

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel
SUBJECT:	Annual Report of Fostering Service and Panel
LEAD OFFICER:	Roisin Madden Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	

SUMMARY OF REPORT:
POLICY CONTEXT/AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON:
<p>Include here a brief statement on how the recommendations address one or more of the Council's Corporate Plan priorities:</p> <p>Corporate Plan for Croydon 2018-2022</p>

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The overall aim of the Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality, safe and aspirational foster placements that meet the needs of our children looked after.
- 1.2 Children's Services has been successful this year in placing a significant number of children with in-house foster carers and an increased number of children have been placed with connected families. The overall number of foster carers has not increased this year but this is part of a recruitment drive that has now begun. The service is a stable one with few staff changes and we have more children remaining with their foster carers at age 18 on Staying Put arrangements. Recruitment and retention of foster carers remains a priority particularly for older children, sibling groups, children with disabilities and long-term placements.
- 1.3 From 1 November 2020 fostering recruitment was brought back in house and we are hopeful that we will be able to target foster carers from our BAME and other communities to ensure successful and appropriate matching. We are revising how we work with foster carers, with more intensive support for the first six months of their first child being placed, continued use of experienced foster carers for mentoring and promoting the CFCA.
- 1.4 This report complies with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards with the Fostering Service Manager monitoring and reporting to corporate parenting members about the management and outcomes of the service.

2. Role of the Fostering Service

2.1 The Fostering Service is responsible for:

- I. Support, supervision and training of foster carers, including family and friend carers (connected carers)
- II. Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster placements in accordance with fostering national minimum standards
- III. Promoting placement stability and permanence planning for our children
- IV. Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
- V. Private Fostering

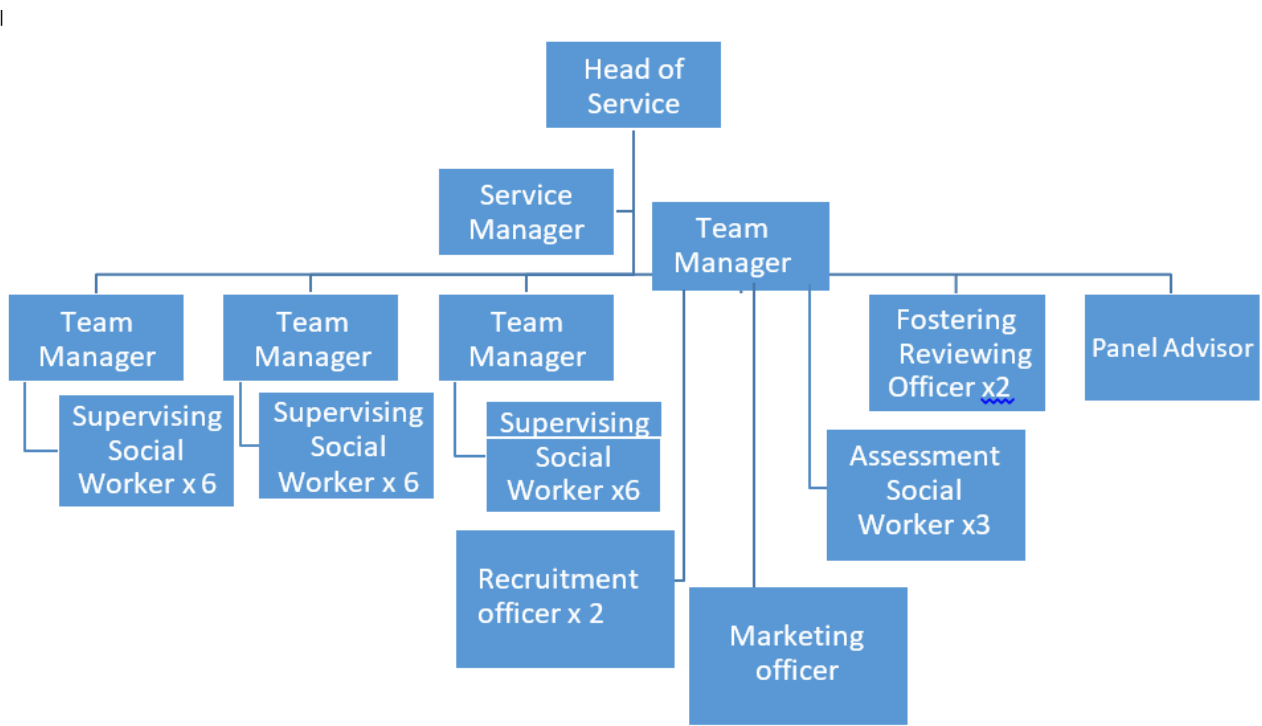
2.2 The priorities are to ensure that:

- I. All children who come into care have an experience of safe, secure and consistent care
- II. All children experience a safe place within which they can play, grow, thrive and are supported to reach their full potential
- III. The holistic needs of any child are addressed and supported through health, education and social development enhancing opportunity to develop resilience and achieve.
- IV. Support for early permanence for children in care and to ensure that children who cannot safely remain at home are offered a permanent family base without delay

2.3 We have a varied range of foster carers with different skills and experience who provide placements including respite; transition to permanence through adoption and long term fostering. We also assess and support family and friends who want to look after children in their extended family or social network, these are called connected carers. All foster carers are supervised and supported by supervising social workers from the fostering teams and provided with training opportunities.

3. Service Structure

3.1 Croydon's Fostering Service is managed under the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Leavers. There is a Service Manager with responsibility for this service. Most of the staff within this service are permanently employed.



3.2 The supervising social workers assess, supervise and support foster carers, ensuring that they meet fostering standards, have an annual review and monitor quality of care, training and development of carers. The most significant aspect of their work is to ensure that children remain safe in foster care and that carers feel supported to fulfil their responsibilities. The two fostering reviewing officers are responsible for overseeing annual reviews of all our foster carers and making recommendations about terms of approval. Croydon has a part time fostering panel advisor who is a point of reference in relation to the fostering panel's policies, procedures and expectations; ensuring that panels undertake reviews of carers as required and follow regulations.

4. Supervision and Support to Foster Carers

4.1 We have 222 fostering households. Croydon looks after 691 children who are placed in a variety of placements in accordance with their care plan.

Tab 1a. Current LAC by Placement Type and Status	Local	UASC	Total
A6 - Placed for adoption with placement order (under section 21 of the 2002 Act) not with current foster carer	9		9
H5 - Semi-independent living accommodation not subject to Children's Homes Regulations	36	9	45
K2 - Children's Homes subject to Children's Homes Regulations	30		30
P1 - Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility	15		15
R1 - Residential care home	2		2
R2 - NHS/Health Trust	1		1
R5 - Young Offender Institution or prison	3		3

S1 - All Residential schools	2		2
U1 - Foster placement with relative or friend- long term fostering	32	1	33
U3 - Foster placement with relative or friend- not long term or FFA	51	4	55
U4 - Placement with other foster carer- long term fostering	141	89	230
U5 - Placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter- FFA	2		2
U6 - Placement with other foster carer - not long term or FFA	156	108	264
Total	480	211	691

4.2 In March 2021, 48% of our children in care were placed with in-house foster carers, the remainder were placed with independent fostering agencies, residential units or in semi-independent accommodation, with some being placed at home with their parents and a number placed for adoption.

4.3 Since April 2020 37 households (56 foster carers) were deregistered.

Deregistration reasons	Foster Home
Connected foster carers who secured permanence via a legal order or children turned 18	11
Due to ill health	2
Carer resignation	25
Connected carers where children have returned home	3
Fostering for another council or agency, or moved out of borough	5
Deregistered due to standards for care	3
Retired	7
Grand Total	56

4.4 Other reasons included family issues, wanting to take a break, full-time employment, unhappy with support and no placements for over a year.

5. Training and development

5.1 Training and development of foster carers is important to the service and further specialist training was commissioned and had started at the beginning of 2020/2021. The training provides experienced and newly approved foster carers opportunities to learn how best to meet the needs of our children, including our most complex who are likely to be traumatised.

5.2 Training has included:

- Research in Practice and Foster Talk tools and research
- Trauma informed practice (delivered by systemic clinical therapists)
- Gangs (delivered by YOS specialist)
- Children Looked After education (delivered by virtual school)
- Caring for children with disabilities (delivered by disabilities youth service)

5.3 Development for supervising social workers and foster carers has included:

- Systemic clinical therapists facilitating reflective social work conversations with staff to promote better understanding of our children's emotional needs and empower them to support foster carers to meet these needs. They also provide consultations to supervising social workers and have supported foster carers to improve placement stability.
- Structured consultations for foster carers with CAMHS, which are also attended by the supervising social worker and child's social worker.
- Training a cohort of foster carers to deliver UASC specific training which staff also attend to ensure joint learning.
- Systemic practice training for supervising social workers and managers.
- The mentoring programme continues for foster carers.
- Croydon Council continues to support Croydon Foster Carers Association (CFCA) and their work with foster carers.
- Communication and Support: Support groups continued to take place each month facilitated by CFCA but the service plans to expand on this to cover a wider area and need. We plan to expand on our written and direct interaction with carers and increase the opportunities for feedback and challenge.

6. Areas for development: gaps in provision

- Parent and child placements. We do not have any carers who are approved to take a parent or parents and child when parent is over 18 years old.
- Large sibling groups. We do not have any carers who are approved to take 3 or more children as a sibling group.
- Teenagers and children with complex needs, particularly those who have suffered trauma and present with emotional and behavioural needs.

7. Recruitment Activity (April 2020 to March 2021)

7.1 Fostering recruitment was brought back in house in November with a dedicated team with responsibility for attracting and assessing foster carers. There is a revised recruitment and retention strategy which focuses on the rewards of becoming a foster carer, alongside the incentives that we offer and outlining our high level of support. We are keen to attract as many local foster carers as possible, with a target of 30 per year.

7.2 Our offer includes:

- A customer-focused service and a competitive foster carer package
- Robust, bespoke multidisciplinary support

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- A transparent, supportive and timely assessment process
- Understanding and supportive supervising social workers who are always 'on the other end of the phone'.

7.3 We will be measuring the outcomes of our strategy with quarterly progress reports to help identify what is working and what needs to improve. This will include:

- Analysis of initial enquiry data
- Analysis of prospective carers' data
- Analysis of referrals
- Analysis of exit interviews/feedback to evidence how services can be improved and promoted
- Analysis of 'drop out' stage in recruitment
- Evaluation of recruitment channels used
- Surveys from newly approved foster carers

8. Marketing

8.1 Marketing and promotion activities have been impacted heavily by restrictions over the past year. Nevertheless, we have carried out a range of activities to promote and market the fostering service. These have included:

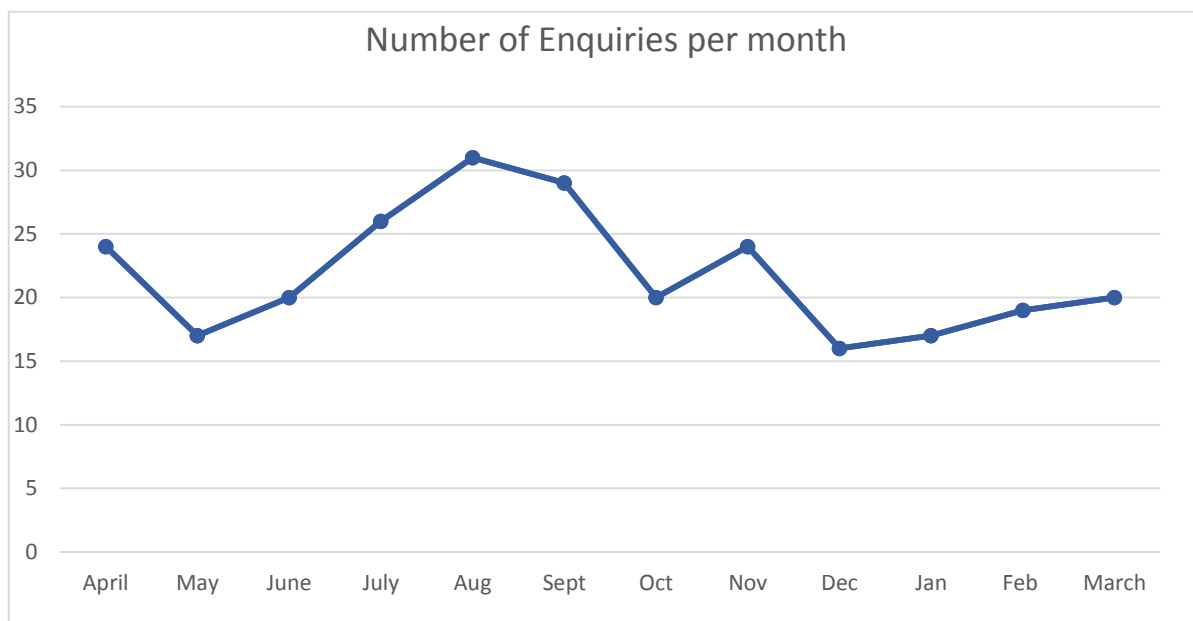
- Council tax flyer inserts to all residents
- JC Decaux advertising boards
- Community engagement through forums or newsletters
- Two marketing activity trials: a contract with Akero, a digital marketing company; and a trial of a promoted live webinar information event

9. Update on recruitment April 2020 – March 2021

(i) **Initial Stages of Application**

During the period there were 263 enquiries to the fostering recruitment team, the majority via the phone with email and online portal being the next most commonly used methods.

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- 9.1 From these enquiries, a total of 51 Initial Home Visits (IHV) were conducted, a conversion rate of 19.3%. The average time from first contact and an IHV being completed was 37 days with delays being in part due to circumstances of the applicant who were making enquiries but were not ready to proceed at that time.
- 9.2 38 households were invited to attend Skills to Foster, with 32 attending. The Skills to Foster is a mandatory for all applicants and forms part of the assessment process. From the 32 households that attended 23 have progressed through to assessment; at the time of writing, seven households had been approved from the cohort who attended after April 2020. A total of 20 households withdrew from the process. The recruitment service has worked closely with EMPIRE to forge links with young people as their contribution is unique.
- 9.3 From April – March 2021, 13 households were approved by Croydon's independent foster panel which is a conversion rate of 4.94% from enquiries; this is within national averages. Given the disruption of Covid, this is an encouraging figure. Assessments were presented to panel within eight months (expected timescale) for 11 of the households with two needing more time for further exploration.
- 9.4 From the 13 households approved, all have had at least one child placed with them. In total, the carers approved in this time period have cared for 18 children and young people.

10. Fostering Panel

10.1 There were a total of 29 Panel dates and 104 matters to consider:

Type of Meeting	Number of Cases	Outcomes
Approvals	13	12 Approved 1 Deferred
Connected Persons/ Family and Friends	21	19 Approved 1 Declined 1 Deferred
First Year Reviews	21	21 Re-approved
3 Yearly Reviews	27	27 Re-approved
De-registration	6 + 1 ongoing	De-registered
Resignations	7	7 Resignations
Long Term Matches	6	6 Matches
Panel updates	2	

10.2 Feedback provided by applicants, foster carers and professionals is that the panel is a warm and positive environment, with the Chair and panel members making applicants feel “at ease” whilst progressing with case discussions. This more “positive feel” to the fostering panel is a welcome improvement as previous feedback was not as good.

10.3 The fostering panel is currently equipped to manage and consider the number of matters that are presented. This situation will be monitored closely in relation to the expected impact of fostering recruitment strategy.

11. Impact of Covid 19

11.1 The introduction of national lockdown in response to the pandemic in March 2020 required the service to adapt and operate on a virtual basis almost overnight; initial home visits, assessments, training sessions, mid-point reviews, DBS risk assessment interviews and Skills to Foster were all delivered online. Many of the external organisations and processes that are relied on were also significantly impacted including GP surgeries, other local authorities, schools, DBS service and wider employers. This did lead to some delay in assessments as the wider system tried to navigate the new way of working. Home visits were all completed via Teams with the exception of the home health and safety assessment; this continued to be completed in person so that the local authority could be reassured that the home was safe and had been visited by a social worker prior to any children being placed.

11.2 The restrictions also prevented most of the recruitment events planned from taking place including the fortnightly information sessions that were normally held at the Town Hall. These were replaced with a pre-recorded video that was available on Youtube for applicants to watch at any time, and eventually live

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sessions on Teams which continued on a fortnightly basis. During this reporting period we held a total of 32 live information sessions that were attended by 256 interested households. These were facilitated by the team manager, with a contribution from current foster carers as well as care experienced young people so that the carer and child's journey were understood.

- 11.3 The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on how training and support has been delivered and accessed as it has had to be virtual. This has been particularly challenging for those carers who are not confident or proficient in using technology, as well for those whose personal circumstances do not enable them to engage effectively online.
- 11.4 There have been difficulties for some foster carers who may have needed to shield, or protect others from the likelihood of catching covid, who have had children living with them who have not understood the seriousness of not following lockdown guidance. This has led to some placements breaking down. We understand how difficult it has been to be a foster carer during this period and want to thank all of our foster carers for their dedication and hard work.

12. Key achievements during 2020/21

- Review of the practice standards in the fostering service presented an opportunity to identify the gaps in our practices and put in place an extensive programme of improvement.
- A permanent fostering panel advisor was appointed to support the panel chair. The panel convenes regular business meetings, to reinforce its remit and reflect on its practice. The "Central List" of panel members was extended to increase diversity.
- The appointment of the fostering reviewing officers has help ensure that the 98% (steady number) of our foster carers have had their annual review undertaken in a timely way. The quality of the annual reviews has also significantly improved.
- Foster carer reviews presented at the fostering panel on the first year following approval and then on a 3 yearly cycle routinely happens.
- Extended the Fostering Panels, the panel is now set to support permanency through long term foster care matches.
- Increase in fostering enquiries in the last part of 2019 and some progress in terms of new approvals
- Croydon foster carers respond positively and in general offer our young people the option of "Staying Put" when they reach 18 years old.
- Extensive work has undertaken in terms of improving the working relationships with other social work teams and services (Virtual School,

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Health, etc.)

- Foster carer project established to address issues raised by foster carers and the service
- Broadening of training programme with arrangements to deliver foster carer training and develop based on needs for 2020-2021 and beyond.

13. Key priorities for development during 2021/22

- Build on the service's relationships with Foster Carers by using systemic practice and develop confidence, competence and resilience to support children achieve a full sense of stability and security.
- Increase in children achieving permanency either by a court order or by making the arrangements in foster carer permanent. This increases the children sense of belonging and provides them with the stability that will contribute towards their overall well-being.
- Use our placement stability guidance and support children to develop ways of managing their difficulties and carers to provide non-judgmental and nurturing care that is supported by systemic practice.
- Reviewing and developing foster carer support groups (to include specific groups for connected carers)
- Where appropriate increase the utilisation of our foster carers, as mentors, ambassadors, support group facilitators, etc.
- Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers as well and as a more responsive service
- Development of training programme tailored to their own needs and development, this includes wider access to the systemic practice and other therapeutic parenting and online resources.
- Reinforcing the expectations around Staying Put and making the related information more clear for carers and staff.
- Improving the digital presence of Croydon Council Fostering Service.
- Improve carers understanding of the issues around leaving care and preparing young people for independence.
- Increase involvement of young people in training for our Foster carers and Young People being involved in Skills to Foster Training.
- Increase participation of our Children Looked After and Care Leavers, to help shape the fostering service.

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- Foster Carer Handbook – to review the handbook and continue work on offering the option of having a digital link to the handbook in the future.
- Enhance our links with the professional network around the child.
- Enabling the service to learn from Ofsted inspections and other service reviews.
- Increase the number of approved carers in line with the sufficiency strategy.

14. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

None.

15. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

None.

16. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

None.

17. EQUALITIES IMPACT

None.

18. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

None.

19. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

None.

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