



SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL 2 – 2020/2021

CHILDREN'S SERVICES OFSTED IMPROVEMENTS

DRAFT FINAL REPORT

1 APRIL 2021

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CHAIR'S OVERVIEW



***Councillor Karanvir Dhadwal
(Panel Chair)***

The Chair to provide text for the overview.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Purpose

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee assigned the Panel to review how the Ealing Children's Social Care Services was meeting its statutory responsibilities in respect of the 2019 Ofsted Inspection findings and progress against the inspection priority actions.

Scope

- 1.2 The scope of the Panel was to consider the following key areas over its three scheduled meetings and make recommendations for further improvements accordingly:

- An overview of the function and delivery of Children's Social Care Services
- Ofsted Annual Engagement Meeting and Priority Actions
- The Children's Services Workforce Strategy
- The impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on statutory services and families
- Care Leavers and Housing Quota
- Update on the Children's Performance Data
- Ofsted Comments on the Progress in the Data
- Regional Adoption Arrangements
- Children's Services Equality
- Ealing Children Short Breaks Service provision at Haydock Avenue

2.0 METHODOLOGY

General

2.1 The Panel received reports and presentations from internal services, external agencies and expert witnesses at its meetings which were held virtually.

2.2 The Panel did not undertake site visits due to the COVID-19 pandemic constraints.

Co-option

2.3 Mr Paul Adair (Headteacher at Castlebar Primary School) was co-opted onto the Panel at the first meeting due to his expertise in children's social care. He sat on several committees and boards with the local authority including the Ealing Learning Partnership Safeguarding & Wellbeing Committee and the Ealing Safeguarding Children Board.

2.4 Castlebar Primary School, located on Hathaway Gardens in West Ealing, was one of the six special schools in the borough. It was a day special school with good specialist facilities for children aged 4-11 years. The school catered for pupils who had moderate to severe learning difficulties and able to benefit from a modified, adapted curriculum. There were up to eight children in each class with a teacher and a teaching assistant or nursery nurse. Speech and language therapists were based at the school three days a week and an occupational therapist present for two days a week. Individual programmes were incorporated into the class work.

Publicity

2.5 The Panel's work was publicised on the Council's website and by direct emails.

3.0 DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS
EALING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES
Background

- 3.1 In providing a strategic overview of the Ealing Children's Social Care Service at the first meeting, Carolyn Fair (Director Children and Families) and Gary Jones (Assistant Director Children's Social Care) explained that the borough had a population of 342,000 residents which was the fourth highest in London. 85,600 (25% of the population) were children and young people under the age of 18, compared to 24% in London. In 2019, 54,578 attended state school in the borough.
- 3.2 Ealing was the third most ethnically diverse local population in the United Kingdom with 84% of pupils from a minority ethnic origin compared to 34% nationally.
- 3.3 Over 170 languages were spoken across the borough. In schools, the proportion of children and young people who spoke English as an additional language in primary schools was 64% (national average was 21%). In secondary schools it was 54% (national average was 17%). English was a secondary language in 34% of households across the borough.
- 3.4 Ealing was the 88th most deprived local authority area with around 11,910 young people aged under 16 years living in low income families – 12th highest among all London boroughs.
- 3.5 72.8% of all residents living in the borough were in employment. 16% of pupils were eligible for free school meals at both primary and high school levels.
- 3.6 The impact of COVID-19 was already felt in the economy locally, including a trebling of universal credit applications since the beginning of the year.
- 3.7 The Children's Social Care Service (CSCS) was responsible for supporting and protecting vulnerable children. This included providing children and their families with extra help. The service took steps to ensure that children who were thought to be at risk of harm were kept safe. The services provided included a range of integrated services from dealing with initial referrals to children leaving the care of the authority.
- 3.8 In 2018, 14% of children attending school in Ealing were identified as having a Special Educational Need (SEN). 11% were on SEN support and 3% had an Education, Health and Care Plan.

THE 2019 OFSTED INSPECTION AND ITS OUTCOMES

Ofsted Inspection

- 3.9 The Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) was one of a cycle of inspections for Local Authorities in England and Wales. The inspection gave a view on the quality of work to support and safeguard children and young people by a local authority. Therefore, the authority needed to carefully consider the inspection findings and progress being made against inspection priority actions.
- 3.10 The current Ofsted regulatory and inspection system took place over a 3-year cycle and local authorities were subject to one graded inspection within that 3-year cycle and up to two focused visits and/or a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) visit. The ILACS process also involved an Annual Engagement meeting between Ofsted and the authority each year. The authority was required to submit a self-assessment ahead of this meeting.
- 3.11 The ILACS focused on the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements regarding:
- helping and protecting children
 - the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they lived, including those children who returned home
 - the arrangements for permanence for children who were looked after, including adoption
 - the experiences and progress of care leavers
- 3.12 The Inspectors also evaluated:
- the effectiveness of leaders and managers
 - the impact they had on the lives of children and young people
 - the quality of professional practice
- 3.13 Ealing had an ILACS in November 2019 and was graded as Requiring Improvement. The inspectors identified the following six areas that required further improvement:
- (1) The social work capacity and allocation of cases.
 - (2) The quality and timeliness of responses to referrals, including strategy discussions and child protection enquiries.
 - (3) The quality and consistency of management oversight and challenge by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).
 - (4) Sufficiency of accommodation, including the range of accommodation options for care leavers.
 - (5) The quality and accuracy of performance reporting and quality assurance activities particularly the data reports.
 - (6) The quality of responses to children and young people who were at risk of being homeless and children on the edge of care.

Improvement Action Plan

- 3.14 Subsequent to the inspection outcome, the CSCS compiled an Improvement Action Plan incorporating the Ofsted recommendations. The service had added an additional seventh connected priority to seek, represent and listen to the voices of children and families. The action plan was now a year in from the implementation. It was overseen and monitored fortnightly by the Children's Services Improvement Board (CSIB) chaired by the Executive Director of Children, Adults and Public Health and reported monthly to the Portfolio Holder, Leader and Chief Executive. Reporting to the CSIB had an increased focus on evidencing outcomes for children in line with the Ofsted inspection framework grade descriptors and reporting on data exceptions.
- 3.15 The virtual annual engagement meeting took place in September 2019, slightly later than scheduled due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The inspectors noted the improvement in Ealing's self-assessment including the response to staff and families in the COVID-19 context.
- 3.16 The routine Ofsted inspections had been suspended over the pandemic period but inspectors expected to undertake a series of assurance visits instead. This would involve five inspectors looking at the entire system over three weeks including three days on site. Ealing anticipated an assurance visit in early 2021.
- 3.17 The focused assurance meetings would evaluate the quality and impact of practice within a challenging context for the previous six months primarily in the three practice areas of help and protection; children in care and care leavers; and impact of leaders.

WORKFORCE STRATEGY (OFSTED ACTION 1)

- 3.18 The draft children and adults social care workforce strategy 2020-2023, the associated workforce action plan for 2020-2021 and the annual workforce return for 2019-2020 were highlighted to the Panel. The joint children's and adults' social care strategy was seen as a strength because there was one approach to the borough's vulnerable population regarding workforce development. The annual return was submitted every November and the Board monitored the workforce action plan fortnightly.
- 3.19 Ealing's social worker workforce was reflective of the comparative London social worker population, although Ealing had a slightly higher representation of under 30-year olds and a higher proportion were from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group (BAME). Ealing, like many other London authorities, had a young workforce with a short tenure (for example, 39% had less than two years' service) that could impact on practice standards and service delivery if development and retention of workers were not maintained.
- 3.20 Ealing's children's social worker recruitment statistics compared favourably with the London social worker workforce. For example, Ealing had lower agency and vacancy rates compared to the rest of London. Furthermore, Ealing's permanent workforce expanded significantly (by 8.6%) in September 2018-September 2019 which reflected relative success in

recruiting social workers onto permanent contracts. Nonetheless, there remained a high reliance on agency staff which was indicative of further demand for services and a shortfall in the supply of workers.

- 3.21 During the first lockdown, the service undertook immediate action in adapting their practice and service delivery in response to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to safeguard children and young people in the borough and best social work practice. The care leavers received food parcels, increased subsistence payments and additional financial support for those who required it. The Ealing Safeguarding Children Partnership continued to meet virtually and responded well to the challenges. A risk register was in place and overseen by the Partnership. The staff received support to ensure that their mental and physical wellbeing was a priority.
- 3.22 Staff used WhatsApp and Skype for virtual visits to children and carers where there were less concerns so children were looked after in stable placements. One of the biggest challenges was of children not being in schools which was vital in detecting any initial safeguarding issues with their pupils. The special schools remained open during the lockdown as their students were classified as vulnerable.
- 3.23 Schools were contacted virtually but this was irregular as they were busy addressing other educational matters online with their students. Staff continued to see children where there were safeguarding concerns but took the necessary precautions. Staff were provided with the appropriate personal protective equipment in line with the public health guidance.
- 3.24 The call duty service continued to work on a rota basis from Perceval House whilst the rest of the staff worked from home. There was increased engagement from the adolescent young people who preferred virtual contact. There was more virtual interaction with the various social work professionals. The service adapted well in moving things to a virtual platform during the first lockdown which prepared them well for the second one.
- 3.25 The CSCS, in accordance with the Council's response to Black Lives Matter movement, had recently started a Children's Equality Group which was co-chaired by three senior managers.

Workforce Data

GENDER	Female	Male	Unspecified
Adults and directorate support (n=347)	78.4%	21.6%	0.3%
Children and Families (n=353)	87.3%	12.7%	0.0%
Total	82.9%	17.0%	0.1%

AGE	<25 Years	25-34 Years	35 -44 Years	45-54 Years	55- 64 Years	65+ Years
Adults	0.9%	8.9%	18.7%	30.3%	35.4%	5.8%
Children and Families	2.6%	23.3%	28.4%	25.6%	17.6%	2.6%
Total	1.7%	16.2%	23.6%	27.9%	26.5%	4.1%

DISABILITY	No	Not Known	Yes
Adults (and Directorate support)	86.5%	8.9%	4.6%
Children and Families	81.0%	15.0%	4.0%
Average	83.7%	12.0%	4.3%

ETHNICITY	White	Black	Asian	Mixed	Other	Unknown	BAME
Adults	38.0%	31.1%	19.0%	5.2%	0.6%	6.1%	55.9%
Children and Families	31.4%	27.2%	17.0%	9.1%	1.4%	13.9%	54.7%
Total	34.7%	29.1%	18.0%	7.1%	1.0%	10.0%	56.3%

Children's Social Workers

Source: Children's social worker workforce 2019¹ (n = 215)

NB: The social worker data summarised below *includes* social work managers and supervisors and registered social workers without a caseload, such as Independent Reviewing Officers.

SOCIAL WORKERS (FTE)	Permanent	Agency	TOTAL	Agency Worker Rate
Ealing	203	44	247	17.9%
Outer London	2,855	838	3,693	22.7%
London	5,162	1,616	6,778	23.8%

AGE (FTE)	20 – 29 Years	30 – 39 Years	40 – 49 Years	50+ Years
Ealing	18.2%	27.7%	26.0%	28.1%
Outer London	14.8%	32.2%	23.9%	29.2%
London	14.2%	32.4%	23.3%	30.1%

¹ Official Statistics, Children's social work workforce 2019
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-work-workforce-2019>

ETHNICITY (Headcount)	White	Mixed	Asian	Black	Other	Unknown	BAME
Ealing	32.1%	6.5%	14.4%	29.3%	0.5%	17.2%	50.7%
Outer London	38.6%	4.9%	8.3%	29.4%	1.5%	17.4%	44.0%
London	40.4%	4.8%	7.9%	29.9%	1.8%	15.3%	44.3%

TIME IN SERVICE (FTE)	0-2 Years	2-5 Years	5-10 Years	10-20 Years	20+ Years
Ealing	38.9%	26.7%	15.3%	14.4%	4.7%
Outer London	43.7%	29.9%	12.7%	10.1%	3.5%
London	39.5%	27.6%	14.5%	14.0%	4.4%

VACANCIES (FTE)	Permanent Social Workers	Number of Vacancies	Vacancy Rate	% of Vacancies Covered by Agency
Ealing	203	33	14.0%	100%
Outer London	2,855	785	21.6%	83%
London	5,162	1,649	24.2%	78%

AGENCY WORKERS (FTE)	Covering Vacancy	Other Agency Social Workers	% Covering Vacancies
Ealing	33	11	75%
Outer London	650	188	78%
London	1,297	319	80%

TURNOVER (FTE)	Number of Starters	Number of Leavers	Joiner Rate	Turnover Rate
Ealing	47	42	23.1%	20.6%
Outer London	774	526	27.1%	18.4%
London	1,232	913	23.9%	17.7%

Children's Equality Group

- 3.26 In the summer of 2020, the directorate set up a Children's Equality Group (CEG) in response to the Black Lives Matter movement.
- 3.27 The vision of the CEG was Equality, Equity and Empowerment. It would focus on racism and ethnicity-based discrimination as a protected characteristic over the next 18-20 months.
- 3.28 The CEG was co-chaired by three senior managers – Judith Chambers-Thomas (Principal Education Psychologist), Angie Dennison (Supportive Action for Families in Ealing (SAFE) Strategy Manager and Carol Yates (Head of Service Leaving Care, At Risk of Homelessness, Unaccompanied Minors and Housing Support). The Co-Chairs fed back issues that staff raised at the forums to the senior management team.
- 3.29 The CEG had met three times since inception and around 70 staff had attended the forums. A further meeting was due to be held later that week which would focus on the staff concerns around COVID-19 vaccinations particularly as a large proportion of the staff was from the BAME group.
- 3.30 An additional smaller core group of 20 members from across the Children's Service was created to help determine the agenda planning and focus of the forum.
- 3.31 In November 2020, the core group met with David Weaver of DWC Consulting as part of Ealing's Big Conversation with staff. This assisted with the key priorities for an action plan. Ealing Council had recently commissioned DWC Consulting, an experienced leadership consultancy with significant experience on issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to provide independent advice, challenge and support on how to imbed EDI into the Council's culture to support its Future Ealing transformation programme.
- 3.32 The Panel noted the ongoing progress in the Ofsted Improvement Plan Summary and commended the approach taken by the Children's Social Care Service in addressing the challenging needs of the staff and the borough's vulnerable families over the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.33 The Panel conveyed its condolences to everybody who had lost a loved one during the pandemic.

Key Issues

In interrogating the presentations, the Panel sought clarification on certain issues:

- How had the improvement in the quality and accuracy of the data and performance reporting progressed?

It was advised that the programme of work around data and performance reporting was underway. The programme would run until October 2021. The service was being supported by an organisation called BetterGov to deliver the Mosaic upgrade and improvements. There had been

significant improvements in the quality of data reporting as it was a priority area.

- Was the capacity of the data quality officers sustainable for the next 6-12 months particularly in the difficult COVID-19 situation?
It was advised that the service had recruited new data quality officers within the performance team. The team was under immense pressure in response to COVID-19 so an additional interim resource had been provided to undertake this work.
- Did the Council have a robust performance measurement system in place to identify underperformance early?
It was advised that there was a rigorous approach to understanding the performance data. The Power BI system was a dynamic tool which enabled the service heads to monitor the key performance indicators in real time and a visual way on an hourly/daily basis. The service had the appropriate tools in ensuring that the officers were ahead of any challenging curves. There was a vigorous sharing of information across the partnership. The Partnership Board consisting of council, education, health and police representatives considered a detailed monthly report.

Most priorities within the improvement plan summary were progressing well against the set timescales. However, there had been limited progress on some priorities such as domestic abuse hub, quality and range of housing provision for care leavers, and robust performance management mainly due to the pandemic. The service received a high number of domestic violence referrals and had recently recruited two staff skilled in supporting such victims.

The service achieved a very high level of engagement with looked after children but found participation and engagement of children/young people in child protection conferences more challenging. The service was seeking different approaches and a survey had gone out to this group.

- What was the shared vision across the children's safeguarding services?
It was advised that there was a unified vision to ensure that the borough's children and young people were given every opportunity to flourish by safeguarding them at every possible point. There was a single approach in assisting children and families in the borough. Ensuring an environment that allowed young people to thrive was a key priority within the Council's Future Ealing programme.
- How was the service dealing with the increase in domestic violence referrals?
It was advised that there had been a marginal increase in the domestic violence referrals at the beginning of the pandemic but a significant reduction during the first lockdown. The figures had reduced to slightly more than normal levels since then. The service was doing more work at the start in providing a robust response which enabled mental support for families as early as possible.

- What was being done about reducing the costs associated with the high percentage of agency staff within the service?

It was advised that the agency staff costs for children's social workers were about 14% higher than permanent staff which had a significant impact on the service's budget. Ealing had 26% (17.9% in 2019) of agency staff. For some authorities across London this varied from 20-45%. The high cost of living in London was the main deterrent for many younger social workers. They often chose to move elsewhere after completing their training for more affordable accommodation. The service was considering various ways of recruiting and retaining permanent staff particularly in a challenging COVID-19 pandemic environment.

The children's social work was by nature a profession where individuals risked burnout. Therefore, the service focused immensely on the support and wellbeing of staff. The offer of support was enhanced in the last eight months due to the pandemic. Ealing had an impressive record of people who stayed for a long time with a large number of the management team having been there for over 10 years.

- Had consideration been given, in liaison with the Portfolio Holder, to offering higher salaries in attracting and retaining the right staff despite the incredibly challenging financial environment?

It was advised that the service had previously benchmarked with other authorities on the social worker pay and intended to do this again. Ealing had been in the middle of the league table as some inner London boroughs paid more. However, Ealing had very frequently seen some social workers return so the likely issue was deemed to be the promotion of the offer and not increased salaries. Experienced social workers tended to stay longer whilst the newly qualified chose to leave on completion of their two years' training.

The service had a series of programmes in place to actively recruit a permanent workforce of both newly qualified and experienced social workers.

- What were the other aspects of the recruitment package?

It was advised that other aspects of the social worker recruitment package included support that was offered to do a difficult job, regular supervision, clear reporting lines to management, lower caseloads and a high quality ongoing training that was unique to Ealing. Ealing was part of the West London Alliance training conglomerate which worked with different sectors to better match the training offer with the business needs.

There was an impact on supporting staff during the lockdown as the BAME group were disproportionately affected by COVID-19. There were regular weekly communications with the staff updating them on the issues as well as advice and guidance. Individual risk assessments were conducted for all staff and the needs addressed accordingly. Shielding

staff did not undertake any physical meetings. Some staff had lost family members and a foster carer had died during the pandemic.

- What psychological support was provided to care leavers, particularly asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors, who would have experienced trauma, separation and loss of a family?
It was advised that a team of psychologists was part of the Brighter Futures programme. Each service, including the carer leavers service, had a dedicated psychologist who provided consultation, advice and support to vulnerable children. A lead psychologist had been recruited in the Leaving Care team who worked closely with the unaccompanied asylum seeking young people by screening for emotional and mental health difficulties. Children’s Mental Health Services could be accessed by young people who required that level of support. Ealing uniquely had clinical psychologists embedded throughout the statutory teams enabling direct access to consultation for social workers. The carers for young people also received ongoing training around trauma informed work.
- How did the virtual meetings compare with physical meetings?
It was acknowledged that there were advantages and disadvantages to both virtual and physical meetings. Generally, social workers preferred physical meetings as some things such as bruises were difficult to detect online. However, there had been better professional interactions in virtual meetings regarding care plans and approaches with families that were being supported. Experience showed that young people, particularly autistic children, tended to engage more in virtual meetings. The service intended to deploy both methods going forward – for example, a risk assessment could be conducted virtually prior to a physical visit.

No.	Proposed Recommendation
R1	Ealing Council should provide adequate corporate support for Children’s Social Care Service in the delivery of its substantial action plan to minimise any adverse impact on staff and vulnerable families in the borough.

CARE LEAVERS INDEPENDENT ACCOMMODATION (OFSTED ACTIONS 4 AND 6)

- 3.34 The average age that care leavers left the family home to live independently was 18 years compared to 25 years for most other young people. Many care leavers came from traumatic beginnings so had more challenges in managing independent living.
- 3.35 The Council ensured that care leavers moved from a semi-independent accommodation where they were prepared for independence into permanent accommodation. In the last decade, this had been in council tenancies known as quota accommodation.
- 3.36 There had been particular challenges in the last three years in the availability of quota accommodation which meant that the care leavers were not in a position to secure permanent accommodation as easily as in the

past. Some of the reasons for this included the number of homes being decanted during the Council's major regeneration programme. This had impacted on the availability of single unit occupancy homes leading to a backlog of quota properties. The costs of private rented accommodation in London were significantly higher than nationally and many landlords did not accept tenants on benefits.

- 3.37 Over the last year, Children's Service had worked with Housing Services in dealing with the backlog of young people waiting for or looking to move into accommodation. There was a joint Housing Panel chaired by Mark Wiltshire (Director of Community Development) which met bi-monthly with oversight from Councillor Julian Bell (Leader of the Council), Councillor Yvonne Johnson (Portfolio Holder for Schools & Children's Services and Deputy Leader) and Cllr David Millican (Shadow Chief Whip and Children & Education). The care leaver accommodation was only one part of the Council's responsibility for housing residents which made it more challenging to ensure that all those in need had availability of permanent secure housing.
- 3.38 There were presently 81 young people ready to move into their accommodation. The service had about 20 quota accommodations a year and had successfully moved the 2019/20 cohort. So far, 22 bidding agreements had been secured for 2020/21 with only two secured actual tenancies. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in less single unit tenancies because fewer people were moving on so scarcer properties available.

Type of Accommodation	Number of Care Leavers
Secured a quota tenancy	17
Bidding for quota	21
Accepted for Quota	20
Accepted subject to further paperwork	0
Secured private rented via housing	2
Secured private rented via LCT	11
Young people in NRPF shared accommodation Joint scheme with housing	12
Young people in shared private rented Joint scheme with housing holding own tenancies	6
Young people aged 18-24 years currently in placements who require independent accommodation	81

- 3.39 In the feedback from the Care Leaver Survey in April/May 2020, young people expressed concern about not having permanent accommodation.

Key Issues

In interrogating the presentations, the Panel sought clarification on certain issues:

- How did the care leaver accommodation figures for 2019/20 compare with previous years?
It was advised that the service worked with an annual target of 20 young people into quota accommodation each year. Hence, the backlog for the 2019/20 of securing 20 quota accommodation had now been achieved. There had been single figures in the previous year which the service was able to accommodate. However, for 2020/21 only two young people had presently secured quota accommodation. The service was endeavouring to get the number of young people approved early in the year to assist them in their bids for accommodation as quickly as possible.

The service would focus on supporting with additional resource to help young people navigate the system for independent accommodation and then secure their bidding more swiftly.

- Despite Ealing's challenges, what could be learnt from other boroughs?
It was advised that the care leaver accommodation processes differed in the boroughs. Some of the neighbouring boroughs provided accommodation for all care leavers but did not bid successfully. This meant that they got through the first process but still needed to bid to find properties. It also depended on the demand and what stock the boroughs had available. There was a high level of demand for single unit tenancies in Ealing which impacted on the numbers available for care leavers. This work was ongoing and a priority for the organisation.
- What follow-up support was provided to the care leavers moving into privately rented housing?
It was advised that the care leavers were supported until they were 25 years old. The service undertook intensive focused action in the early stages to help prepare the young people for independence. It provided financial support where necessary and kept in touch with the particularly vulnerable young people to ensure that they were managing. The Council had recently committed to care leavers no longer having to pay any council tax. The service provided some start-up support to the young people in setting up their flats including a leaving care grant. The service monitored the progress of the care leavers monthly and provided any additional support required. As the Corporate Parent, the Council continued to support the care leavers for as long as possible to give them the best opportunities.
- How did the service deal with the miscommunication that the care leavers received regarding other boroughs?
It was advised that communication with the young people was central to the service as their feedback helped to drive the service provision. Ealing had a strong Corporate Parent Panel (CPP) which listened to the young people. The CPP met quarterly, presently virtually, and was a very powerful voice for the young people particularly regarding how other

boroughs presented information. However, boroughs varied and those outside of London had more availability of housing. For Ealing, it was about what it did for the young people and what they felt was being done to support them to be in accommodation that met their needs. The young people had been very involved in all the work that had been done so far. For example, several young people had expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of some semi-independent accommodation provision. The service had made improvements to the accommodation which the young people could see. Prior to the regeneration projects beginning, the Council was able to house a large number of young people in social housing. However, while regeneration projects were underway meeting the housing needs of care leavers in Council owned accommodation would be more challenging for the next three years. The service felt it was important to communicate with the young people in giving them the best opportunity to a range of needs and accommodations. The private rented sector had worked well for some young people particularly unaccompanied young people who enjoyed sharing a house.

- How was the children's service coping with the challenging budget situation?

It was advised that the importance of securing permanent housing for the young people also supported the budget position. It was important to secure permanent accommodation for the young people as quickly as possible. Therefore, anything that the service did to support young people was also the right thing for the Council's budget.

- Was the service satisfied with the type of accommodation provision available for young people in the current developments within the borough?

It was advised that the conversations with developers were always encouraging them to think about the appropriate level of social housing provision. The Council's existing accommodation ought to be reassessed when it became empty to establish whether it could be redeveloped innovatively for a different use. The Leader of the Council was supportive of the ongoing work between Children's Services and Housing Services.

- How had the discussions on the potential care leavers rent guarantor scheme progressed?

It was advised that the scheduled discussions in January 2021 with an external organisation regarding a potential care leavers rent guarantor scheme had been cancelled due to the COVID-19 lockdown. However, Carol Yates was arranging to meet with officers at Kent County Council which had implemented a successful scheme that supported young people within the private rented sector.

- Was the Council able to top-up the £350 per week cost for a semi-independent accommodation at the YMCA to enable a young person to move into privately rented independent accommodation?

The Panel heard that it was important to support young people into sustainable independent accommodation where they could reside longer term. The young people could achieve this by using housing benefits and

other accessible funds. It would be challenging for the Council to top-up the difference in rent as the young people would become reliant on this top-up for the long term. There had been a significant impact on the budget in retaining young people longer in semi-independent accommodation due to the lack of affordable permanent accommodation. It was equally important for the young people to live independently and successfully manage their own finances.

- What support was provided to a young person in transitioning from a semi-independent to an independent accommodation?
It was advised that each year there were about 80 young people who turned 18 years of age requiring support from the Council. This year, the Council had only secured housing for a quarter of this number. Some of the young people went into social tenancies, private rented accommodation and university. Every young person had regular contact with a social worker or a personal advisor. The head of service reviewed the cases monthly and the Council continued to provide appropriate support to a care leaver until the age of 25 years.
- How did the Council determine the quota accommodation allocation for the young people?
It was advised that the service undertook a detailed assessment of the needs of the young people in deciding the quota accommodation allocation. For example, with the current paucity for quota housing the focus had been on the more vulnerable as they required secure lifelong tenancies. Therefore, young people likely to struggle in the private rented market were considered first for quota housing and given appropriate additional support.
- Had there been instances of housing applications by care leavers which had not been progressed any further?
It was advised that there had been some occasions where the Council had paused the housing application for care leavers, for example when a young person was unable to manage independent living at the time due to a mental health breakdown.

No.	Proposed Recommendation
R2	Ealing Council should ensure that there is effective cross-organisational working of the relevant services, such as Children’s Social Care Service with the Housing Service, to address the needs of vulnerable children and young people in the borough.
R3	Ealing Council should set up a care leavers rent guarantor scheme as soon as possible to support young people within the private rented sector.
R4	Ealing Council should introduce a condition on large developments within the borough for a priority provision of social accommodation suitable for care leavers. For example, including adequate rooms with access to communal facilities such as kitchens.

CHILDREN'S PERFORMANCE DATA (OSTED ACTIONS 2, 3 AND 5)

- 3.40 In updating the Panel on the progress in children's performance data for the period April-November 2020, the Assistant Director Children's Social Care outlined that:
- 3.41 Senior managers monitored progress weekly to ensure that additional support was provided to the teams where necessary.
- 3.42 The senior management group monitored children's data monthly.
- 3.43 The Children's Safeguarding Partnership Board regularly monitored children's performance data to ensure that the service was safeguarding vulnerable children.
- 3.44 There had been 8,556 contacts with the service for the year so far. This was a reduction of 12% compared to 9,718 in the previous year. 60% of the contacts originated from the police and health services, with contacts from the police and schools resulting in more referrals.
- 3.45 The rolling 12-month average for enquiry to referral conversion remained at 30% but the April-November 2020 rate was slightly lower at 28%. In November 2020, the referrals at 333 were above the average 300 for the year.
- 3.46 The COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions caused a 38% reduction in referrals in the year so far. The April-November 2020 referral rate per 10,000 was at 292.6 compared to 468.9 for the same time in the previous year. This was below the statistical neighbours' average of 538.5 and national average at 534.8.
- 3.47 The re-referral year to date rate remained high at nearly 23% despite the continued downward direction. This was higher than that of the statistical neighbours at 18.83% but in line with the national average of 22.60%. Ealing had large sibling groups returning within 12 months. There were 67 re-referrals in November 2020 made up by 40 families, equating to an average of 1.67 children per family. The biggest sibling groups were four families of four children.
- 3.48 The total number of Section 47s (children at risk of significant harm) to date was 611 compared to 903 for the same period in the previous year, a reduction of 32%.
- 3.49 Child protection registrations increased by 3% to 22% compared to 12% in the previous year. In the last month, six of the seven children re-registered were from the same family. 82% of all re-registered children lasted on the plan between 1-12 years prior.
- 3.50 At the start of a child protection investigation the service had about 15 days in which to go to conference. The year to date performance for child protection conferences was 65%, mostly due to the disruption of March-April

2020. It exceeded the previous year's figure of 61% but was below the expected 80%.

Key Issues

In interrogating the presentation, the Panel sought clarification on certain issues:

- What was the reason for the high enquiry rate in November 2020?
It was advised that the COVID-19 pandemic had a big impact on the number of enquiries received. During the first lockdown in March-April 2020, there were very low numbers of enquires received as children were schooled at home. However, as the schools re-opened to broader groups of children the number of enquiries went up in November-December 2020. The schools were critical in identifying children and young people at risk of harm.
- How was the service ensuring that children were safeguarded whilst studying from home?
It was advised that the schools were becoming increasingly sophisticated in online and video learning with families. The school staff tracked and quickly referred children who were not visible online or on video. The schools liaised directly with social workers and staff about any particular concerns regarding vulnerable children. The Children's Social Care Service maintained high levels of communication with schools and had an agreement in place on signposting concerns. It was anticipated that the impact of the previous year would be felt by the vulnerable families and the service for some time to come. The service was expecting the number of referrals to rise once the schools reopened fully as the most vulnerable families had been impacted most adversely by the pandemic.
- Why was Ealing's rate of re-referrals higher than that of the statistical neighbours?
It was advised that Ealing's higher re-referral rates were due to various factors such as the size of the family, the demand and seasonal variations. Ealing had quite a high proportion of large sibling groups which distorted the figures quite quickly. There were families with six or more children and one had 13 children. The service monitored the rates for consistency and informed decision making.

No.	<i>Proposed Recommendation</i>
R5	The Children's Social Care Service should work with the relevant services, such as education establishments, in providing appropriate post-COVID 19 support to vulnerable children and young people.

ADOPT LONDON WEST

- 3.51 The Panel heard from Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service – Adopt London West, Regional Adoption Agency) about Adopt London West in respect of children’s adoption provision.
- 3.52 Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) were created nationally to improve the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters plus speed up the matching and placement of children for adoption. In 2018, four RAAs were established across London (North, South, East and West) to work collaboratively on areas that would contribute to an improved equitable standard of services to families. The collaboration became “Adopt London”. The Adopt London West (ALW) RAA consisted of the four West London boroughs of Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham and Hounslow. It was agreed that Ealing would be the host borough for the ALW RAA. The relevant staff from the other boroughs were transferred to Ealing under TUPE legislation on 3 September 2019 and the ALW went live from 1 October 2019.
- 3.53 The ALW had only existed for a few months when the COVID-19 Pandemic began. It presented additional challenges and the services had to be reconvened differently. The team had adjusted accordingly and focused on giving the best experience to the adopters coming through the recruitment and assessment process. Equally important was the ongoing family finding activity that had to be undertaken to find new adoptive families for children.
- 3.54 The government provided additional adoption support funding in response to the pandemic which had enabled the RAAs to collaboratively commission and deliver services quickly across London. The collaboration had the benefit of raising standards of adoption services and equity for adopters and special guardians throughout London. The RAAs established a strong partnership with We Are Family, an adopter-led peer support organisation, in developing a comprehensive webinar programme.

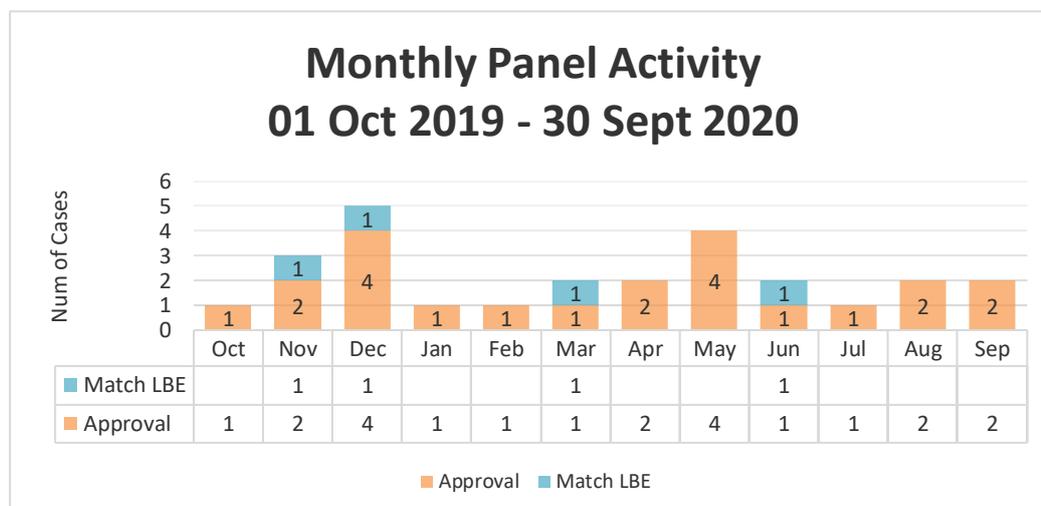
Children open to ALW for Family Finding, on 30 September 2020

Local Authority	Pre ADM	ADM	Placement Order	Total Per Local Authority
Brent	7	2	3	12
Ealing	6	3	3	12
Hammersmith and Fulham	6	2	6	14
Hounslow	10	5	7	22
Total	29	12	19	60

- 3.55 Since October 2019, Ealing had referred 27 children to ALW. 10 of these referrals had closed because the plan for the child had later changed. 17 were presently open (see the breakdown in the table below). Additionally, four Adoption Orders were granted for Ealing Children in April-September 2020.

Children Referred from London Borough of Ealing – September 2020

Stage	Number of Children
Pre-ADM	6
ADM	3
Placement Order	3
Placed for Adoption	5



Total Adoptive Families Approved	Total Ealing Children Matched
22	4

Financial Arrangements

Partner	2019/2020 Financial Contribution £	2019/2020 Percentage Contribution %	7 Months
Brent	378,647	23%	220,877.42
Ealing	656,913	40%	383,199.25
Hammersmith & Fulham	198,797	12%	115,964.92
Hounslow	404,264	25%	235,820.67
Total	1,638,621	100%	955,862.25

Adoption Support Fund – 2018/2019

2018/2019	Brent	Ealing	Hammersmith & Fulham	Hounslow	
Number of applications	34	121	40	46	
Funds received	£87,220.70	£230,384.84	£71,419.76	£116,512.04	
Grand total					£505,537.34

Adoption Support Fund – 2019/2020

2019/2020	Brent	Ealing	Hammersmith & Fulham	Hounslow	
Number of applications	38	107	18	39	
Funds received	£90,438.44	£214,810.70	£45,055.88	£75,699.82	
Grand total					£426,004.84

Adoption Support Fund COVID-19 Emergency Fund

Regional Adoption Agency	£ Awarded
Adopt London South	350,109.00
Adopt London East	173,907.84
Adopt London North	280,651.27
Adopt London West	165,470.19
Total	£970,138.30

Number of Children Matched

Matches	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	Trend
Adopt London South	91	92	51	-45%
Adopt London East	67	46	25	-46%
Adopt London West	24	28	20	-29%
Adopt London North	55	50	25	-50%
Combined	237	216	121	-44%

Adopter Approval

Approvals	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	Trend
Adopt London South	44	52	55	6%
Adopt London East	18	30	24	-20%
Adopt London West	11	13	24	85%
Adopt London North	30	33	18	-45%
Combined	103	128	121	-5%

Key Issues

In interrogating the presentations, the Panel sought clarification on certain issues:

- Why was Ealing's share of the Adoption Support Fund significantly bigger than that of the other three partner boroughs?
The Panel heard that an initial exercise in joining the RAA had established what each partner borough currently spent on their adoption provision. Ealing had a proud tradition of very high quality support for the adopters and special guardians so the budget for those services reflected this. Ealing was clear about not changing the level or quality of support that it offered. The ALW agreed the overall budget to be the sum of the individual budgets. Going forward, consideration would be given to change the budget contribution to reflect the quality of the service.
- How was the service encouraging the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community to consider adoption?
It was advised that Ealing had a very strong connection with the LGBT community and the ALW continued to do the same. For the first time, there had recently been a government funded generalised national campaign which raised awareness of adoption targeted at the LGBT community to encourage adopters to come forward. In February-March 2021, there would be specific London focus on encouraging adopters from the LGBT community. The blogging and messages on the Council's website displayed images of gay couples. The ALW had a partnership with New Family Social, an organisation founded by gay adopters, which encouraged the community and support network of peer-to-peer support to come forward.
- Why was the ALW awarded the least amount in respect of the Covid-19 Emergency Fund compared to the other RAAs?
It was advised that the Covid-19 Emergency Fund was based on the local authority funding formula which was determined by Whitehall. Therefore, the ALW had slightly less funding than the Adopt London East RAA, as West London authorities received less central government funding than East London authorities.
- What was the difference between domestic and private adoptions?
It was advised that domestic adoptions were where the local authority was family finding to recruit adopters to place children. Private adoptions were applications from families who wished to adopt a child that was already part of their family, usually a step-parent. Inter-country adoption was the adoption of children who came from other countries. The ALW had a contract with the inter-country adoption centre which managed these adoptions. The domestic referrals were for those children who usually came through care proceedings or were looked after by the local authority.
- What was the criteria mentioned in the Dom and Jorge case study and why had Ealing accepted them as adopters after they had been turned down in east London for failing to meet a criteria?

It was advised that individual adoption agencies had their own recruitment criteria prior to the establishment of the RAAs. Some agencies had very rigid criteria and turned people down on quite spurious grounds which had been the case with Dom and Jorge. The government was keen for the RAAs to address this issue so some national principles were agreed that all adoption agencies were required to follow. Ealing was inclusive and welcomed adopters from different backgrounds.

- What were the reasons for adopters to withdraw applications?
The Panel heard that there were various reasons why adopters withdrew applications including a change in economic circumstances, change in minds about the time being right for them and an adverse health event.

Adopters' Experience

- 3.56 Mr David Dye and Mrs Susie Dye, a couple who had recently adopted a child, related their experience of the adoption process to the Panel:
- 3.57 Susie Dye had attended an adoption information event in March 2019 and expressed an interest in adopting a child. After initial conversations with the service officers the couple were advised that they were not quite ready for adoption. They were asked to do some further work before reconsideration.
- 3.58 Subsequently, the couple returned to the service in August 2019 and successfully entered stage one of the adoption process in September 2019. The matching panel took place in October 2020 and Delilah was placed with the couple in mid-November 2020.
- 3.59 They felt that it was initially hard to build a relationship with the two social workers who were also judging their suitability. However, they found Ealing's team of professionals empathetic and established a good relationship with them. During the process the couple also had contact with the teams at the neighbouring boroughs of Hounslow and Hammersmith & Fulham. The communication during the second stage in January 2020 took place through video calls.
- 3.60 The couple joined a peer group of adopters from across West London and during the first stage had found the group training sessions useful and informative. A WhatsApp group of the peers helped to share experiences and learn from others.
- 3.61 The couple had found the adoption process life changing. They felt that the foster carers were very good and had introduced them to Delilah as 'Mummy and Daddy'. Delilah still had a brother with the foster carers. The couple would honour the birth mother's request that Delilah be baptised and brought up as a Christian. The pandemic lockdowns had enabled them to bond with the child.

Key Issues

The Panel commended the couple for sharing their unique experience and asked them some questions:

- How could Ealing’s adoption process be improved?
The Panel heard that it had been a long journey for the couple. There had been unavoidable changes in personnel during the course of the process but were grateful for the same supportive social worker throughout. The coordinating of nearly 15 different professionals during the whole process was quite time consuming. The uncertain timelines made it difficult for the couple to make firm plans regarding their own employment matters. Their employers had been very supportive and understanding about the lengthy process which had helped enormously.

The nationally imposed syllabus for the training days was too extensive for the time available. Consideration should be given to condensing the information to make the process more manageable and effective.

Everyone involved in the adoption process was quite stressed because they wanted to get everything right. The whole experience was emotionally intensive and sensitive. The Councillors should contemplate speaking to and supporting the social care staff to fully understand what was involved in these highly demanding roles.

Recognising quite early on in the process that everything was about the best interest of the child which took some getting used to.

- What advice could be given to a new adopting couple?
The Panel learnt that the advice would be to check out the different adoption agencies before deciding on which one to use. They had already recommended ALW to a colleague.
- What support was being provided to the couple regarding the sibling with foster carers and informing Delilah about her adoption?
It was advised that the couple were in regular contact with the foster carers and have had direct contact with Delilah’s brother several times since the placement. It was anticipated that this would continue. The couple were open to direct contact with the birth family but the mother was not engaging presently. The couple awaited feedback from the officers on a draft settling-in letter for the birth mother. The couple were due to meet the psychologist later that week and would seek advice about how best to talk to a two year old child about her adoption. They anticipated this journey for the next 10-20 years of Delilah’s life and letting it be her story to tell others. The couple recognised that the stigma around adoption had changed profoundly nowadays.

No.	Proposed Recommendation
R6	The Children’s Social Care Service should review the information documentation that is provided to adopters with a view to simplifying and making it more user-friendly.

EALING CHILDREN SHORT BREAKS SERVICE

- 3.62 The Panel was scheduled to review the Ealing Children Short Breaks Service provision in Haydock Avenue at its next meeting on 31 March 2021. The centre which had opened in November 2020 provided accommodation-based short breaks for disabled children and young people aged 8-18 years.

4.0 **KEY LEARNING POINTS**

4.1 Some of the key learning points for the Panel were:

- Acknowledging the constructive expertise of the Co-optee.
- Recognising the numerous and diverse organisations that operated across the borough in different ways in managing the needs of vulnerable children and young people.
- The webcasting of the Panel meetings enabled people to view the live proceedings and afterwards.
- The virtual meeting had enabled the adopters with a small child to participate from their home.
- Seeking the views of some of the key stakeholders and their attendance at Panel meetings was a valuable source of gathering information directly.
- The benchmarking exercises provided important comparisons.
- The difficulty in visiting and engaging some external agencies and areas of the community due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.
- The inevitability of identifying problems in the current provision and making suggestions for improvements.
- The review had produced ideas for future service development.
- An important element in the success of initiatives was the promotion and communication of activities, opportunities and new initiatives to the widest audience using relevant communication channels.

5.0 **MEMBERSHIP AND ATTENDANCE**

5.1 The table below shows the membership and attendance of Panel Members and will be updated after the last meeting on 31 March 2021.

Membership and Attendance at Panel Meetings

Name	Total Possible	Actual Attendance	Apologies Received
<u>Members</u>			
<u>Councillors</u>			
Cllr Karanvir Dhadwal (Chair)	3	2	-
Cllr Seema Kumar (Vice Chair)	3	2	-
Cllr Praveen Anand	3	2	-
Cllr Sitarah Anjum	3	2	-
Cllr Jaskiran Chohan	3	2	-
Cllr Tariq Mahmood	3	2	-
Cllr Gary Malcolm	3	2	-
Cllr Swaran Padda	3	2	-
Cllr Chris Summers	3	1	1
<u>Co-optee</u>			
Mr Paul Adair (Headteacher, Castlebar Primary School)	3	2	-
<u>Substitutes and Other Councillors</u>			
- Cllr Miriam Rice substituted for Cllr Chris Summers at the second meeting.			
<u>External Witnesses</u>			
- Mr David Dye and Mrs Susie Dye (Adopters)			
<u>Service Officers</u>			
- Carolyn Fair (Director Children and Families)			
- Gary Jones (Assistant Director Children's Social Care)			
- Debbie Gabriel (Head of Service – Adopt London West, Regional Adoption Agency)			

6.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

6.1 Useful Papers

Ealing Council's Constitution, available at

https://www.ealing.gov.uk/info/201046/decision_making/597/council_constitution.

Scrutiny Review Panel 2 – 2020/2021: Children's Services Ofsted Improvements – Agendas, Minutes and Reports, available at

https://ealing.cmis.uk.com/ealing/Committees/tabid/62/ctl/ViewCMIS_CommitteeDetails/mid/381/id/325/Default.aspx.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Agendas, Minutes and Reports, available at

http://ealing.cmis.uk.com/ealing/Committees/tabid/62/ctl/ViewCMIS_CommitteeDetails/mid/381/id/34/Default.aspx.

Current agendas and reports are available at

<http://ealing.cmis.uk.com/ealing/Committees.aspx>.

6.2 Useful Websites

Ealing Council – www.ealing.gov.uk

Webcast of Panel meetings – [Ealing Council - YouTube Channel](#)

Centre for Governance and Scrutiny – www.cfgs.org.uk

Government Services and Information – www.gov.uk

6.3 Further Information

For further information about Scrutiny Review Panel 2 – 2020/2021: Children's Services Ofsted Improvements please contact:

Harjeet Bains

Overview and Scrutiny Officer

Ealing Council

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7.0 PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Rec No.	Proposed Recommendation
R1	Ealing Council should provide adequate corporate support for Children's Social Care Service in the delivery of its substantial action plan to minimise any adverse impact on staff and vulnerable families in the borough.
R2	Ealing Council should ensure that there is effective cross-organisational working of the relevant services, such as Children's Social Care Service with the Housing Service, to address the needs of vulnerable children and young people in the borough.
R3	Ealing Council should set up a care leavers rent guarantor scheme as soon as possible to support young people within the private rented sector.
R4	Ealing Council should introduce a condition on large developments within the borough for a priority provision of social accommodation suitable for care leavers. For example, including adequate rooms with access to communal facilities such as kitchens.
R5	The Children's Social Care Service should work with the relevant services, such as education establishments, in providing appropriate post-COVID 19 support to vulnerable children and young people.
R6	The Children's Social Care Service should review the information documentation that is provided to adopters with a view to simplifying and making it more user-friendly.

8.0 PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS WITH OFFICER COMMENTS

Rec No.	Proposed Panel Recommendation	Service Officer Comments (Including Any Resource and Legal Implications)	Recommended Cabinet Response (Accept/Reject)
R1	Ealing Council should provide adequate corporate support for Children's Social Care Service in the delivery of its substantial action plan to minimise any adverse impact on staff and vulnerable families in the borough.		
R2	Ealing Council should ensure that there is effective cross-organisational working of the relevant services, such as Children's Social Care Service with the Housing Service, to address the needs of vulnerable children and young people in the borough.		
R3	Ealing Council should set up a care leavers rent guarantor scheme as soon as possible to support young people within the private rented sector.		
R4	Ealing Council should introduce a condition on large developments within the borough for a priority provision of social accommodation suitable for care leavers. For example, including adequate rooms with access to communal facilities such as kitchens.		
R5	The Children's Social Care Service should work with the relevant services, such as education establishments, in providing appropriate post-COVID 19 support to vulnerable children and young people.		
R6	The Children's Social Care Service should review the information documentation that is provided to adopters with a view to simplifying and making it more user-friendly.		