

Foster Carer Recruitment Strategy

Jan 2021 to Dec 2023

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Introduction

The Croydon Foster Carer Recruitment Strategy is to increase the in-house fostering capacity each year to enable our looked after children and young people to be placed in well matched, stable homes where they can reach their full potential. As of 21 December 2020 there were 226 fostering households. 88 of these were friends and family households, with the fostering service having 138 households that could potentially provide homes for non-familial children and young people.

On 31 October 2020 Croydon brought fostering recruitment and assessment in-house. The fostering service now has its own dedicated recruitment team, comprising of a team manager, a marketing officer, recruitment officers, assessing social workers and business support. This improved model will give Croydon greater control and flexibility in how it develops and implements its foster carer recruitment strategy, keeping a close eye on the changing demographics of the borough and its CLA population.

This recruitment strategy should be read in conjunction with the foster carer marketing and recruitment plan and the fostering service development plan.

Aims and Objectives

The key aims and objectives of this strategy are follows:

- To improve local foster care placement choice and stability for children and young people in Croydon, particularly for teenagers and children requiring short break care
- To increase the number of in-house foster placements and reduce the use of independent fostering agencies and residential care

Our target is to recruit at least 30 additional foster carers annually.

National Context

According to figures released by the Department for Education in December 2019 (CLA in England 2018-2019) the number of children in care had risen to 78,150 by 31 March 2019, an increase by 4%. 72% of looked after children are cared for in foster placements, 39% of the CLA population are children aged 10 to 15. According to the Fostering Network fostering services need to recruit a further 7,220 foster families nationally over the next 12 months. In London this equates to around another 900 fostering families.

Having the right placement in the right place at the right time is critical to achieving placement stability and the best outcomes for our looked after children

Local Context – Croydon

Croydon is large and diverse as a borough in both size and population, with areas of considerable wealth and others amongst the most deprived in the country. It is the 70th most deprived authority out of 326 district authorities and the 19th most deprived borough in London, with notably more deprivation in the north and east of the borough than in the south and the west. Croydon has a higher proportion of residents from black and minority ethnic backgrounds than the national average, with the younger population being more diverse than the older. In 2020 Croydon's looked after children were formed of 39% from a White background, 33% from a Black or Black British background, 5% Asian and 22% from a mixed or other cohort.

Croydon has the largest child population in London, over 93,500 of our residents are aged 0-18 and 57,500 are of statutory school age. The children looked after rate of 86 per 10,000 population at 31 March 2019 is higher than both the national average of 64 and Croydon's statistical neighbours with an average of 55.

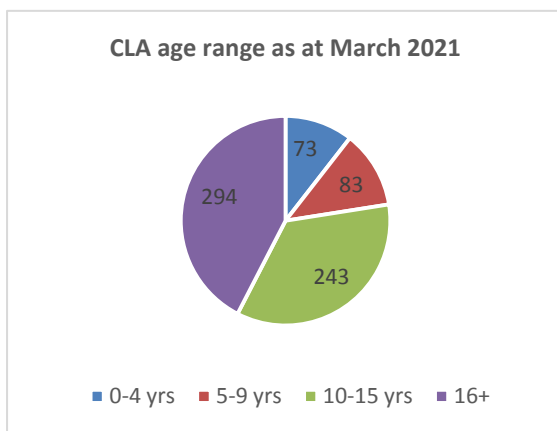
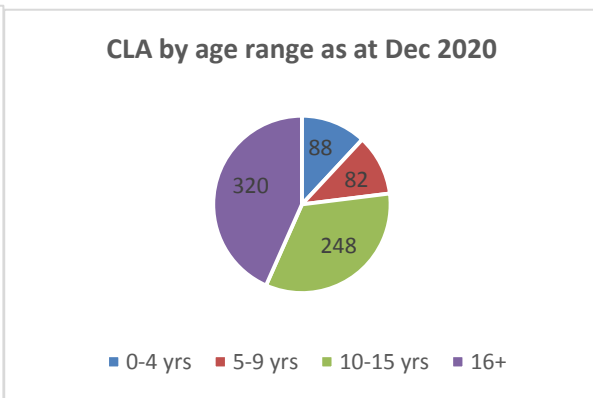
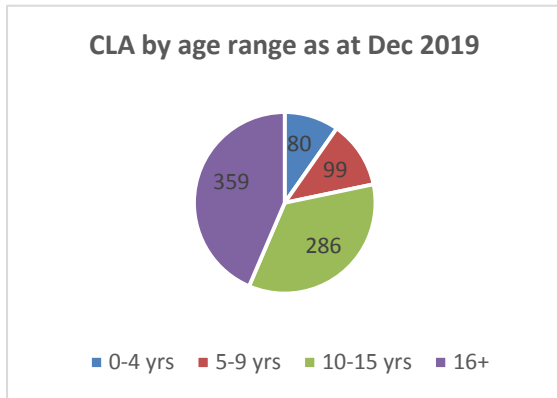
The number of Children Looked After as of March 2021 was 693. Of these, around 490 are from local families and around 213 are unaccompanied asylum seeking children. This is the highest rate in London and the 17th highest in England and needs to be considered as part of the recruitment strategy. The plan is to focus on recruiting fostering households who can also offer placements to children who are from our UASC population.

A high proportion of Croydon's children looked after are placed with foster carers (84%). There is good placement stability with 72% of our CLA remaining in the same placement for at least two years and 82% benefit from placements within a 20 mile radius.

To meet Croydon's aim to recruit 30 new households in year one will mean applying a range of promotion strategies, to ensure there is good placement choice for children and young people. This is particularly true in relation to increasing placement choice for adolescents, unaccompanied minors and those at risk of child sexual exploitation, gang involvement and offending. Croydon has a higher rate of first time entrants into the youth justice system than the London and national average. Many of these young people have been traumatised and their behaviour can reflect this. In addition we have a number of children with disabilities who have different needs and there will be a focus on recruiting foster carers with additional and relevant skills who can offer short break or longer term care to these often vulnerable children.

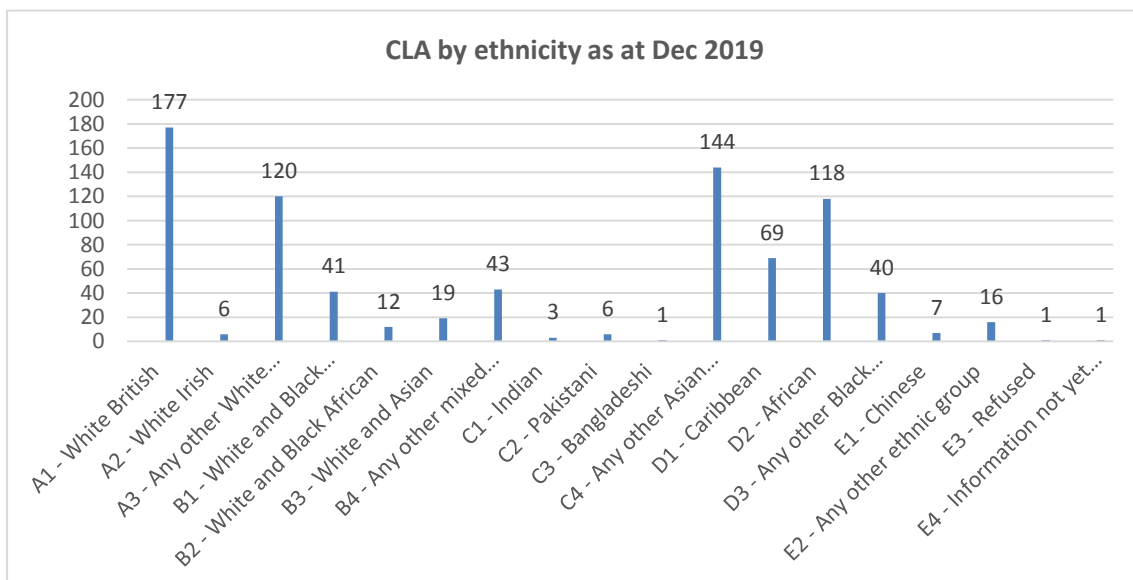
Another priority cohort of children identified in the above report includes children with a disability. In relation to fostering provision the 2021/23 strategy will include a focus on recruiting foster carers with additional, relevant skills to offer short break or longer term care to this vulnerable group requiring safe alternative care.

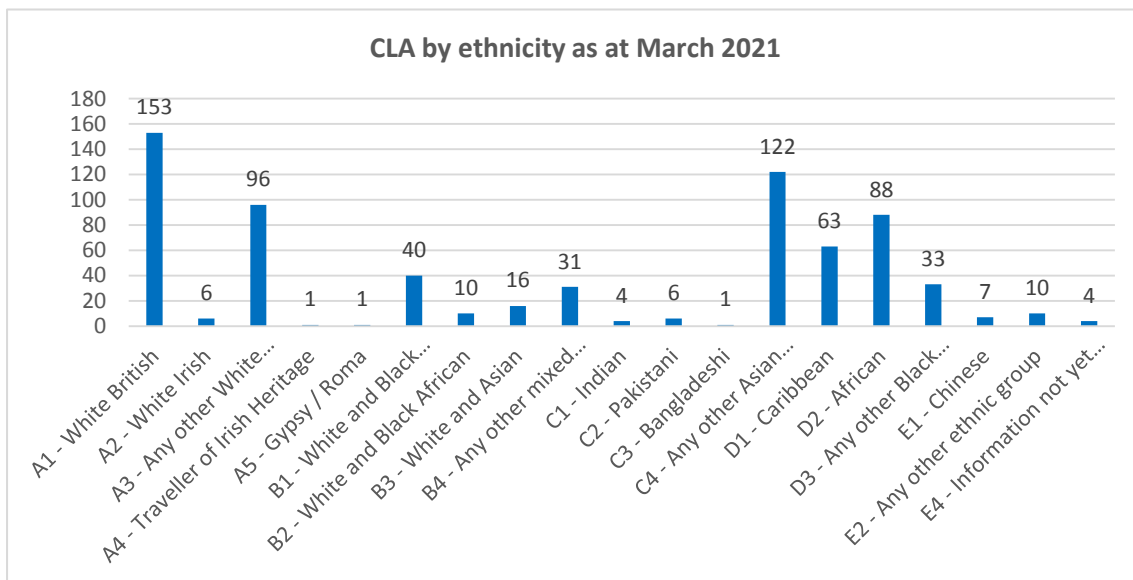
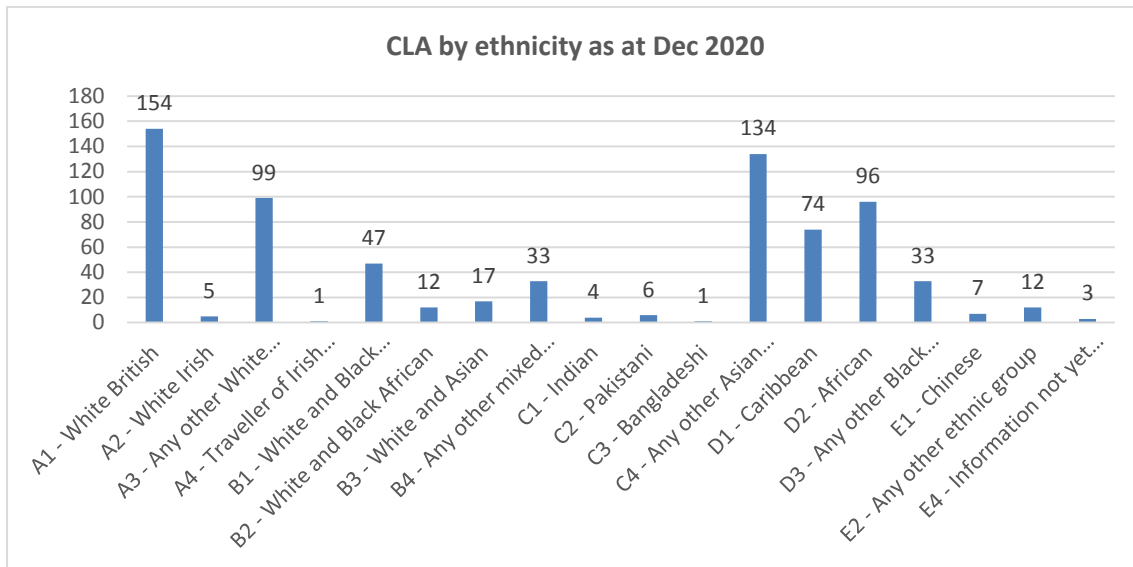
The following data identifies where the pressures are and how where to focus the recruitment:



What is evident from this series of data is that over the last 3 years the 16+ cohort accounted for around 43% of our CLA population; the 10-15 years cohort accounted for around 34%.

The next set of charts will help to highlight the ethnic breakdown of these cohort of children/young people, to further focus this strategy.





From the March 2021 data:

<p>White British</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% of 16+ cohort • 25% of 10-15 years cohort • 27% of CLA population 	<p>Any other Asian</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% of 16+ cohort • 22% of 10-15 years cohort • 21% of CLA population
<p>Any other White</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45% of 16+ cohort • 17% of 10-15 years cohort • 23% of CLA population 	<p>African</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25% of 16+ cohort • 34% of 10-15 years cohort • 24% of CLA population

Approaches and Attention

To achieve our recruitment targets and meet our aims and objectives our approach will be to adopt a multi-faceted marketing approach utilising various channels to reach our key audience(s). This will include some partnership working where possible with local businesses, community groups as well as schools and colleges. We will utilise our existing foster carers as advocates in our marketing and publicity.

The focus of this will be to:

1. Raise awareness of the need for more foster carers as well as educate people on what foster carers do, who can foster and how rewarding it can be
2. Convert more people thinking about fostering by engagement, either face to face, on the phone or via the website and communicating the strengths of working with Croydon Council

Marketing activity will be targeted towards our demographics as a borough and of our children in care, concentrating on people living within 10 miles of Croydon. We will not exclude anyone based on their sexual orientation, ethnicity or gender. The recruitment team will continue to liaise with a range of (existing and new) partners, to raise awareness of the need for more Muslim foster carers. Croydon's own Muslim recruitment champions will be able to further this aspect of the strategy. We will uphold the fostering brand identity and focus on key messages highlighting the positives of being a foster carer. The full plan for annual activities and how they will be measured are set out in the marketing plan (see attached).

The recruitment team have worked collaboratively with colleagues in the fostering support team as well as forging useful links with those foster carers who have been willing to support us at various recruitment events. By employing a care experienced young person to work as a recruitment assistant we have been able to make sure that the voice of our children is reflected within our marketing materials and events. We are also ensuring that our children in care council (Empire) have been able to feedback about our materials and suggest ideas for recruitment.

Croydon has an active Foster Carers Association and attending meetings will continue to be beneficial to encourage our current foster carers to recommend a friend or relative who may want to become a foster carer. We have also reviewed and increased the fees and allowances we pay so that our offer is competitive.

Croydon's recruitment strategy outlines and complies with statutory requirements - ensuring that, the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011 and (England) Regulations 2011 are met fully in the recruitment, assessment, approval, review and support of foster carers.

Fostering Marketing/Recruitment Statistics and Analysis

In light of the above, the sufficiency data, identified priorities and Croydon's on going improvement journey the recruitment activity to be undertaken can be viewed in the summary below.

Level of enquiries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximately 281 fostering enquires have been generated this calendar year. This can increase further during 2021 and beyond.
Brand recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Akin to other agencies it is likely that over 30% of carers contact other agencies before approaching the Council. This implies an opportunity to improve the brand recognition of the Council as a provider of fostering. Communications and Design teams recommend a continuation of the current brand design with minimal change.
Recommending the Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carers will recommend their local council to others if they feel valued and supported. Anecdotal evidence suggests there have been few formal recommendations in the period from April 2020 and we want to increase these by offering support and working with our current carers. The revised fees and allowances will aid recruitment and will be highlighted.
Involve carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster carers are positive about being involved in recruitment and Croydon's carers are no different. Carers are likely to be interested in contributing informally e.g. through talking to people, holding coffee mornings or being part of a drop in session. Carer champions to aid recruitment can be grown further. Year One has benefited from some excellent carer involvement at pop up events Having information packs and guidance about the types of carers most needed would be particularly helpful for carers.

Croydon's marketing and recruitment plan (summary narratives)

a. Recruitment Core Narrative

We know from experience and research that residents are predominately Pioneers*. Therefore, they are more persuaded to act only if they are persuaded that this is “the right thing to do”, that Fostering is the right thing to do. The continued marketing approach into year two will therefore focus on the ethical value of fostering alongside the reward, incentives and high level support provided to carers.

The key messages are:

- Being a foster carer is an amazing thing to do. It will not only change the lives of the young people you support but it will enhance your life positively as well. And because we know it is such a big step to take we will make sure you are well paid for doing this – in fact you should think about being a foster parent as a career opportunity.
- Fostering in Croydon is changing, improved fees and allowances and an excellent training package.
- We [Croydon] think getting the right people is crucial so we see you becoming part of a much bigger family of other foster parents, officers and young people.
- We [Croydon and residents] are a team and that means we will all be in this together. If you have a spare room and a willingness to go for it then we will support and advise you so that this becomes one of the great decisions in your life.
- Most of all, you get a chance to give someone the head-start in life that they really need. We really look forward to hearing from you.

b. Marketing Core Narrative

To achieve the overarching objective to communicating our key messages to residents, marketing mechanisms would include:

Method / Source	Action
On-line	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Council website and fostering micro to be updated with Key Messages – inviting residents to get involved – ‘Be a Life Changer’.• More interactive clips representing the views of young people and the diversity of Croydon carers.

<p>On-line: social media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press releases about the various information events happening across the borough. Partners will be invited to support the campaign by re-tweeting (Twitter) or 'liking' (Facebook) our messages. • Improve online presence by scoping other online forums, e.g. influencers, online communities and blogging.
<p>Public Relations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular articles and blogs from carers would be released to local press. • In-house Fostering Newsletter production to be used to mobilise. This newsletter will share good news stories of the service as well as features and news/event stories. Encourage Word of mouth enquiries. • The newsletter will focus on how existing carers can expand their capacity and to take active part in the recruitment campaign. • My Croydon and Internal Communications.
<p>Direct Marketing – literature distribution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each council letter dispatched to a resident to have fostering information for example via the Council tax letters
<p>Build support among elected members</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will seek to engage elected members in supporting our strategy, engaging the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning (currently Alisa Fleming).
<p>Advertising Board/ Public Spaces</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refresh the existing Croydon recruitment banners / boards, to include inspiring messages. • Strategically positioning recruitment banners / boards within Croydon, where there is significant pedestrian traffic. • The use of advertising specialists (like JC Decaux and Clear Channel direct) to be explored and boarding to be utilised for example

Positioning Croydon

An additional aim of this strategy is to position Croydon as the preferred agency to foster for. The aim is to influence potential foster carers and retain existing ones, so they will feel proud to foster for brand Croydon.

We are therefore positioning Croydon Fostering as offering:

- A customer focussed service
- Generous foster carer allowances and support package
- Transparent, supportive and timely assessment process
- Understanding and supportive supervising social workers who are always 'on the other end of the phone'
- Comprehensive Out of Hours support
- Excellent training
- A mentoring service
- An opportunity to become a recruitment champion
- Being part of our relationship-based (systemic) model of working with vulnerable children and their families

Monitoring and Evaluation

The strategy will be measured quarterly to build up a picture of effective methods of recruitment. This will be undertaken by a variety of methods including:

- Analysis of initial enquiry data – an ongoing monitoring system is in place via framework and other database systems
- Analysis of prospective carer's data – on-going monitoring systems are in place
- Analysis of referrals
- Analysis of exit interviews/feedback to evidence how services can be improved and promoted
- Panel feedback
- Ongoing monitoring systems are in place
- Analysis of 'drop out' stage – when do people drop out of the fostering process i.e. information pack, initial visit, preparation training, or assessment stage
- Evaluation of individual recruitment channels used – including hits to the website and press coverage
- Surveying of newly approved foster carers during 2021