availability in that locality.

5.11   Feedback from foster children

5.11.1   Members of the Commission met with a number of local looked after children from Hackney Gets Heard, Hackney's Children in Care Council, who are cared for by foster carers. This was an informal meeting at which the retention and recruitment of foster carers was discussed, from which looked after children made a number of relevant points to this review.

- There was a perception among some looked after children that support systems in place for foster carers within the IFA sector were not as developed or as encompassing as those provided to in-house foster carers.

- Looked after children noted that limited housing capacity was a significant barrier to foster care, and that more could be done to help improve the housing options and capabilities of current and future foster carers.

- To improve placement stability and better outcomes for young people, further developments could be made to the matching process. In particular, looked after children indicated that it would be helpful to have pre-meeting with foster carers ahead of any new placements starting.

Finally, looked after children suggested that it would be helpful to have greater recognition and representation of their views on local fostering bodies, and if possible, increased representation on the local Fostering Panel.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1 Retention

<u>De-registration</u>

6.1.1   National data suggested that in 2015/16, the total number of fostering households that de-registered was 4,610, which equated to about 11% of all fostering households (Narey & Owers, 2018). With the number of children entering care continuing to rise, this places additional pressures on fostering agencies to recruit and retain more fostering households.

6.1.2   Local data would suggest that the rate of foster carer de-registration is similar to the national figure, in which 8-15 foster carers de-registered each year in Hackney in the period 2014/15-2016/17 (see 5.6.7). Although the most recent figures suggest that the number of de-registrations appears to be on a downward trajectory, this should be carefully monitored and assessed by the Fostering Service to ensure that this trend continues.

6.1.3   Evidence presented to the Commission would suggest that there may be many varied reasons why foster carers de-register from a fostering agency. Evidence from local foster carers and from national research suggest that the following reasons are often contributory factors in a carer's decision to de-register:
- Pressures and challenges of the foster care role;
- Lack of formal or informal support to help them manage their foster carer role;
- Insufficient training and development opportunities;
- Not being given sufficient placements;
- Insufficient respite;
- Inadequate support provided when facing allegations.

6.1.4   By default, these very reasons should be central to any foster carer retention strategy. Research has indicated that when foster carers believe that they are receiving adequate preparation and training, respite, timely crisis intervention, and they have a

sense of being valued and respected by the agency, they are more likely to continue to foster (DfE, 2017a).

<u>Training and support</u>

6.1.5   Without doubt, the foster care role has become more challenging. The nature of children entering the care system has changed where looked after children are now more likely to be older, teenagers, many with complex needs or challenging behaviours. In this context, the nature and level of support available to foster carers is now critical to the effective provision of foster placements.

6.1.6   Fostering agencies must ensure that there is an appropriate training and development package for foster carers to ensure that they have the necessary skills and expertise to look after children placed within their care.   In particular, training and development packages for in-house foster carers should reflect the demography and care needs of local looked after children (e.g. teenagers) to ensure that foster carers are equipped to deal with the needs of these children.

6.1.7   The Fostering Network, in evidence to this Commission, emphasised that foster carers enter the role from varying backgrounds and with a range of skills and expertise. In this context, it was important for fostering agencies to provide training and development programmes that were based on an individual assessment of that foster carer's needs. This approach helps ensures that training is relevant and helps keep carers engaged and involved with the service.

6.1.8   In the context of the above, the Commission were aware of the need to progress, train and develop Hackney's in-house pool of foster carers given that as of 2017, just 5 (6%) were at level 3. Whilst accepting that progression is determined by experience as well as training and development, further work could be undertaken to encourage and support more level 1 and 2 foster carers to develop and advance.

6.1.9   The complexities and challenges within each foster carer role may mean that support may need to be provided in ways which are varied, flexible and responsive to the needs of that placement. In this context, support provided by fostering agencies will need to be a mixture of formal (professional) and informal (peer) sources and available in a way which is accessible to foster carers and when they may be likely to need it (e.g. regular social worker meetings, 24/7 help lines, support groups).

6.1.10   Evidence to the Education Select Committee would suggest that the provision of informal peer support is often overlooked by fostering agencies, despite this being highly valued by foster carers themselves. Expert evidence to the Committee suggested that foster carers needed an informal outlet where they could vent their anxieties or concerns in an environment where they were not being assessed or judged, or where what was said could impact on future placements of looked after children (House of Commons, 2017).

6.1.11   The Commission noted that there were a number of local forums, including Hackney Foster Carer Council through which foster carers could obtain peer support, but were keen to ensure that further opportunities were maximised. It was felt that the foster carer's ambassador scheme in which more experienced foster carer are able to provide additional peer support to in-house foster carers could be extended. In addition, it was noted that the approach taken with the proposed development of the

Mockingbird Scheme could also deliver improved and accessible peer support on the ground to foster carers (see 5.8.9).

Intelligence Gathering

6.1.12   Comprehensive and insightful intelligence as to the needs and preferences of local foster carers is central to their retention within the service. To this end, foster carers should be *formally* and *regularly* consulted on various aspects of service provision, including (for example) the nature and level of support provided, remuneration and training and development needs. Armed with this intelligence, the Fostering Service will be better equipped to respond to any new and emerging needs of foster carers, and ensure that they are well supported and committed to the service.

Exit interviews

6.1.13   A majority of de-registrations recorded for 2015/16 were initiated by foster carers themselves rather than the fostering agency (Ofsted, 2017), therefore the reasons behind their departure may not always be clear. Yet to understand retention, fostering agencies must know why foster carers de-register from their service.

6.1.14   Evidence from the Fostering Network's benchmark survey suggests however, that just 5% of foster carers who deregistered in 2016 were given an exit interview (Fostering Network 2016). In this context, local fostering services may not fully grasp the reasons behind this decision and not be able to identify patterns or trends behind such departures and make any necessary service adjustments and improvements.

6.1.15   On average, 11 foster carers a year have deregistered in Hackney over the period 2014/15-2016/17 (see 5.6.7). Whilst the number of foster carers that de-register each year appears to be on a downwards trend, the departure of each foster carer represents a significant loss to the service, and it is therefore important that the borough captures and understands the reasons behind why a carer may choose to de-register.

Remuneration

6.1.16   Foster carers are entitled to national minimum allowances (see 5.3.15), which are often supplemented by additional payments and grants that are determined and agreed locally. As a consequence, the amount paid by a local authority to an individual foster carer will vary considerably depending on a range of factors including, for example, the age of the child and their specific needs, the type of fostering provided, the carer's skills and capabilities, and length of service.

6.1.17   Many authorities, including Hackney, operate a tiered system of remuneration which is linked to foster carers skills and abilities and which underpins a local payment structure (see (5.4.8). This approach to remuneration has been strongly endorsed within national reviews (Narey & Owers, 2018).

6.1.18   National research would appear to suggest that financial reward is not an important motivation for fostering (Narey & Owers, 2018; Sebba, 2012), a position which has been validated locally in the Commission's consultation with foster carers. Where a number of local foster carers have indicated that they have not received sufficient number of placements however, financial consideration may be an issue for retention.

6.1.19   In its biennial survey in 2016, the Fostering Network found that just 42% of foster carers thought their allowance covered the costs of fostering, a considerable fall from the figure (80%) obtained two years earlier (The Fostering Network, 2017a). In light of this fostering services do need to be alert to the wider financial climate (inflation, benefit entitlements, cost of living) and the financial impact that this may have on the foster carer role.   In this context, it is important that local fostering services continue to benchmark their package of remuneration against other local providers to ensure that this is up to date and does not place the authority at any competitive disadvantage in terms of recruitment or retention.

Respite
6.1.20   As many children are coming into care much later and with more complex needs, the role of fostering had become more challenging (The Fostering Network, 2017). In this context, fostering agencies should ensure that sufficient respite is provided for foster carers. National data however, would suggest that the provision of respite support to foster carers could be improved, where just 1 in 4 foster carers indicated that the level of local respite provision was 'good' or better (The Fostering Network, 2017).

Handling allegations against foster carers
6.1.22   An allegation is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or another member of the fostering household has or may have behaved in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence against a child or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. Allegations are more serious than general complaints and have to be investigated under local child protection procedures.

6.1.23   Facing an allegation of abuse or neglect is something that some foster carers may experience during their fostering career. This can be distressing for foster carers, looked after children and everyone connected with the fostering household. Evidence given to the Commission suggested that a number of foster carers had left the service because of the stress and anxiety associated with an allegation investigation.   To ensure that foster carers are properly supported through this investigative process and that they remain engaged with the service should the allegation be unproven, the Commission supported the view of the Fostering Network that foster carers should have access to independent advice and support throughout the investigation.

6.2   Recruitment

Sufficiency
6.2.1   Analysis of national data has consistently underlined the need to recruit more foster carers. National data has indicated that:
   ▪ The number of children entering care has increased incrementally year on year since 2012:
   ▪ 10-12% of the existing pool of foster carers de-register each year;
   ▪ There is a skewed demography of foster carers in which there is a higher representation of those aged 50 years and above.

6.2.2   Shortages of foster carers is not a new concept, indeed this has been a feature of the sector for a number of years, but the demographic profile of existing foster carers could mean increased pressure on recruitment and retention for future years. The profile of the foster care pool is skewed to those over 50, which means that very experienced,

longstanding carers will approach retirement soon and may prove difficult to replace (Fostering Network, 2016).

6.2.3   Ensuring that there are a sufficient number of skilled foster carers is important to improving outcomes for children and young people, in that this allows local fostering services more choice in seeking the best placement to meet the needs of the child. Each local authority is legally required to publish a sufficiency statement outlining how it will meet the placement needs of looked-after children in its care.

6.2.4   Despite this requirement, national data has concluded that despite the provision of local sufficiency plans, the quality of forward planning for foster carer sufficiency is not well developed in many local authorities. This analysis would suggest that there is generally little attempt by local authorities to model what future needs may be beyond the short term (DfE, 2017a).

6.2.5   Hackney Children and Families Service publishes a comprehensive sufficiency strategy to ensure that there is sufficient placements to care for the needs of looked after children. This strategy provides a wide ranging evidence base to help forecast accommodation needs, contains a number of targets and objectives to support these needs and is accompanied by an associated action plan.

6.2.6   Local recruitment strategies have underlined the need to attract highly skilled and competent carers to the local in-house foster carer pool, which may have impacted on the number of new recruits it has been able to attract. Although the Fostering Service has a target to recruit 20 new foster carers each year, it has not reached this for the past 3 years. This underperformance in local recruitment was acknowledged and had contributed to the position where there were substantially fewer in-house foster carers in Hackney in relation to comparator boroughs. Whilst the focus of recruitment should always be to attract highly skilled and competent foster carers, it is clear that local recruitment should be up-scaled to reflect local needs.

6.2.7   Recruitment of foster carers is challenging. There are 152 local authorities and 295 registered IFAs all competing against one another to recruit foster carers. This is all undertaken in an entirely unplanned and a competitive way, in which individual agencies vie for the attention of prospective carers, which increases the costs of marketing and ultimately the costs of fostering (Narey and Offers, 2018).

On-line presence

6.2.8   Evidence presented to the Commission from local officers suggested that there was a need to further develop the on-line presence of the Fostering Service to help improve awareness and support recruitment. At present, there was no dedicated resource for on-line communications and all publicity and promotion through this medium was handled through the central communications team.   As communications were presented through council wide platforms (Facebook and Twitter) alongside other council wide content, opportunities for service promotion and recruitment for the Fostering Service were restricted.

6.2.9   In its investigation in to fostering, the Education Select Committee also noted that the use of the internet and social media were important to help maintain the profile of local fostering services and to assist in recruitment (House of Commons, 2018).   In

particular, the dominance of on-line search engines was noted to be a central point of information gathering and onwards referral for prospective foster carers.

6.2.10 It should be acknowledged however, that many children's services might not have the capacity or expertise required to provide 24-7 oversight for dedicated web pages or to manage and update internet content as would be required by a dedicated on-line presence. It may be possible to provide such a service collaboratively with other local authorities. It is noted that the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium already supports a dedicated website, so it may be possible to extend this to other on-line and social media platforms if this was collaboratively resourced.

Speed of response to enquiries

6.2.11 The number of applications to become a foster carer in Hackney has grown by 80% since 2014/15 (see 5.6.7). Whilst this is encouraging, it is important that such enquiries are handled in an efficient and responsive manner to ensure that prospective applicants remain interested and engaged.

6.2.12 Evidence presented to the Commission from the Education Select Committee suggested that response times to initial enquiries to become a foster carer were an important factor within successful recruitment strategies, particularly within the IFA sector (House of Commons , 2017). It is suggested that there should be a dedicated team to provide timely responses to such enquiries.

Key features of recruitment strategy

6.2.13 There has been much research on the effectiveness of foster carer recruitment strategies for which there is a general concurrence around those features which should figure within it. These are summarised below.

- Evidence to this review consistently stated that foster carer recruitment strategies should be informed and directed by a **needs analysis** of placement requirements of looked after children. This will determine the skills, experience and fostering preferences needed from foster carers which should underpin and focus local recruitment strategies. In the Hackney context this will mean recruiting more foster carers who have the skills, experience and preference to care for teenagers, some of whom may have complex needs.

- Similarly, evidence to the Education Select Committee has highlighted that those authorities that perform well at recruiting and retaining foster carers are those that have **sound data and intelligence** about their foster carers and their looked after children. Those authorities that regularly consult and evaluate their service know where their gaps are and what aspects are performing well and those that are not. These authorities know what foster carers and looked after children are telling them and are able to respond accordingly and make it clear to potential foster carers or to children what they can offer (Evidence to Education Select Committee, 2017).

- There is a constant need to adapt the profile of those coming into fostering to the complexity of the needs of local looked after children. This would indicate that foster carer recruitment processes should focus specifically on attracting **'multi-skilled specialists'** who are capable of supporting the varied and complex needs of foster children.

- Word of mouth was also consistently recognised as an important tool in foster carer recruitment strategies, as this provided prospective carers with an opportunity to understand first-hand what the foster care role might entail, how the role impacts on children and the satisfaction that is obtained from the role.

- Evidence to this review noted that many potential foster carers do not feel confident, or feel that they have the right skills or training to be able to foster a child. Thus fostering agencies need to **challenge the traditional narrative** around foster carer recruitment strategies so that these encompass non-traditional foster carer recruits such as single people, younger people, people with no history of raising children and people from the LGBTQi+ community.

6.3 Increasing the council wide offer to Foster Carers

6.3.1 When a child comes into care, the Council becomes the Corporate Parent. As 'Corporate Parent' it is the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies to provide the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by the Council. In this context, the Council should ensure that each foster carer looking after a local child in care is well supported through the range of corporate services be this housing, local taxation, leisure services or any other service within its control.

6.3.2 By increasing the corporate offer to foster carers, this will better support them in their role and extend the range of support for looked after children. In addition, increasing the corporate offer may also increase the appeal of the foster carer role which in turn may assist retention and recruitment strategies.

6.3.3 Evidence presented to the review highlighted a number of areas of need which could be assisted by a broader corporate offer to foster carers. These included:
- Housing - need for larger properties;
- Financial assistance;
- Access to local services and support.

Housing Schemes

6.3.4 Throughout the review, wide ranging evidence was collected to suggest that there were a number of barriers to the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers. These barriers focused on a lack of housing capacity of foster carers which restricted opportunities to care for local looked after children. For example, experienced foster carers who were approved for 2 children but had only 1 spare room, or those foster carers already caring for a care leaver who has stayed in the same placement after they have turned 18 through the staying put scheme.

6.3.5 Providing additional housing capacity to local in-house foster carers can help provide additional placements for local looked after children and make better use of the in-house pool of foster carers. By increasing the housing capacity of a foster carer can be viewed as the equivalent of recruiting an additional foster carer (and thereby reducing associated costs).

6.3.6 The Commission noted evidence from Islington (see 5.9.12-13) and Camden, both of which run housing schemes to support further local in-house fostering. Both boroughs

run schemes to established fostering families who, if offered a larger accommodation, could care for a looked after child in priority need (e.g. a teenager).

6.3.7   In Camden, 10 large properties (2-4 bedrooms) properties are set aside each year for the fostering service to enable foster carers to up-size and care for more looked after children. In Islington, adult children within a fostering household are placed on a priority list for rehousing which can then free up additional capacity for the foster carer to support a placement for a looked after child.

6.3.8   The Commission noted that a similar small scale housing project was being piloted within Hackney which had allowed one fostering family to up-size their accommodation. The Commission were of the view that this work could be developed further with reference to the Camden and Islington approaches.

Council Tax reduction scheme

6.3.9   Analysis of the package of support for in-house foster carers in other boroughs would suggest that a number offer council tax reduction schemes to reduce the financial burden on foster carers and to promote local recruitment and retention strategies. A summary of three such schemes, two of which are in neighbouring boroughs, are given below:
   ▪ **Redbridge:** all foster carers are entitled to a 60% reduction in local council tax;
   ▪ **Waltham Forest**: level 1 and 2 foster carers are eligible for a 33% discount and level 3 50% discount; an additional discount is provided for particular placements (e.g. teenagers) and; a retainer fee is paid to in-house foster carers who reside outside the borough (Waltham Forest, 2017).
   ▪ **Liverpool:** all foster carers receive a 100% reduction in local council tax.

6.3.10   Whilst it is acknowledged that the introduction of such a scheme in Hackney would require additional financing and the potential loss of income from council tax revenues would have to be off-set, this could be recouped if this led to increased recruitment and retention of foster carers. In the Liverpool scheme, it was suggested that the cost of operating the scheme would be offset if this resulted in a 3% increase in in-house foster carers (Liverpool CC, 2017).

6.3.11   It was acknowledged that the Council had just recently reviewed its Council Tax Reduction Scheme, and that any amendments would have to be considered as part of the next re-assessment (in 2020).

6.4   Making best use of the existing pool of in-house foster carers

6.4.1   As well as recruiting and retaining in-house foster carers, the Commission noted evidence which would suggest that better use could be made of in-house foster carers. There may be many genuine reasons why foster carers do not receive a placement, including that their skills do not meet the needs of the children requiring placements at that time. But in its discussions with local foster carers, it was noted that a number of foster carers had left the service as it was felt that they had not received sufficient placements.

6.4.2   The foster carer vacancy rate for Hackney was approximately 15% in 2015, which indicates that about 13 foster carers were without a placement at any one time (see 5.4.14). The vacancy rate in Hackney however, is far lower than the national average

of 23% (2016). Nonetheless, it is clear that improved management of vacancies could help to ensure foster carers do not spend too long without a placement; something which could leave them demotivated or disengaged.

6.4.3   In evidence it received, the Commission noted a number of ways in which better use could be made of the in-house pool of foster carers in Hackney. Most importantly, it is essential that the in-house pool of foster carers are equipped with the right skills and experience to meet the needs of local looked after children, in particular looking after teenagers or those with challenging behaviour. In this context, it is important that in-house foster carers are provided with training which can allow them to expand their preferences and skills to those that reflect the needs of looked after children in Hackney.

6.4.4   Teenagers have a very poor media image and it is important that the Fostering Service and the wider Council take steps to improve the image of working with this group of young people. In this context, the Commission heard from a number of sources that indicated that it was important to change the dialogue with foster carers about teenagers to demonstrate that working with this group can be very positive and rewarding and that they can have a very beneficial impact on young people's lives.

6.4.5   Evidence presented to the Commission also suggested that there were a number of schemes which if implemented or expanded, could also make better use of the in-house pool of foster carers. These included:
  ▪ Offering of placements across the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium;
  ▪ Implementation of Step Up-Step Down;
  ▪ Foster Carers Ambassadors scheme.

6.4.6   To make better use of in-house foster carers, Islington fostering service offer vacancies throughout boroughs participating within the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium. This kept foster carers engaged, as well as developed an income stream to the service. The Commission suggested that this approach could be explored further within Hackney.

6.4.7   Step Up Step Down, is operated by the Fostering Network in Northern Ireland. In this approach, highly trained and experienced foster carers provide time limited, preventative support to families where the children are on the periphery of entering the care system. Thus the foster carer role is broadened to enable the foster carers to work intensively alongside birth families to build their skills, capacity and networks and prevent children entering care.

6.4.8   There are currently 6 foster carer ambassadors in Hackney who are experienced and skilled foster carers who undertake a range of support and promotion functions within the fostering service. The Commission were of the view that, with suitable training and development, this service could be expanded to provide peer support to foster carers as well as assisting in recruitment events.

6.5   Relationship with IFAs

6.5.1   The relationship between the IFA and LA foster sectors is undoubtedly complex. With 152 local authorities and 295 registered IFA's competing to recruit foster carers there

are clearly tensions between these agencies, with some IFAs reported to be offering up to £3,000 as a 'golden hello' to in-house foster carers that transfer. In addition, there are tensions around the cost of using foster carers in the IFA sector as these are more than double that of in-house foster carers (see 5.4.10). The cost of IFAs is of particular concern in Hackney as almost 2/3 of all foster care placements are made within this sector (see 5.4.9), and annual foster care spend on IFA foster carers is four times that spent on in-house foster carers (see 5.4.12).

6.5.2   There is also a concern that there is some shrinkage in the number of IFA providers which has led to reduced competition in this sector. As a result, this may lead to reduced choice and increased costs to fostering agencies seeking to place looked after children in this sector. (The Guardian, 2018).

6.5.3   Although not the determining factor, the cost of foster carer placements is clearly a strategy consideration for local fostering services that are under considerable budgetary pressures. It has been estimated that local fostering services could save around £150m per year by making greater use of local in-house fostering services (Impower, 2014). It is clearly more cost effective to recruit and retain in-house provision than commission services within the IFA sector.

6.5.4   This review also noted that despite many IFA's being rated as good by Ofsted, there were local concerns around the quality of some individual foster care placements within this sector. This was also verified at the national level in submissions made to the Fostering Stocktake by the Local Government Association, (LGA, 2017). Whilst there are a number of tools and processes to benchmark costs across different providers, there is very little evidence or any tools to assess the quality or outcomes of foster care placements. It is clear that such additional information is needed to guide and inform commissioning arrangements with fostering agencies.

6.5.5   Nonetheless, despite these concerns, foster carers working for an IFA provider make up 1/3 of all looked after placements nationally. It is also apparent that IFAs are more likely to look after those children with more complex needs or challenging behaviours (Narey & Offers, 2018). In this context there has to be a level of cooperation and collaborative working across the sectors to ensure that both sectors work efficiently and effectively together to meet the needs of looked after children.

6.5.6   Evidence presented to the Commission from an IFA representative body suggested that greater collaboration across the sectors could be of benefit in helping to ensure more looked after children are placed locally. The Leeds Project involved local children's services working with local IFAs to place children within that local authority where they could maintain access to existing social support networks and enable local officers to better support them. Given that just 1/3 of children in foster care are placed in Hackney, the Commission were of the view that such an arrangement with IFAs should be explored locally.

6.5.7   To support collaborative working, the Commission is also in agreement with the LGA that clearer joint working protocols between IFAs and councils could help to address issues around cost and quality. Such protocols would offer a constructive way to

negotiate such complex issues which would be of benefit to all parties and ensure that children are able to access the right placement at the right time.

6.5.8   There is also scope for improved co-operation between IFAs and councils for improved commissioning of services. Analysis of commissioning arrangements by local fostering services suggested that many local authorities continue to use a 'spot purchase model' to acquire foster care placements for looked after children which does not allow either the IFA or the local authority to predict and plan for placements and often failed to recognise the needs of the looked after child (DfE, 2017a). The Commission were of the view that a review of local commissioning arrangements could help to make a more effective partnership between the independent providers and the LB Hackney.

6.6   North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium

6.6.1   Given the speciality of fostering services, the numbers of children involved and the relative size of local authorities, collaborative partnerships across the sector represent a logical way in which to develop effective and efficient services. The Commission heard evidence from local officers from both Hackney and Islington to support this view, and noted the development of the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium.

6.6.2   Officers indicated that collaborative working among 6 north London local authorities had helped to pool resources and expertise to improve both recruitment and training of foster carers. It was suggested that collaboration through the Consortium offered significant advantages for the recruitment of foster carers in that this allowed authorities to pool resources and project one brand and one message. This approach also allowed authorities to undertake more specialised recruitment which might be difficult for one authority to undertake by themselves. It was also noted that similar arrangements had been developed for training foster carers across the partnership.

6.6.3   Evidence presented to the Education Select Committee also supported the collaborative partnerships across local authorities in the provision of fostering services, an approach which is endorsed in the final report (House of Commons, 2017). To this end, the Commission were of the view that LB Hackney should explore further ways to engage and develop its relationship with members of the Consortium to identify further opportunities to support effective commissioning of services (recruitment and training) and ways to work more effectively with the IFA sector.

6.7   Education Select Committee & Fostering Stocktake

6.7.1   A number of national reviews of fostering have taken place to coincide with the review of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission investigation here in Hackney. Whilst the Commission has had sight of the evidence submitted to these reviews, actual reports and recommendations were not reported until after the Commission had completed its work.

Education Select Committee, Fostering House of Commons 2016/17

6.7.2   The House of Commons Education Select Committee commenced a review of fostering in the 2016/17 parliamentary session. The aim of this review was to see how foster carers, children and providers could best be supported. The review looked at:

- The recruitment and retention of foster carers;
- Stability of foster care placements;
- The role of voluntary and independent foster care providers, and their relationships and cooperation with local authorities;
- The foster care market, including the costs of commissioning of services and financial incentives in the recruitment of foster carers;
- The sufficiency of support and recompense given to foster carers.

6.7.3   The Committee invited written submissions to support its investigation, and held two evidence gathering sessions in January and March 2017. Following the dissolution of Parliament on 3 May 2017 however, all Select Committees ceased to exist and the inquiry closed. The inquiry continued in September 2017, and held a further two evidence gathering sessions to supplement the 40 written submissions to this inquiry from a range of agencies, local government and academics in the fostering field.

6.7.3   The Committee have produced a report based on the evidence received: *Fostering* (House of Commons, 2017). It makes a number of recommendations in relation to recruitment and retention:
- That all foster carers should be paid the national minimum allowance;
- High quality training materials should be developed for foster carers;
- The establishment of a national college to support foster carers;
- Introduce a national recruitment awareness and recruitment campaign that targets those with skills needed (looking after children with complex needs) and includes non-traditional groups.

6.7.4   The report was published too late to be presented and analysed in this review, however, it should be considered by the fostering service when it presents an update to the Commission in the future.

Narey Review (Fostering Review 'National Stocktake')
6.7.5   The Department of Education commissioned Sir Martin Narey to undertake a national stocktake of fostering services across England. This was a wide ranging review which encompassed all areas of fostering provision, including:
- Making fostering more effective;
- Financial rewards and compensation to foster carers;
- Recruitment and retention;
- Commissioning;
- Matching.

6.7.6   The Narey Report (Narey & Owers, 2018) makes a number of recommendations in relation to recruitment and retention of foster carers which include:
- Supporting the establishment of a national register of foster carers to help carers switch between providers more easily;
- Endorsing more regional cooperation in recruitment campaigns;
- Urging all LA's to review the way in which foster carer applications are handled to improve efficiency and quality of responses;
- The greater use of exit interviews by fostering agencies.

6.7.7   Again, the report was published too late to be presented and analysed in this review, however, it should be considered by the Fostering Service when it presents an update to the Commission in the future.

6.8   Mockingbird

6.8.1   The Commission heard evidence from The Fostering Network on a new supportive approach to foster care which was being trialled at a number of authorities. Mockingbird is an alternative method of delivering foster care with the potential to improve placement stability, safety and permanency for children and young people in care and to improve support for, and retention of, foster carers.

6.8.2   The Commission heard that Mockingbird increases the protective factors around children through the provision of an extended network of family support. It uses the concept of a hub and spoke model where 6 to 10 satellite fostering households live in close proximity to a dedicated hub home of specially recruited and trained carers offering respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities. The hub empowers families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate, and offers children a more positive experience of care.

6.8.3   The Commission believe that this approach could provide a more supportive approach to foster care in Hackney which may assist with foster carer retention as well as improved support for children in care. The Commission were of the view that the Fostering Service should explore with The Fostering Network if this model could be trialled within the borough.

7.   CONTRIBUTORS, MEETINGS AND SITE VISITS

7.1   The evidence was collected through a scrutiny-in-a-day exercise held on the 11th October 2017. All the contributors to the review process on the day are listed below.

Session / Time	Objectives of session	Name of Attendee / Organisation
1: 09:00-10:45	To establish local policy and practice: ▪ Nature and level of foster care provision ▪ Local recruitment and retention strategies ▪ The Hackney offer to in-house foster carers. ▪ The performance of LB Hackney in comparison to other London boroughs.	• **Sarah Wright** Director of Children & Families Service, LB Hackney • **Robert Koglek** Head of Service Corporate Parenting, LB Hackney • **Deborah Ennis** Interim Safeguarding and Learning Team Manager, LB Hackney ▪ **Antonia Canning** Service Manager - Fostering and Placements, LB Hackney ▪ **Karolina Slovenko-Bell** Practice Development Manager (Fostering Service), LB Hackney
2: 11:00-12:45	The perspectives of in-house foster carers: ▪ Follow up issues from the survey ▪ Perceptions of local recruitment and the Hackney offer ▪ How can the foster carer role be improved?	▪ London Borough of Hackney in-house foster carers ▪ **Joy Harris** ▪ **Steve Gayle** ▪ **Debbie Douglas**
3. 12:45-13:00	The views of looked after children in foster carer: ▪ Support of foster carers ▪ Stability of placements.	Chair and Vice Chair to feedback from site visit to her from young people from Hackney Gets Heard, Hackney's Children in Care Council.
4: 14:00-15:10	Comparative policy and practice: ▪ To compare and contrast approaches to foster carer recruitment and retention taken in other London boroughs with Hackney; ▪ To identify good practice	**Susanna Daus,** Service Manager Adoption, Fostering and Contact, LB Islington **Bridget Thorby-Rocks,** Placement & Support Manager, Anchor Foster Care (An independent foster carer agency)

Session / Time	Objectives of session	Name of Attendee / Organisation
	which can be transposed to Hackney; ▪ Identification of opportunities for further collaborative partnerships and project work in the recruitment and retention of collaborative partnerships.	
5. 15:25-16.30	Specialist insight based on national themes and trends: ▪ Successful recruitment and retention strategies ▪ Managing the pool of in-house foster carers ▪ Development of foster carer offer ▪ New approaches and collaborative partnerships.	▪ **Melissa Green,** Director of Operations, The Fostering Network ▪ **Harvey Gallagher,** Chief Executive, Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (A representative body of IFAs)
6. 16:45-17.30	Reflections on the day ▪ Key evidence ▪ Any additional evidence required ▪ Outline conclusions / recommendations	**The CYP Scrutiny Commission**

8.   MEMBERS OF THE SCRUTINY COMMISSION

8.1   The following members served on the Commission during this review

Councillor Christopher Kennedy (Chair)
Councillor Margaret Gordon (Vice Chair)
Councillor Sophie Conway
Councillor Tom Ebbutt
Councillor Michelle Gregory
Councillor Abraham Jacobson
Councillor Emma Plouviez
Councillor Tom Rahilly

Rabbi Baumgarten - Orthodox Jewish community representative
Richard Brown - London Diocesan Board for Schools (CoE) representative
Louis Comach - Hackney Youth Parliament representative
Skye Fitzgerald McShane - Hackney Youth Parliament representative
Jane Heffernan – R.C. Westminster Diocesan Schools Commission
Jo Macleod - Hackney Schools Governors' Association representative
Maryam Mohammed - Hackney Youth Parliament representative
Sevdie Sali Ali - parent governor representative
Shuja Shaikh - North London Muslim Community Centre representative
Ernell Watson - Free Churches Group representative
Kairi Weekes- Sanderson, Hackney Youth Parliament representative

Overview and Scrutiny Officer:	Martin Bradford ☎ 020 8356 3315
Legal Comments:	Joe Okelue Acting Service Lawyer Team Leader Children, Education and Community Services team ☎ 0208 356 4817
Financial Comments:	Jackie Moylan, Director, Children, Adults & Community Health Finance ☎ 020 8356 3032

For this review:

Lead Group Director:	Sarah Wright, Director, Children and Family Services
Lead Cabinet Member:	Cllr. Anntoinette Bramble, Deputy Mayor & Cabinet Member Children Services

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY

9.1   Below is a list of the specific documents cited in this report together with other key background material:

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