



Children and Young People's Department

**Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Sufficiency Strategy
2017-20**

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1. Introduction

This strategy sets out how Brent Council, as Corporate Parent, will meet the current and future placement needs of Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

This strategy describes how Brent Council meets its statutory Sufficiency Duty as laid down in Section 22G of the Children Act 1989. It builds on existing duties in law to promote and safeguard the welfare and well-being of children to ensure that all Looked After Children are appropriately matched in placements, that placements are made through quality assessments and care planning and that placements are regularly reviewed in line with legal requirements and as part of Brent's quality assurance framework.

In preparing this strategy, consideration has been given to the statutory guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children (DfE 2010), the Children Act 2004, the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

The strategy is based on the following commissioning principles:

- understanding the needs of Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers;
- ensuring the right numbers and types of placement are anticipated and planned for;
- developing the market to meet required needs and secure appropriate placements;
- focusing on outcomes for children and young people through rigorous contract management and monitoring.

This strategy outlines the current Looked After Children and Care Leavers profile and placement mix. It identifies key actions and areas of focus in achieving placement sufficiency over the next few years in line with the changing demographic profile of Brent's Looked After population.

2. Profile of children in Brent

Brent is one of the most densely populated outer London boroughs. The 2015 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment confirmed the child population as 79,800 and there is an increasing population of younger children living within the borough. Projections show that there will be 83,700 children in Brent aged between 0 and 19 in 2020, an increase of 5% based on current estimates.

Brent is one of the most culturally diverse areas in England, with one of the highest proportions of black and ethnic minority residents in London. The largest ethnic groups of statutory school age are: Asian Indian (16%), Black Somali (8%), Black Caribbean (7%), White British (7%); Asian Pakistani (6%), Iraqi (5%) and Asian Sri Lankan (4%). Whilst there are established communities of Black Caribbean and Irish people living in Brent, the proportion of these children is decreasing in schools. The numbers of children from Somali (and other African groups), Afghani and Spanish speaking backgrounds are increasing. Additionally, there has been an increase of 32.3% of Eastern European pupils in Brent schools since 2014.

As of 2015, Brent has been ranked the 27th most deprived local authority area in England (of 326 local authorities). In 2010, Brent was ranked as the 10th most deprived area in England.

3. Profile of Looked After Children and Care Leavers in Brent

The number of Looked After Children (LAC) in Brent has remained consistent over the past two years at around 320. This is low compared to other London authorities and neighbouring boroughs and significantly lower than in the past. Over the last five years the number of LAC in Brent has reduced from 390 (March 2012) to 319 (March 2017), although nationally the number of LAC has increased. The majority of Brent statistical neighbours have also seen a decrease in LAC, as has London as a whole, although Outer London has seen an increase over the same period. The overall

trend of a lower number of LAC since 2012 reflects a variety of contributing factors, including improved early identification and engagement of families at risk of escalating problems, which has reduced the numbers of parents entering voluntary Section 20 agreements.

The current population of LAC represents 43.1 LAC per 10,000 head of child population in 2016/17. In 2015/16 the figure for Brent was 45.3 per 10,000. This contrasts with the rate for statistical neighbours (excluding Croydon) of 54 per 10,000 head of child population. If Brent had the same rate as statistical neighbours, Brent would have an additional 81 LAC. The national rate for LAC has consistently been 60 per 10,000 of the population. If Brent had the same rate of LAC as nationally, Brent would have an additional 125 children in care.

Looked After Children as at 31/03/2017	Numbers	Percentages
Number of children in care	319	
Gender		
Female	113	35.4%
Male	206	64.6%
Ethnicity		
Asian or Asian British	64	20%
Black or Black British	92	29%
Mixed/Multiple	61	19%
Not stated/Undeclared	1	0%
Other ethnic groups	8	3%
White	93	29%
Placement type		
Placed for Adoption	8	2.75%
Fostering	204	63.9%
Placed with parents	3	0.94%
Semi Independent	64	20.1%
Residential setting	30	9.4%
Placement Location		
In borough	127	39.8%
Out borough	192	60.2%
Within Neighbouring boroughs	68	21.3%
Outside neighbouring boroughs	124	78.7%
Legal Status		
Section 20	121	37.9%
Section 38	37	11.6%
Section 31	146	45.8%
Placement Order	10	3.1%
Age		
0-4	33	10.3%
5-9	40	12.5%
10-12	31	9.7%
13-15	77	24.1%
16-18	138	43.3%

Key indicators

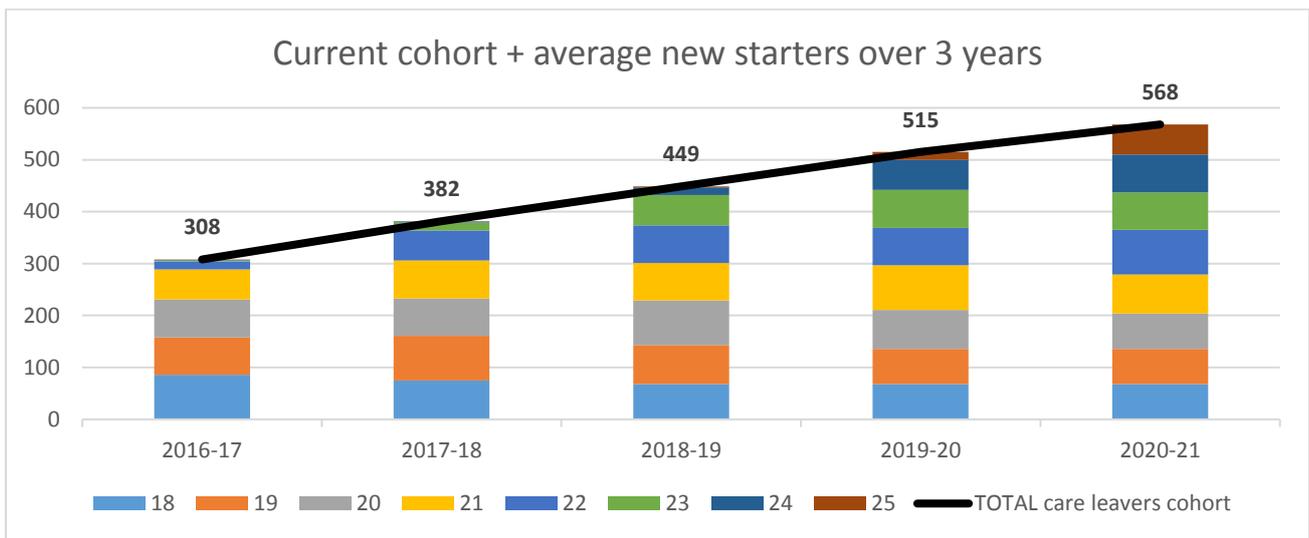
- **Age profile of LAC:** Recent trends show a growing older age group of LAC, with an increase in the number of young people entering care in their teenage years. In March 2017 67.4% of the care population in Brent was over 13 years old, with 43.3% aged 16-18, compared to 61% and 33% in March 2015. Of 209 new LAC since April 2016, 59 (28%) were aged 13-15 and 61 (29%) were aged 16-18. Some of this increase is linked to external factors, such

as an increase in the number of young people entering the UK as unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). There were 45 UASC LAC in March 2015, compared to 75 in March 2017. Brent has also seen an increase recently in the need to provide accommodation for young people for longer periods of time beyond age 18, for example those who do not have recourse to public funds or who are struggling to live independently.

- **Gender:** As at 31/03/17, 64.5% of Brent's care population was male, compared to 57.8% at the same time in 2015. For Brent's statistical neighbours 56% of LAC were male, the same as the national average. One reason for this variance is the high number of UASC, of whom the vast majority are male.
- **Placement Profile:** Of the 325 LAC in March 2015, 75.1% were placed in fostering placements (including kinship placements) and 21.5% were placed in residential type placements. In 2017 the proportion of LAC placed in fostering placements has reduced to 63.9% and placements in residential and semi-independent provision (including residential schools) have increased to 29.5%. This reflects in part the older age profile of LAC, as well as the complex needs of the older children entering into care for whom foster placements are not always suitable. The increase has mainly been in the number of children and young people in semi-independent provision. There were 25 placements in residential provision in March 2015 and 29 in March 2017.
- **Geography of placements:** In March 2015, 41% of children were placed within the borough and, whilst 59% were placed outside of Brent's boundaries, 23% of the total population were within a neighbouring borough. In March 2017 39.8% of children were placed within the borough, whilst 60.2% were placed outside of Brent's boundaries with 21.3% placed within a neighbouring borough.

Of those placed outside of a neighbouring borough in 2015 approximately half (or 18% of the total population) were within 20 miles of Brent. This has remained at a similar level in 2017 at 17%. Our reducing LAC population has a high proportion of older children, many of whom have multiple vulnerabilities such as the risk of exploitation by gangs or child sexual exploitation, requiring placement away from Brent. There is also a challenge in identifying suitable specialist provision within a 20 mile radius of Brent.

- **Placement Stability:** LAC achieve better outcomes when they are in stable placements. During 2016/17, 44 children had three or more placement moves (13.79%). The criteria for determining 3 or more placements changed in 2016, so it is not possible to compare this figure to previous years' data.
- **Care Leavers:** Local Authorities have a duty and responsibility to all Care Leavers up to the age of 25 regardless of their education or employment status (Children and Social Work Act 2017). As of 31 March 2017, Brent was responsible for the support to 308 Former Relevant Young People (aged 18 -21) and 25 young people aged 21-25 in higher education. The Care Leavers' Team is a recently established dedicated team focused on supporting and remaining in touch with care leavers. The Care Leaver population is forecast to grow over future years. The graph below shows the likely population based on the current LAC and Care Leaver cohort and an average growth factor in LAC.



- Children on the edge of care: vulnerable adolescents.** In 2016 Brent Council commissioned an independent review of the management of LAC demand. The review confirmed that Brent managed this demand well. The review identified key risks for Brent children which increased the risk of coming into care, particularly when experienced in combination: being in adolescence; gang involvement; domestic abuse; emotional health and substance misuse. The review identified that up to 31% of children accommodated in 2016 presented a combination of these risk factors.

4. Engagement of Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Brent Care in Action (CIA) is Brent's Children in Care Council and works to make sure children and young people in and who have left care have the chance to be involved in making decisions and sharing their views about the services and support they receive. Brent Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) is the element of the Council for Care Leavers. CIA and CLIA are active members of Brent Corporate Parenting Committee. Both CIA and CLIA regularly engage with senior Council officers to help shape services for Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

Brent CIA and CLIA have informed placement practice and priority actions, including:

- Establishing a dedicated Care Leavers team was in part a response to CIA telling us that Care Leavers needed more support. They helped to shape the new team, through consultation and engagement about its purpose.
- Some children and young people have asked for additional support to help them settle and develop their skills. As a result, all young people under the age 16 & 17 years old in semi-independent provision receive access to the support of a key worker for at least 5 hours of a week.
- Young people age 18+ and/or who have been assessed as requiring additional support are also provided with targeted key worker support.
- Children have expressed a wish to have placement choice and to meet new carers before moving, so the Commissioning and Resources Team, providers, the fostering team and social work teams ensure introductions take place before a child is moved.
- Children and young people have told us that they want to stay close to Brent. Brent Council is actively participating in the WLA DPV tendering processes which will increase access to local residential and fostering provision.

5. Current commissioning arrangements and placement provision

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

Over the period 2015-17, Brent has continued to work in partnership with other local authorities through the West London Alliance (WLA), a collaboration of 9 local authorities, which was set up in 1998 to promote the interests of West London residents and businesses and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the provision of services. The areas of main activity over 2015-17 for the WLA Children's Efficiency Programme were establishment of an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) framework and a framework agreement for Semi-Independent Provision; supporting the development of local residential provision and supporting commissioning of WLA fostering arrangements. The WLA negotiated IFA Framework introduced cost and volume savings as well as the opportunity for more effective relationship building and quality assurance arrangements to be established.

Over the past year, the WLA has also been working to develop three Dynamic Purchasing Vehicles (DPVs) – for residential provision, independent fostering provision to replace the current IFA Framework and independent and non-maintained special schools for children with SEND. The DPVs will go-live in Spring 2018. They are expected to increase the number of suppliers available to Brent and will become the Local Authority's primary commissioning system.

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

Monthly child or young person placement progress reports are reviewed by the relevant panel. The reports cover the detail of support and care provided and are shared with the child or young person's social worker. Feedback from social work teams about any placement concerns or best practice is encouraged to ensure that CRT is aware of any issues and can highlight these to providers. Provision quality is discussed for all cases brought to Children's Placement Panel. CRT also carries out a schedule of quality assurance visits to residential and semi-independent providers and feedback results to key professionals.

a) Foster placements

Foster placements include in-house foster placements, placements with family and friend carers, and independent and voluntary fostering agency placements through a framework agreement.

Where placement with a family member or connected person has been ruled out, Brent considers a placement with an in-house foster carer. If a suitable placement with a Brent foster carer is not available, the council approaches the Independent Fostering Agency Framework, before extending its search to the private and voluntary sector. 85 children were placed with IFA carers as at March 2017.

Brent foster carers benefit from the support of a dedicated Fostering Development Co-ordinator and a refreshed training strategy that has made a greater connection between foster carer development needs and training requirements. The dedicated Fostering Reviewing Officer ensures that quality

standards are followed up with in-house foster carers and that Supervising Social Workers are appropriately challenged.

Brent foster carers attend a regular support group where they share common issues of concern with each other and the Supervising Social Worker leading the session. The Head of LAC and Permanency also meets quarterly with a foster carers' focus group where development issues are discussed and any areas of concern can be raised. Feedback from the focus group informed a realignment of the service in 2017/18 and has contributed to development of the foster carers' training programme.

Recognising the need for foster carers and social work staff to improve the quality of relationships with children and young people, a programme of social pedagogy development was initiated in 2015. Focusing on placement stability, quality of relationships and outcomes for children, the programme has now become a part of Brent Council's Practice Framework and evolved to a second phase. A Social Pedagogy Development Lead was appointed in summer of 2017 to improve professionals' understanding of the needs of children and young people with longer-term anticipated outcomes being greater placement stability and improved educational attendance and attainment. A number of Supervising Social Workers and foster carers have received social pedagogy training. A Diploma in Social Pedagogy Programme will be run for social workers and foster carers from April 2018. The effectiveness of the social pedagogic approach will be evaluated as part of our practice framework in 2018.

There is a shortage of suitable, large housing within the borough which impacts on the pool of potential foster carers available in Brent. Next to Newham, Brent has the highest level of housing overcrowding levels within London, with the majority of housing for residents in multi-occupancy accommodation. Many new properties are flats that have limited potential to accommodate families with several children. Some of the newer communities to have settled in Brent have not provided significant numbers of carers, in part because many are students or young professionals who are not interested in fostering.

Diversity needs including disability, race, religion, language and culture are always considered when placing a child. The profile of Brent foster carers broadly matches the ethnic and cultural background of many of our children and enables in many cases children to be placed with families that reflect their ethnicity or culture. Comparison work across the WLA has demonstrated Brent does well in matching ethnicity of children to in-house foster carers. However, a high proportion of Brent foster carers are of Black Caribbean heritage and the aspiration to increase the number of foster carers of Asian, White British and White European ethnicity is included in this strategy.

b) **Semi-Independent Living**

It is the Local Authority's responsibility to ensure LAC and Care Leavers are properly prepared for making the transition to adulthood in a planned and effective way, to achieve the best possible outcomes for the individual young person. The provision of semi-independent living can support the transition to adulthood for LAC over 16 years old and Care Leavers over 18 years old, giving the opportunity to prepare and practice their independent living skills.

Brent uses semi-independent placements in both private and voluntary sector provisions for young people aged over 16 and aged 18+. Brent currently has a block contract provision with Centrepoint for 20 units, 15 of which offer low to medium support and 5 offer high support.

In March 2017 there were 65 LAC and 55 care leavers living in semi-independent provision, compared to 33 and 37 in 2015. The majority of young people placed within semi-independent living accommodation continue to be within 20 miles of Brent. Between January 2014 and January 2017, 37 young people were accommodated at Centrepoint.

In addition Brent spot purchases semi-independent placements from a number of providers to meet the needs of individual young people. Many of these placements are spot-purchased through a WLA Semi-Independent List, a framework agreement that was implemented in 2015. Providers on this list have been through a robust selection process based on quality and price, with the aim of ensuring greater quality assurance for local authorities and standardisation of practice for providers.

c) Residential placements

Brent currently spot-purchases placements in Residential settings, including secure accommodation. The Local Authority does not manage any residential home provision, but is responsible for one Local Authority residential short break unit for children with disabilities. The unit is Ofsted registered and graded as 'Outstanding' in its most recent inspection in May 2017.

The threshold for children being placed in residential care is considered on an individual basis and when fostering options are not suitable. In March 2017, there were 29 children and young people in residential provision ranging from 10 to 16 in age, compared to 25 in March 2015.

Due to the complexity of need for some young people in residential care, Brent works with specialist providers that are able to offer immediate access to educational provision and therapeutic support if required. Many of these placements are currently not available within the West London area. Brent aims to place children in homes that have achieved an Ofsted rating of 'Good' or 'Outstanding' and professional references are taken from other local authorities to ensure quality of provision. Where the Ofsted rating falls below this standard, the Commissioning and Resources Team scrutinises the reasons for the rating and ensures a robust improvement plan is in place, before requesting authorisation from an Operational Director for placement. Where a child is placed in a home that receives an 'Inadequate' rating, an immediate review of the individual circumstances are undertaken in consultation with other practitioners. The DCS authorises any continued placements in such situations.

Brent aims to use London based residential provision for young people in order to maintain their school placement and family/social connections where possible. Privately run children's homes based within Brent are supported through the West London residential children's home network that is facilitated through the WLA. To encourage market development, the WLA supported the establishment of a home for girls at risk of CSE in 2015 in the West London region.

There are established joint commissioning arrangements with Brent CCG for the placement of LAC with SEND, with two young people recently placed in residential specialist provision. This includes the sharing of costs as appropriate for individual children.

d) Care Leavers: Staying Put

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

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

While semi-independent provision can provide a stepping stone to living independently for some young people, others prefer to stay with their foster carers for longer. As of 31st March 2017, there were 10 young people under staying put arrangements in Brent, either with a Brent or independent agency foster carer compared to 19 in March 2015.

Brent's position is to support the continued relationship between young person and carer where agreed within the Pathway Plan and recent actions are expected to increase the number of young people who are 'staying put'. The Care Leavers Team is working to improve emphasis on Pathway Plans that identify where it would be beneficial for young people to stay put. This includes measurable outcomes that focus on young people obtaining life and independence skills ahead of their 18th birthday and whilst there are in a Staying Put placement after their 18th birthday. A new 17+ Panel means there is senior management oversight and scrutiny of Pathway Plans and preparation of young people so they can transition to their own accommodation when they become an adult, after a period of 'staying put' if this is what the young person wants.

Brent has increased the allowance for in-house foster carers to encourage young people to remain in their placement after their 18th birthday. Once this allowance period ends and if carer and young person wish to continue the arrangement, then the allocated Social Worker ensures housing benefit is claimed and paid to the former foster carer. IFAs within the IFA framework have agreed on a set level of fee structure for placements of this type. This is aimed at securing a more consistent sub-regional position. It is anticipated that this will lead to more young people remaining with their foster carers if agreed within their Pathway Plan. Brent has developed its Staying Put policy to provide greater clarity to foster carers about expected outcomes, in particular in relation to young people developing their independent living skills during the time period that they 'stay put'.

e) Adoption

Adoption services in Brent are delivered by two teams within the Looked After Children and Permanency Service:

- A Placements Assessment and Recruitment Team – responsible for the recruitment, assessment and training of prospective adopters, as well as family finding and support post approval up until Adoption Order.
- An Adoption and Post Permanency team – responsible for family finding for children with an adoption plan; statutory social work responsibility for children subject to a Placement Order up until Adoption Order; supporting adoptive families, Special Guardians and birth families and providing a counselling and intermediary service for adopted adults and their birth relatives.

In 2016/17 4 children who were in care were adopted. Between April and September 2017, 7 children were adopted.

The most recent set of national adoption scorecards were published in April 2017, covering the three year period 2014-16. The Brent three-year average time in days between a child entering care and moving in with his/her adoptive family was 523 days, compared to 544 days at the 31 March 2015. This is a 5.3% improvement against the previous reporting period and compares against a national average of 558 days and a statistical neighbour average of 578.

6. How Brent will develop its sufficiency duty – Additional actions for 2017-20

There are a number of challenges faced by the Local Authority in meeting the needs of vulnerable children and young people in our care.

Whilst the LAC population has reduced in size, the current trend of older teenagers entering care is likely to grow in line with Brent's forecast population increase. This group requires new commissioning solutions to ensure that Brent can continue to meet its sufficiency duty. Particular challenges include:

- securing local independent foster placements where supply already falls far short of demand and where Brent hosts a high number of IFA placements from other boroughs, restricting the availability of local resources.
- the consistent supply of good quality semi-independent placement options for young people.
- increasing numbers of care leavers who need support through their transition to adulthood.
- improving access to high quality residential provision that meets the needs of our most challenging LAC and young people.
- responding to the needs of an older LAC profile presenting with a range of risks linked to gang affiliations, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, or substance misuse.

The agreed actions of this strategy, set out below, will enable Brent to respond to these challenges, increasing access to high quality placements, so that Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers have the right placement available at the right time.

a) Fostering

Brent will increase the number of good quality local placements for children by securing more in-house fostering placements. By March 2018, the aim is to have a net increase in foster carers of five, which will involve recruiting, assessing and approving a higher number to offset de-registrations. Support provided to foster carers is regularly reviewed, with foster carer feedback on what is positive building on well-established, positive relationships.

Increasing the number of IFA placements made on the WLA framework and through the new DPV will support greater consistency of provision, as the WLA quality assurance process provides a robust mechanism for holding providers to account in ensuring they continue to meet the requirements of the contract. Once live, the DPV will be used by Brent for the majority of IFA placements. It is anticipated that IFAs currently outside of the WLA framework will join the WLA DPV which will increase placement choice.

Additional work on block contracts by the WLA within the DPV will be explored to further ensure cost effective placement choices, including for children with more complex and challenging needs.

b) Semi Independent Provision

Brent is planning to expand the number of semi-independent placements that are commissioned through block contract arrangements, in response to increasing demand for this provision that is forecast to continue to grow over the next few years.

Building on the success of Brent's current contracted service, the expanded block contract will support increased access to quality provision and achieve cost effectiveness. The intention is to procure up to as many as 60 units, predominantly to support young people with low to medium needs, with the majority of placements local to Brent ensuring that young people can be housed close to family. The new contract will also secure some provision out of borough for young people for whom this would be a safer option.

This provision will be accompanied by a robust and accredited life skills programme to enable young people to develop their independent living skills.

c) Residential provision

Brent has been active in supporting development of the WLA DPV for Children's Homes and Independent and Non-maintained Special Schools. These will be fully mobilised by Spring 2018.

Brent is currently undertaking a needs analysis to inform possible block purchasing of residential provision through the DPV to increase access to provision that meets the health, education and social care needs of those most complex and challenging Brent LAC. This is likely to involve a spread of provision geographically with some provision close to Brent and some out of borough, potentially delivered by a provider that has units nationwide.

d) Adoption

Brent is actively participating in the development of a London Regional Adoption Agency, which it is proposed will include the majority of London authorities from 2019. The Outline Business Case for the Agency has been produced, with cross London local authority agreement planned by summer 2018. It is planned that Brent will be involved in the West London sub-regional adoption agency which will be one of the four proposed sub-regional arrangements connected to the London Regional Adoption Agency. All activity regarding adoption including recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, matching processes and post-adoption support will be undertaken by the new regional adoption agencies. Responsibility of children with adoption plans will remain with local authorities.

e) Supporting Children on the Edge of Care: Vulnerable adolescents

Brent Council is undertaking Outcome Based Review (OBR) specifically around young people on the edge of care and young people affected by gangs, with the ambition to find ways to keep young people safely in the community, through re-imagining the role that local services and community-based support could play in supporting adolescents. The OBR process is driving a partnership approach to better understand the effectiveness of and gaps in the current offer, as well as identifying opportunities to broaden the reshaping of early intervention to make sure it is responsive to the needs of all of Brent young people at risk of becoming looked after and their families.

The OBRs are informed by community research and listening to the views of young people, parents and carers, partner agencies and community groups. The OBRs have identified priority projects, which will launch in Spring 2018 and will contribute to the following outcomes:

- Management of avoidable demand and reduced escalation of cases, resulting in an increase in the number of vulnerable adolescents being safely supported in the community.
- Further improving performance of prevention services, to ensure that where risks are identified for vulnerable adolescents, they are resolved quickly and families are supported to keep young people safe.

