

Corporate Parenting Panel

Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on Tuesday, 8 February 2022 at 5.00 pm.
This meeting will be held remotely.

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Alisa Flemming (Chair);

Councillors Maddie Henson, Bernadette Khan, Pat Clouder, Sue Bennett and Maria Gatland

Co-optee Members

Angela Christmas (Foster Carer Representative),
Manny Kwamin (Foster Carer Representative),
Shelley Davies (Virtual School),
EMPIRE (EMPIRE),
Porsha Robinson (EMPIRE) and
Charity Kanotangudza (Health Commissioner)

Also

Present: Roisin Madden (Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care)
Shaun Hanks (Head of Quality Assurance)
Susanna Daus (Head of Service of Adopt London South)
Derek Dyer (Permanence Service Manager)

Apologies: Councillor Mike Bonello

PART A

1/22 Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meetings held on Wednesday 3 March 2021, Wednesday 28 April 2021, Thursday 24 June 2021, Wednesday 22 September 2021 and Wednesday 10 November 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

2/22 Disclosures of interest

There were none.

3/22 Urgent Business (if any)

There was none.

4/22 Update on actions agreed at previous meeting(s)

There was none.

Croydon Children's Social Care Update on Children with a Plan for Adoption & Adopt London South Regional Adoption Agency Annual Report 2020-21

The Corporate Parenting Panel considered the Croydon Children's Social Care Update on Children with a Plan for Adoption report, and the Adopt London South Regional Adoption Agency Annual Report 2020-21 together, which provided an overview of the children currently subject to a placement order who had a plan for adoption. The presentation by Adopt London South further highlighted how Croydon had developed its permanence framework in the year 21/22 and the planned improvements for the next financial year.

The Panel received a detailed presentation from the Permanence Service Manager, Derek Dyer, and the Head of Service of Adopt London South, Susanna Daus.

In brief, the presentation highlighted:

- The permanence framework which reviewed the emotional, physical and legal condition that provided a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. There was also a Permanence Panel which reviewed children in permanent care and their needs.
- The Adoption Order sets out the security and stability of a child by permanently altering the rights and duties of the adults involved. This was irrevocably of natural family members or a reconstituted family.
- The adoption process would be tracked and monitored.
- There were ten adoptions completed between 2021 and 2022.
- There were currently twenty-two children subject to a placement order, of which:
 - Thirteen children were matched and residing with their adopters pending an application for an adoption order and in their 10-week monitoring period;
 - Five children had adoption hearings arranged in January
 - Nine children that had placement orders were in foster care placements awaiting for a new family.
 - There were eleven children with a plan for adoption that had not received a placement order and currently residing in placements with foster carers.
- Life story books - focused on younger children (aged 3 – 5) in assisting an understanding of moving to their placement. This would be constructed by the social worker in collaboration with the adopters.
- Life letters – provided more information of why the young person came into care and was adopted. Support was given to social workers in writing these letters.

The Adopt London South (ALS) presentation highlighted:

- The ALS service provided to Croydon included finding families for the children in care; recruiting, preparing and approving adoptive families;

providing support to adopted children and parents (including group work, therapeutic work, counselling, training services and many more); Letterbox services system to enable indirect contact between birth families and children; supporting adopted adults in the finding of their past adoption through Croydon or residence in Croydon; providing counselling to birth parents and adopted people; providing help to families to adopt within the wider family network; and the partnership with specialist international adoption services for those wanting to adopt from abroad.

- ALS partnership with “We Are Family” – which were an adopted led group operating across London and who arranged training; hosted podcasts; arranged social groups and online groups; and ‘adopt a hub’ which provided masses of information for adopters.
- Other projects included the black adoption aimed at reviewing performance across London and reducing race disparity across London.
- The Annual Plan to improve outcomes and implementation of black adoption project and develop more services.

The Panel welcomed the reports and in particular the retained Life Story books for young adopted children.

In response to queries raised by the Panel, the Permanence Service Manager and the Head of Service of Adopt London South, clarified the following:

- The Children in Care Service aimed to employ more permanent adoption social workers as it had been apparent that a change of social worker for a child was disruptive, and it was beneficial for a child and social worker to see through cases from beginning to the end. Though there had been changes in the past, current staff changes was deemed to cover maternity or long term sickness. Recruitment was also very important for the service to ensure that all social workers were three-years qualified in order to undertake adoption cases. Close monitoring was given to those social workers who were slightly outside of the three years. Further, there were lots of continuity with the permanence of staff from Croydon and more stability which was fortunate for the ALS service.
- On the issue relating to children of certain ethnic groups waiting longer for permanent adoption, the service noticed a surplus of Asian families wanting to adopt and not so much with Black African and Caribbean families though children were still adopted. It would take approximately 146 days longer for a black young person to be matched which was a concern. The barriers was often regarding space within the home or affording a bigger home, building trust and bureaucracy. A new progressive approach was used to recruit more families to adopt, this included a widespread of information shared through social media, in community centres and churches.
- The InterCountry Adoption service partnered with Adopt London South.
- The regionalisation process had seen a nation decline in the numbers of placement orders made by the courts, including the growth in

Special Guardianships which was preferable to adoption for the young person to reside with family, adoption was therefore considered when there was no family option. Further it was noted that the United Kingdom was one of the last countries which had closed adoptions - where children did not have contact with their birth parents, and thus the whole adoption may have an impact in how decisions were made in the court.

- In regards to the long rising issue for adoption, the voices of Croydon's children and adopters were heard through the regional adoption system of Adopt London South with the sense of technical corporate parenting held within the borough at the Corporate Parenting Panel, as this was the place for challenging and scrutinising the work the council interfaced with Adopt London South.
- Support for ongoing adopters was provided in the adoption support plan when an adoption order was filed. There were circumstances where support fund was available for therapeutic work which was in place for a number of months. There was also purposeful delay which weighed on decisions to be made on the needs of the families before an adoption order was completed.
- In regards to placements and failures, the national data was approximately 3%. Croydon had completed 150 matches with three disruptions (less than the 3% in Adopt London South). It is not known whether the pandemic was a contributing factor in the disruptions, though it was noted that within the early stages in adoption during the pandemic, there was a high level of anxiety and stress amongst foster carers making introduction difficult. However, the performance had increased during the pandemic which was very good for the service.
- In regards to finance, the Adopt London South was careful with the activity based budget which was calculated on the number of completed matches per local authority and the number of post adoption enquiries. This would be added every quarter and shared amongst the board members addressing transparency of why some local authority members pay more than others. For this reason Croydon currently paid the highest contribution, which was made annually. The budget would also be scrutinised by the board to ensure fairness and value for money.
- In regards to the breakdown of the ages of children being adopted and preference, it was addressed that matching was not solely on age and was around the circumstances that was considered on a case by case bases on whether a connected person was right for a child, or best for a child to be adopted.

ACTION: For the Permanence Service Manager to provide data information of the average ages of adoption; the average age of black children waiting to be adopted and children that are within sibling groups, and update with the Panel at a later date.

- In regards to those children who would remain in care when they were not adopted, their placement order would be revoked and it was the service's responsibility to ensure that the young person had a clear

understanding of why they were in care. The support provided to the young people was heavily dependent on the life story work which illustrated many things and answers to questions the young children may have. Reducing placement change for children was also a priority as permanence was important to a child's journey.

Some of the E.M.P.I.R.E members asked if the Council had a response following the recent 'Ready or Not' report from Ofsted and if any funding or resources would be put in place to better support young people moving into independent living. In response, the Head of Quality Assurance noted the report that reviewed the experience for children in care aged 18 plus and moving to independent living at a time of anxiety or not being prepared or not knowing their rights. The service had worked on recruiting more personal advisors for care leavers to improve further support, additionally, a lot of work that had gone on the Core Offer amongst other themed matters raised within the report to improve the support for care leavers and long-term care leavers.

- In regards to what support young people were offered specifically when there had been an adoption breakdown in their teenage years and had to go back to being fostered and therefore came out of the system, the Head of Quality Assurance relayed that support needed to be clearer, though young people were seen as care leavers no matter their background. If there was a breakdown within the timeframe, the young person would be illegible for care leaving services. The emotional support and life stories were also very important to provide to the young person and systemic practices around relationships were also considered. It was also said that as the service recognised adoption breakdown to be unpleasant, this was very rare within Croydon.

Further voices of EMPIRE came forward and shared experience of their adoption and their journey, raising questions relating to adoptive parent(s) and the process time it would take to be prepared to adopt a child and when adoption was granted; also the process it took to ensure that an adoptive parent (s) was prepared to support a child on their life story journey and not disregarding the life story as 'just a book', to ensure that the child's journey was safe, smooth and not triggered.

Officers welcomed the voices from EMPIRE and highlighted that services was aiming to deliver the right preparation in the adoption process as a whole for a better service to all individuals involved. The "Moving to Adoption" model was something the Adopt London South was adopting, which required a careful period of receiving new parents, reviewing how children was to be looked after and to further help children on their journey to form their unique identity. When ensuring support, foster carers were encouraged to stay in touch after a period of time, with visitations to happen within a month or two after a child settled within their placement to stay in touch. It was noted that there had been difficult moments during transitions and placements which was often acknowledged. Life letters and life stories were also to be co-designed with adopters and social workers. Further, officers confirmed that there was no flexibility on the extent corporate parents or foster carers had on the

maintenance of visits for up to two months where an adopter parent refused. Though legally adopter parent(s) were the child's legal parent, adopters were very much encouraged by the service to work with foster carers to understand the process of support.

- In relation to the housing department and the support requested following an increased uptake of adoptions, as part of the adoption support fund, there was room for support which was based on a case by case scenario, there was consideration for applications to be rehoused though it was noted as an unusual request, however the service advocated for families residing in social housing. In addressing the issue that housing was also a barrier to adopt regionally or nationally, this challenge was to be reviewed.

Action: For the Director of Early Help and Children's Social Care to raise the request for housing support for increased uptake in adoption with the Adopt London South Lead and the Adopt London Board for wider conversations, and to update the Panel at a later date.

In relation to the Croydon Children's Social Care Update on Children with a Plan for Adoption report:

The Panel **RESOLVED**: To review and note the performance in relation to children with an adoption plan.

In relation to the Adopt London South Regional Adoption Agency Annual Report 2020-21:

The Panel **RESOLVED**: To note the proposed recommendations:

1. Improve the outcomes for South London children of Black heritage, reduce waiting times and improve the adopter journey for Black families ready to adopt them.
2. Work with Adopt London on the new project to address the race disparity for children in the 23 Adopt London LAs.
3. Develop improved commissioning and finance systems to improve the experience of families and children using Adoption Support Fund therapies.
4. Reduce waiting times for adopted adults, by developing improved pathways and collaboration with London Adoption support agencies.
5. Ensure a smooth transition for the services users of the new partner joining ALS.
6. Once the new partner has joined the partnership undertake an organisational review of staffing to ensure the best use of resources.
7. Continue to develop Adopt London services for the benefit of London children

Children in Care Performance Scorecard

The Corporate Parenting Panel considered the Children in Care Performance Scorecard which provided an overview of the December month. The Panel received an overview from the Head of Quality Assurance, Shaun Hanks, who highlighted the following:

- The population comparison for December 2020 and December 2021 had shown a higher number of black children and less number of white children looked after.
- There was an increase of children aged 7-14 becoming looked after and a decrease of 16 and 17 year olds who were looked after.
- There was a number of Pathway Plans delayed due to some impact within the service, however there was an improvement with the numbers and quality of plans for the children. There was 75% of the plans completed on time, though it was noted that there was disparity in individual experience for plans to be completed on time.
- Care plans had not risen much in performance, though there was better statistics for the younger aged groups than the older aged groups.
- There was also disparity in placement moves.

In response to queries raised by the Panel, the Head of Quality Assurance, clarified the following:

- In regards to Pathway Plans and in terms of supervision and management, there were some teams that were managing well. There was a team that struggled and had caused a 10% drop in the overall performance and management was working with the team to better standards. The service focused on the predictions of plans due to be out of date, and senior officers had noted that the failures within the teams was due to unforeseen personal circumstances, as well as not addressing plans that were due to be out of date.
- Further, performance statistics in teams were 93%, 88% and 80% highlighting more room for improvement within the performance of teams, however the service was in a better stance for care plans completion than before which was a huge improvement overall.
- Compliance and quality was changing, and the service was working very hard to make pathway plans and care plans the centre of work for frequent update.
- With the concerns raised for the high number of young persons that were Not in Education, Employment or Training, the service was working very hard to ensure that young people were in education, employment or training, though the service had experienced difficulties mostly due to the individual circumstances (such as health, being a parent). There was a lot of effort in finding opportunities through apprenticeships and a number of other placements through local networking. The service was also aspiring to seek more support to young people who were in new experiences.

- Additionally it was noted that though the red key indicator performance for the young people in Education, Employment and Training was low, it was above the London's national average; nonetheless, the service was looking for more ways to improve on this performance.

During the discussion, the Panel raised the following:

- For future reports to address the work done on disparity particularly relating to placements and the amount of placements, and also the disparity between ethnic groups, in future panel meetings.
- For future reports to address the affects and changes of young people in Education, Employment and Training.

7/22 How has the Panel helped Children in Care today?

The Panel welcomed the voices of EMPIRE and ways services could support adoption in Croydon.

The Panel welcomed the work that was being done to improve better performances for the young people in Education, Employment and Training.

8/22 Work Programme

The work programme was received for information.

ACTION: To discuss the work programme with EMPIRE

9/22 Exclusion of the Press and Public

This was not required.

The meeting ended at 7.23 pm

Signed:

Date:

.....