1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report provides the Committee with an update regarding the crucial role that our foster carers play in providing high quality care for children who are looked after. Following on from reports in previous years, it provides further details of trends regarding the number and characteristics of children looked after by foster carers as well as a profile of our foster care resource which is now managed and provided across three boroughs. This report includes an update on ongoing developments in the Tri-borough Fostering and Adoption Service which recruits, assesses and supports the foster carers.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Committee considers the report, and makes recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, as appropriate.

3. BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF PROGRESS

3.1. Since 2012, the borough has pooled its resource of foster carers with those of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster City Council
through a Tri-borough Fostering and Adoption service with shared management. The service is now responsible for recruiting, training, supporting and reviewing local “in-house” carers.

3.2. This report provides an update of the profile of our foster carer resource, levels of unmet need, progress with how foster carers are recruited and supported and other recent developments.

4. CHILDREN REQUIRING FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

4.1. Tri-borough Family Services continue to pursue a policy through which children requiring a foster placement should usually be placed with a carer employed by the Tri-borough service. Where this is not possible, alternative carers are commissioned from independent fostering agencies (IFAs). A considerable number of other looked after children continue to be placed with extended family members. There is a specialist team within the service which assesses and supports kinship or “connected persons” carers.

4.2. As of February 2014, there were 203 children looked after by Hammersmith & Fulham (10 less than a year ago). Of these, 52% were placed with professional foster carers. 29% were placed with in-house foster placements, 4% more than in 2013. 23% were placed with IFA foster carers (2% fewer than last year). Therefore there has been a slight decrease in reliance on the independent sector over the past year.

5. THE BOROUGH’S FOSTER CARER RESOURCE

5.1. In March 2012, the borough had a total of 71 households providing foster care which could provide placements for a maximum of 113 children. Under Tri-borough arrangements, the three boroughs share their carers and so there are now 216 households providing care for up to 314 children. Of the 216 placements, 88 or 41% were within the boundaries of the three boroughs while the rest were in other areas, mostly in other London boroughs. This is thought to be partly due to a number of local carers who adopted Hammersmith and Fulham children thus reducing the numbers of local carers along with successful recruitment of more carers from other London boroughs.

5.2. The ethnicity of the majority of Tri-borough foster carers continues to be Black or Black British (42%) as was the case under the single borough service although the proportion of carers with this ethnic background increased further since 2013 when they comprised 32% of carers.

5.3. Historically there was a higher proportion of teenagers placed with independent fostering agencies in the past because of the lack of in-house carers to meet their needs. Last year there were indications that the policies of the Tri-borough service were starting to address this with increased numbers and proportions of children being placed with in-house carers and reductions in numbers placed with IFAs. This trend has been maintained in the past year; which may reflect that this cohort is starting to “age out” with
much fewer younger children joining the overall IFA cohort. The trend is also taking place in a context where increasing proportions of children entering care are teenagers.

6. **UNMET NEED AND RECRUITMENT**

6.1. There is national shortage of foster carers and recruiting such carers in London continues to be a particular challenge because of the lack of suitably sized, affordable housing as well as high levels of competition between the 33 London authorities and a large number of independent fostering agencies all of which are seeking additional foster carers. Therefore, constant attention needs to be paid to effective recruitment to ensure appropriate placements for all the children who require them. A variety of carers with different skills and specialisms is required to meet the wide range of needs of the children concerned. Not being able to find an appropriate in-house carer continues to be a key reason for referring to the independent sector.

6.2. Despite the challenges of recruiting the right foster carers, the Tri-borough service has only needed to place 9 Hammersmith and Fulham children with IFA carers since April 2013 and no children have been placed in this sector since August 2013. It should also be noted that there are currently no children under the age of two who are placed with IFAs. This reflects the increased tendency to place children with in-house carers and the successful recruitment of mother and baby placements and other placements for babies. Children not placed with professional foster carers were placed with friends, relatives, parents or in residential placements. (See Appendix Table 1).

6.3. The dedicated Tri-borough Recruitment and Assessment team continues to track progress of potential foster carers from initial enquiries to approval. The capacity of the team (four full time, two part time social workers and one student) will be maintained to support achievement of next year’s target (again for an additional 20 carers). However, there have been periods of time when the team has been understaffed in the current year which has impacted upon some aspects of performance including the duration of assessments. Areas such as duty, initial visit timescales and delivering training have not been negatively affected by this.

6.4. Tri-borough arrangements have enabled the comparing and contrasting of approaches to recruitment and development of shared standards for assessments. The overall aim has been to recruit carers living within one hour’s travel time from the agency. There is evidence of existing carers referring new potential carers to the service.

6.5. A foster carer recruitment strategy was developed for 2013/14. The main aim was to recruit 20 additional carers in the course of the year. To date, the service has recruited 10 carers comprising 9 new households and one partner assessment. It is anticipated that a further 3 foster carers will be approved by the end of March 2014. In addition, three further assessments were commenced but put “on hold” owing to issues with the applicants’ housing (uncompleted building work and issues with a tenancy). Four
additional assessments are ongoing and are expected to be presented to the Fostering Panel in May 2014. Therefore actions were in place to achieve this target although it will be delivered later than planned.

6.6. In terms of generating enquiries and applications, a campaign including advertisements in the Metro newspaper has led to an increase in attendance at information events. Nearby areas such as Brent and Camden have been subject to leafleting by the Tri-borough service. This has been followed up with an increased number of initial visits to prospective carers and 16 households have had a successful initial visit which enabled them to attend the Skills to Foster training sessions.

6.7. National changes to the fostering assessment process have been implemented locally to avoid potential further delays in approving new carers. This has increased the number of Stage 2 assessments which have commenced.

Table 1 Details of recruitment activity May 1st 2013 to March 2014;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment Stage</th>
<th>Number of Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial enquiries</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial home visits</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills to Foster training</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment allocated after training</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing assessments</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approvals</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.8. There are ongoing challenges with recruiting carers for children with particular needs. This includes finding placements for large sibling groups, disabled children and young people with offending behaviour. It has been difficult to identify any carers within the Tri-borough or surrounding areas who can meet these needs. It should also be noted that IFAs have also been unable to provide local placements for sibling groups when approached. This unmet need is likely to be a result of the availability of suitable housing resources rather than a recruitment issue. There is also an ongoing need for specialist placements for a parent and child and there has been some success with this.

6.9. Part of the marketing and recruitment plan is to ensure that we target a diverse range of potential carers to meet the needs of our children, including those from caring professions such as health care staff and members of staff across the Council who we would expect to be educated to a Higher or further education level.

6.10. A previously looked after young person is a member of the Fostering Panel playing a key role in influencing and contributing to panel decisions as well as providing valuable insight into the needs and experiences of children in care. Further developments are planned to incorporate young people’s views into the assessment of carers.
6.11. For many families who foster, the demands of the role require at least one adult to be free to foster without the restrictions that full time employment may bring. Individuals and couples with at least one adult who has flexible or part time work patterns are more likely to be able to provide the required levels of care needed. This has an impact on our ability to recruit carers from a broader range of professional backgrounds.

6.12. Regarding educational qualifications, carers who have achieved in further or higher education are known to have a positive impact on children’s outcomes, particularly in relation to education. However, there is often a high level of motivation and support to promote the looked after child’s academic development and achievements from carers who have lower levels of achievement or who have not been through the British education system, via support and training available through the virtual school.

6.13. Due to the ongoing challenges with the recruitment of new foster carers, an organisation called iMPOWER has been engaged to support the service. This is within a context where all local authorities and private fostering agencies are targeting similar communities to identify new carers. iMPOWER are using their “Family Values Programme”, building on existing work in the development of the Fostering Service. They are focusing on the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and the customer journey such carers experience throughout their involvement with the local authority. The overarching aim is to make sustainable improvements beyond the life of the project and to ensure the service is fully fit for the future challenges. This builds upon local work completed by iMPOWER so far with 7 other councils and national work by DfE and the Fostering Network.

6.14. Family Values is a ‘customer-led’ programme that involves a combination of business analysis and customer insight in order to measurably enhance recruitment, retention and support performance.

6.15. iMPOWER’s approach will develop a greater understanding of the market and community where carers come from which will be used to inform a targeted recruitment strategy.

7. PERFORMANCE OF THE TRI-BOROUGH FOSTERING SERVICE

7.1. From April 2013 to the end of February 2014, the service had received 442 requests for potential placements from the three boroughs of which 247 proceeded to placement of a child (the other 177 referrals were withdrawn and a small number are in the process of being found placements). 217 of these placements were made with in-house foster carers (88%) and 30 with IFAs (12%). Of the 217 children placed with in-house carers in the past 11 months, 95 (44%) were looked after by Hammersmith & Fulham. 40% of all referrals made were subsequently withdrawn by the referring borough. 37% of Hammersmith & Fulham’s referrals were withdrawn.

7.2. In March 2013 Hammersmith & Fulham had 53% of its children who were in professional foster care placed with in-house carers and 47% with IFAs. By
February 2014, the proportions were 56% and 44% respectively. This reflects an ongoing reduction in use of IFA placements since the Tri-borough service was established in 2012. The majority of Hammersmith and Fulham’s children (77%) who remain with IFAs are aged 12 or older and some of these will be in permanent placements. It would not be usual practice to undermine placement stability by moving such children to a different placement in pursuit of a policy to place children with in-house carers unless a child’s current placement was not meeting his or her needs. This suggests that the new service is having a positive impact on the aim of making reduced use of IFAs, particularly in the light of no children under the age of two currently being placed with IFAs.

7.3. Last year it was reported that Hammersmith and Fulham’s fostering service had been inspected by Ofsted in February 2013 under a new framework introduced in June 2012. The inspection judged the service to be “Outstanding” for *Overall Effectiveness*. There were also “Outstanding” judgements for *Outcomes for Children and Young People*, *Quality of the Service, Leadership and Management*. *Safeguarding* was judged to be “Good”. Ofsted have since reported on all inspections that have taken place under this framework between October 2012 and September 2013. Of 45 local authorities to have been inspected, 4 or 9% were judged to be outstanding.

7.4. The Service’s workforce has been subject to some turnover. This has been partly due to lack of parity between posts across the three boroughs. As staff leave, existing staff have applied for roles which are similar to their existing posts but paid at better rates. Therefore vacant posts are difficult to fill because they tend to be paid at the lowest rates in Tri-borough and lower rates than similar authorities in London. This has led to a need to employ agency staff in some roles.

7.5. The new service has been subject to a significant range of audits, inspections and reviews, including the Ofsted inspection, the adoption diagnostic assessment and two mock Ofsted inspections. This has been perceived to have had an effect upon morale for some staff and there has also been little in the way of recommendations for service improvement resulting from many of these reviews.

8. **SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CARERS**

8.1. Following Tri-Borough reorganisation, the new service has combined staff from all three boroughs into four specialist teams focusing on:

- Duty, Support and Supervision
- Recruitment and Assessment
- Connected Persons
- Adoption and Permanence including post order support
8.2. Supervision and support for carers is provided by supervising social workers in the Fostering – Duty Supervision and Support team. Each social worker has a caseload of up to 14 carers and do not have a role in areas such as recruitment and assessment. The supervising social worker is expected to visit the carer on a 6 weekly basis to ensure high quality care and timely support.

8.3. The Workforce Development Team has continued to develop the programme of training with the aim of ensuring all carers are capable of delivering high quality foster care to meet the needs of looked after children. As well as a dedicated fostering training programme, carers also have links to other training such as those coordinated by the Tri-borough Local Safeguarding Children Board. Each carer is expected to attend the equivalent of three training events a year, some of which are compulsory.

8.4. A number of courses have been made available for carers using eLearning approaches. This has been well received, particularly as many carers do not live in central London and so find face-to-face training difficult to attend. eLearning also means carers can access a course at any time or on any day.

8.5. There has also been a number of initiatives to involve looked after children in the training of foster carers. This includes a care leaver delivering a session to new carers at the Skills to Foster course about their experiences of being fostered and their expectations of foster carers from a young person’s perspective. A training session on Diversity, Equality and Fostering is also delivered by a previously looked after young person.

8.6. The content of the training program is informed by messages from LAC and Foster carer reviews as well as the Fostering IRO’s Annual Report which includes foster carers’ support and training needs and other areas for development. Additionally, complaints, allegations and feedback from carers and children (both individually and through formal bodies such as the Children in Care Council and the Corporate Parenting Board) also feed into training plans.

8.7. Foster carers continue to have access to independent advice from the Fostering Network should they need it, support groups for carers, a handbook and access to a range of other professionals such as mental health practitioners, a Looked After Children’s Nurse, the virtual school and youth offending practitioners.

8.8. The revived Tri-borough Foster Carers’ Association continues to be in place providing additional support for carers across all three boroughs. There has been some loss of momentum within this important organisation following changes in its leadership and membership. A workshop/development morning has been organised by the service to review plans for the year, evaluate the Association’s effectiveness and its future direction of travel.

8.9. Since April 2012 when the service was formed there have been 13 allegations made against foster carers. Whenever an allegation is made, an
independent investigator is appointed. Where children are placed in other local authorities, an officer from the borough of residence is also involved in investigations relating to allegations.

8.10. Last year it was reported that a new policy regarding payments for foster carers had been planned for this year following consultation with carers. Under this, all carers would be paid under the same scale including those who continue to foster children they were caring for prior to the Tri-borough reorganisation. This has now been implemented and is working well following some initial difficulties. The scheme is well understood by carers and is reviewed annually by carers and the Fostering Service to reflect any changes in nationally agreed allowance rates.

9. CONNECTED PERSONS

9.1. A significant number of children continue to be cared for by relatives or “connected persons” who have been identified and assessed as potential carers or approved as foster carers. An overall aim of Family Services and the Fostering and Adoption Service has been to increase the proportion of children cared for in this way in line with good practice. Many of these carers go on to care for children under Special Guardianship, Residence or Adoption orders which means the children can be raised by adults they already know or have a connection with, without the on-going monitoring and review that is required if the children remain looked after.

9.2. Under Tri-borough arrangements the specialist Connected Persons team undertakes all the assessments, supervision and support of such carers. The proportion of children who are looked after by such carers has remained largely constant over time. However, many of these children leave the care system to be cared for by relatives, often under a Special Guardianship Order and it is rarely the intention that children should remain in care long term if they have a connected person carer.

9.3. Table 8 in the Appendix provides an overview of the team’s work across three boroughs up until February 2014 and indicates the significant amount of activity in relation to Hammersmith & Fulham children. There is a high number of connected persons assessments as many of these are completed as a backup plan and never used. This explains the difference between the number of referrals and the number of cases progressing to permanency.

9.4. Some assessments are also terminated following a negative initial assessment. In some cases, up to 5 assessments are completed for one family to ensure that children’s needs are appropriately met within their extended families wherever possible.

9.5. The Connected Persons team is committed to complete assessments in the care proceedings pilot within 10 weeks and even less if family members came in at a late stage to be assessed.
10. OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

10.1. The service had a number of developments planned for the previous year and beyond:

- The planned formal launch of the service was postponed owing to significant changes within the Foster Carers' Association who were to be key partners in this event.
- A range of carers have undergone training and an updated assessment to enable them to take on different kinds of placement. The impact of this is reflected through there being no need to place any babies in IFA placements because of the better developed specialist skills of our own foster carers.
- More specialist mother and baby placements have been identified as an alternative to practice where such family units are placed in private residential settings. Experience suggests that use of mother and baby foster placements facilitates earlier, better informed decision making in situations where it is in the best interests of very young children to be separated from their mothers to be placed with alternative long term carers.
- A process through which long term foster placements are identified where it may be possible to support the carers to adopt the children they are caring for has been launched. This supports the general policy of Family Services which is to pursue adoption for children who might be considered too old for such an outcome to be considered in other local authorities. The scheme was supported by the new “Permanency Manager” post.
- A scheme to develop “concurrent placements” has been launched in partnership with Coram who were pioneers in this area of practice. This entails carers providing foster care for children while the court process is taking place. The carers are approved to adopt the children they are fostering providing the court agrees that the children need a permanent placement. This prevents unnecessary changes of placement for very young children who can then potentially remain with the first carer they were placed with at birth on a permanent basis.

10.2. In 2014/15 the Service plans to:

- Develop the Foster Carers’ Association and strengthen the working relationship between carers and the service
- Implement action points from the fostering recruitment review by iMPOWER
- Continue to develop the Concurrent Planning project
- Work with the West London Consortium and connected persons carers to agree a revised fees and allowance structure along with reviewing the potential to use some carers as a resource for general scheme caring.
11. CONCLUSION

11.1. The Tri-Borough Fostering and Adoption Service continues to play a significant role in supporting wider strategies to best meet the needs of vulnerable looked after children from Hammersmith & Fulham. While the service has received good feedback from external agencies such as Ofsted, there are ongoing challenges to ensure that there are sufficient carers to meet local needs. There are a significant number of initiatives to ensure continuous improvement of the service.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Implications verified/completed by: Jade Monroe, Senior Solicitor, Social Care and Education, Tel 0208 753 2695.

13. FINANCIAL AND RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

13.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Implications verified/completed by: Caroline Osborne, Tri Borough Head of Finance, Children's Social Care, Tel: 0208 753 1423.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT

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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description of Background Papers</th>
<th>Name/Ext of holder of file/copy</th>
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</thead>
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LIST OF APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 – Annual Report on Foster Care 2014