

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel 27 <sup>th</sup> April 2022
SUBJECT:	<b>Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2021/22</b>
LEAD OFFICER:	Róisín Madden; Director Children's Social Care
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	<b>All</b>
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	

### **SUMMARY OF REPORT:**

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.

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, due to the number of new approvals being cancelled out by the number of carers who have resigned or retired. The service is a stable one with few staff changes and we have more children remaining with their foster carers at age 18 through Staying Put arrangements than statistical neighbours. Recruitment and retention of foster carers remains a priority particularly for older children, sibling groups, children with disabilities and long-term placements.

Since fostering recruitment was brought in house (on 01 November 2020) we have been more flexible in our approach, focusing recruitment on foster carers to meet our placement sufficiency objective. The relationship between the fostering service and the foster carers has vastly improved, which has helped to further develop our support structure for foster carers, particularly where is deemed necessary to provide more intensive support for the first six months of their first child being placed; there is continued use of experienced foster carers for mentoring and promoting the CFCA.

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, see appendix 1 Statement of Purpose.

### **COUNCIL PRIORITIES 2020-2024**

This report identifies how our practice, systems and services are in line with the Council's priority of:

We will focus on providing the best quality core service we can afford. First and foremost, providing social care services that keep our most vulnerable residents safe and healthy.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

There are no financial implications of this report

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. The panel notes the evaluation of the Fostering Service as set out in the Annual Report including the CFCA's report
2. The panel approves the Statement of Purpose 22/23
3. The panel endorses the key priorities for development in 22/23 as set out in this report

## **1. Role of the Fostering Service**

The Fostering Service is responsible for:

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

The priorities are to ensure that:

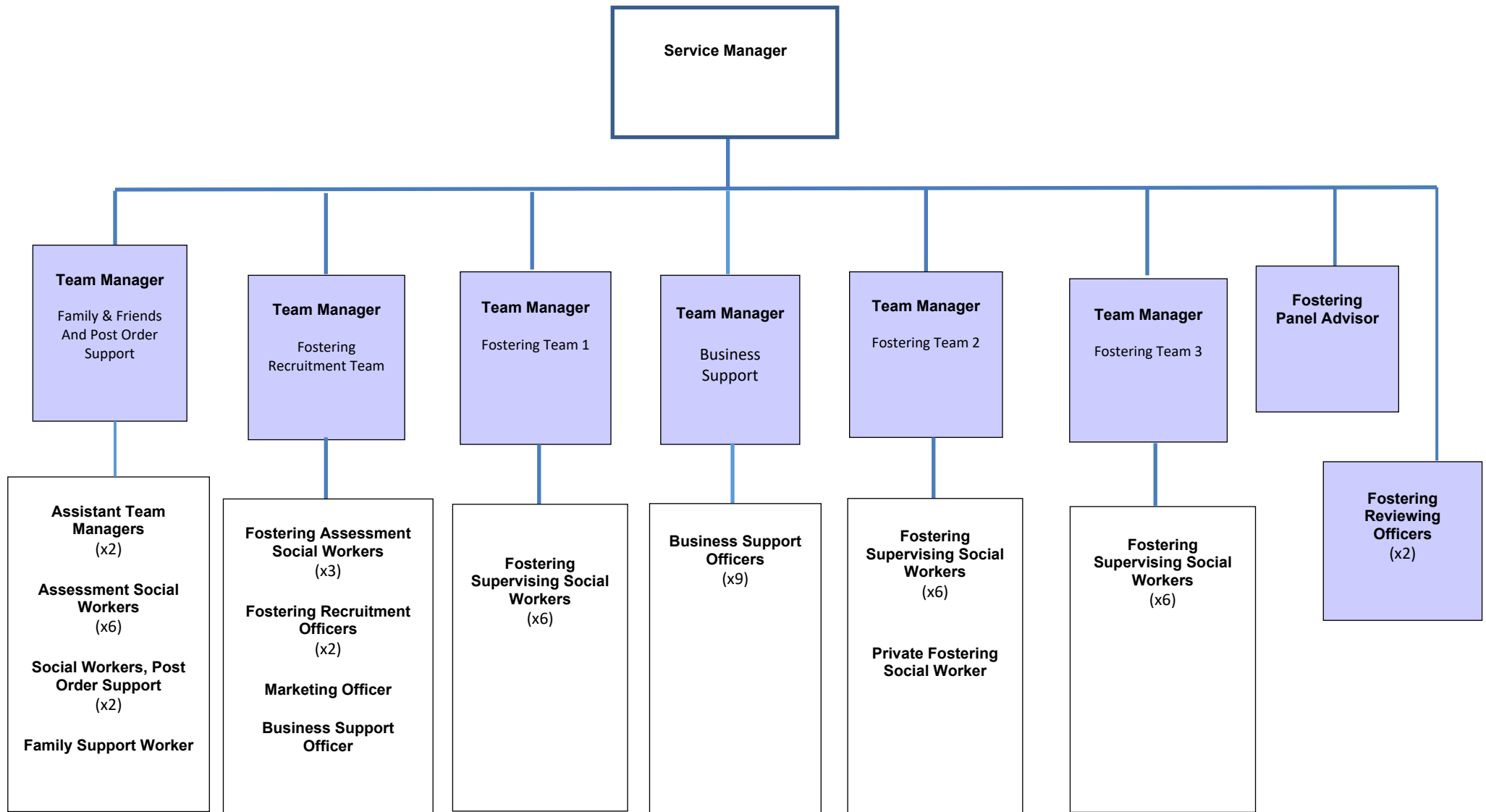
- All children who come into care have an experience of safe, secure and consistent care
- All children experience a safe place within which they can play, grow, thrive and are supported to reach their full potential
- The holistic needs of any child are addressed and supported through health, education and social development enhancing opportunity to develop resilience and achieve.
- 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
- Digitise our services, information, guidance and advice to promote a more efficient and effective service
- We measure and report customer experience and operational performance, taking action where we need to.

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.

## **2. Service Structure**

Croydon's Fostering Service is managed under the Head of Service for Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People. There is a Service Manager with responsibility for this service. Most of the staff within this service are permanently employed.

Please note the structure chart on the next page:



The 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.

### 3. Supervision and Support to Foster Carers

We have 205 fostering households as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. Croydon looks after 559 children who are placed in a variety of placements in accordance with their care plan.

<b>Tab 1a. Current LAC by Placement Type and Status</b>	<b>Local</b>	<b>UASC</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>A6 - Placed for adoption with placement order (under section 21 of the 2002 Act) not with current foster carer</b>	11		<b>11</b>
<b>H5 - Semi-independent living accommodation not subject to Children's Homes Regulations</b>	22	2	<b>24</b>
<b>K2 - Children's Homes subject to Children's Homes Regulations</b>	27		<b>27</b>
<b>P1 - Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility</b>	18		<b>18</b>
<b>R2 - NHS/Health Trust</b>	3		<b>3</b>
<b>R5 - Young Offender Institution or prison</b>	3		<b>3</b>
<b>S1 - All Residential schools</b>	1		<b>1</b>
<b>U1 - Foster placement with relative or friend- long term fostering</b>	28		<b>28</b>
<b>U3 - Foster placement with relative or friend- not long term or FFA</b>	41	6	<b>47</b>
<b>U4 - Placement with other foster carer- long term fostering</b>	107	24	<b>131</b>
<b>U5 - Placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter- FFA</b>	2		<b>2</b>
<b>U6 - Placement with other foster carer - not long term or FFA</b>	180	82	<b>262</b>
<b>Z1 - Other placements</b>	2		<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>559</b>

At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 43% 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.

Since April 2021, 17 households (26 foster carers) were deregistered.

Deregistration reasons	Foster Home
Connected foster carers who secured permanence via a legal order or who turned 18.	4
Due to ill health	1
Carer resignation	7
Connected carers where children have returned home	1
Fostering for another council or agency, or moved out of borough	1
Deregistered due to standards for care	2
Retired	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>17</b>

## Training and development

Training and development of foster carers is important to the service and further specialist training was commissioned and had started at the beginning of 2021/2022. 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.

Training has included:

- Research in Practice and Foster Talk tools and research
- Introduction to Systemic and Trauma Informed Practice (supported by our systemic family therapists)
- Gangs (delivered by YOS specialist)
- Children Looked After education (delivered by virtual school)
- Caring for children with disabilities (delivered by disabilities youth service)

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. See appendix 2 Report from CFCA.
- Communication and Support: Support groups continued to take place each month facilitated by CFCA but the service has begun to execute its plan to expand on this to cover a wider area and need. We have improved our written and direct interaction with carers and increase the opportunities for feedback and challenge.

#### Areas for development: gaps in provision

- Parent and child placements. We have approved 1 fostering household for this area, but they were immediately unavailable to Covid related travel abroad. 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.

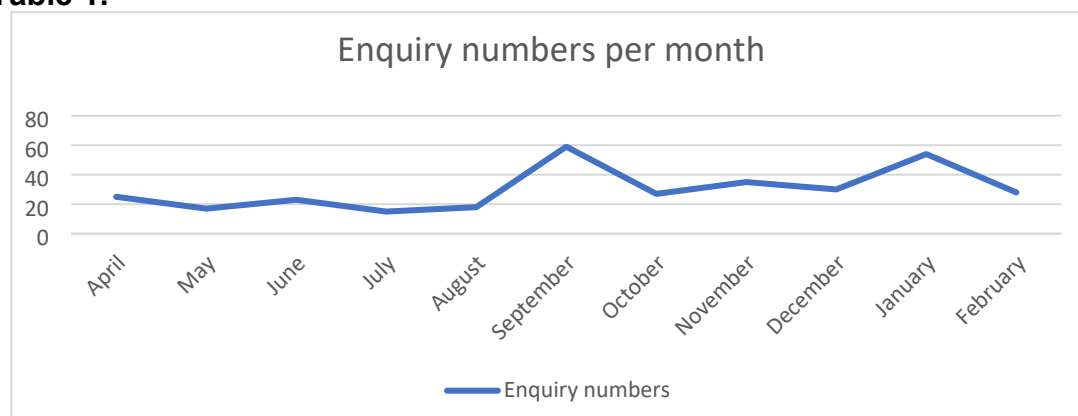
#### 4. Recruitment Activity (April 2021 to March 2022) (prepared by the Marketing Officer)

##### 5.1 Summary:

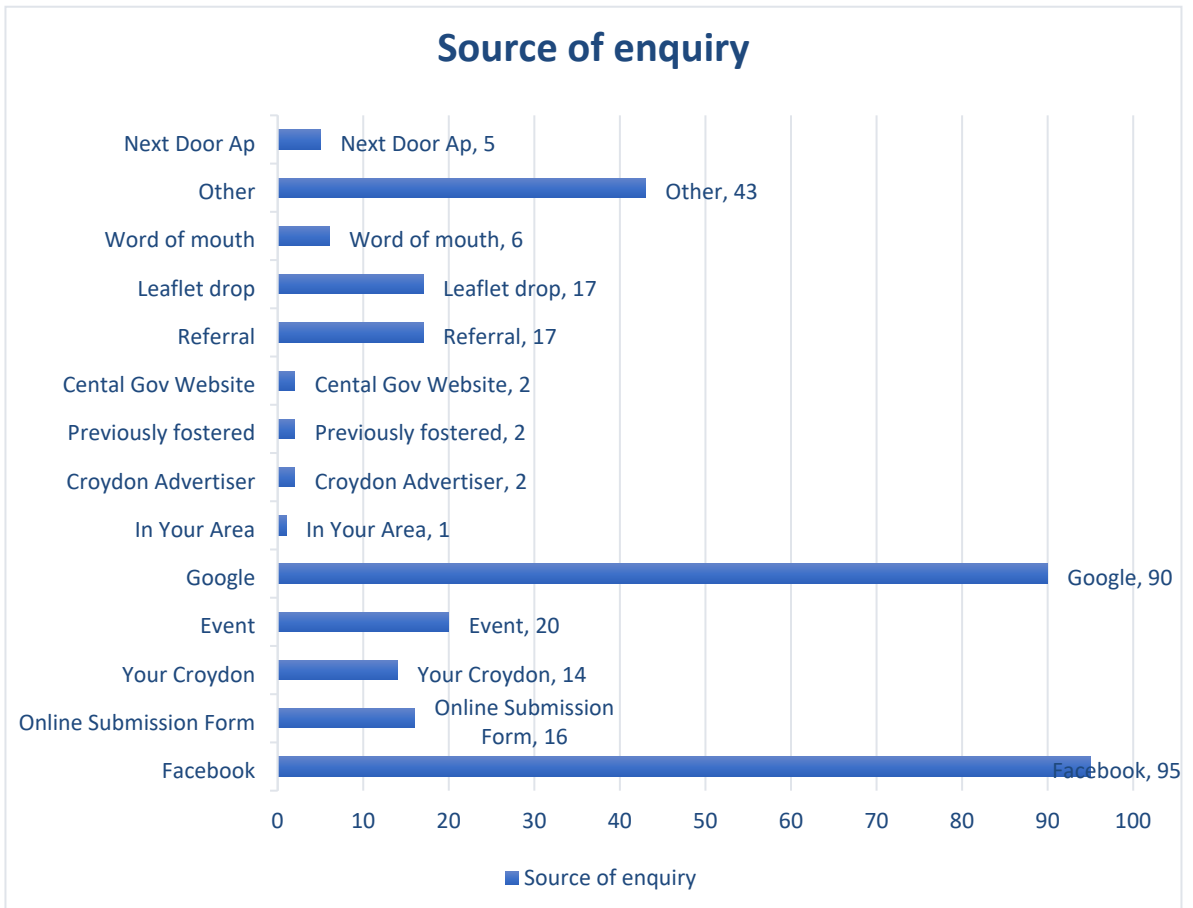
	Total requests for information	Total initial enquiries	Total hom visits	Total assessments	Total approvals
<b>Target</b>	<b>300</b>				<b>15</b>
<b>Actual</b>	<b>330</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>10 (*12)</b>

8 in active assessment  
(\*2 going to panel in March, 3 in April)

**Table 1.**

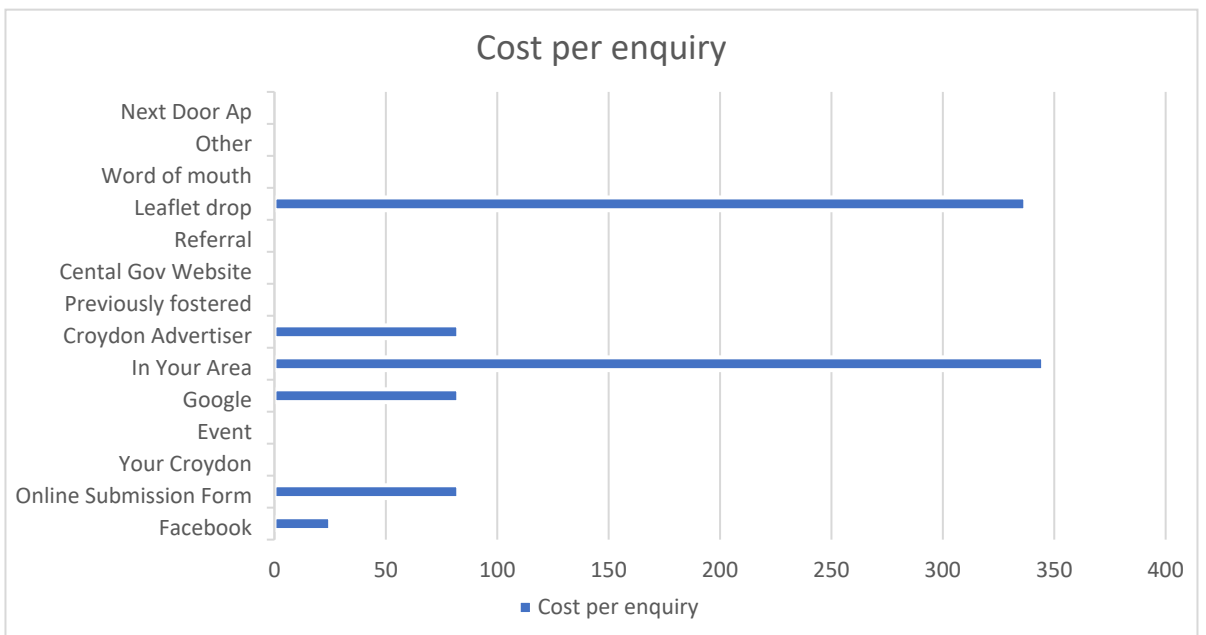


**Table 2.**



## 5.2 Cost per enquiry

**Table 3.**





### 5.3 Cost per approved foster carer: £3,333.

### 5.4 Business conversion rates:

- Requests for Information – Initial enquiry: **56%**
- Initial Enquiry – Approval – **6.5%**

### 5.5 Objectives vs Outcomes

Objectives	Outcomes/target achieved
To assess and approve 15 new sets of foster carers in 1 financial year	12/80%
Recruit carers who can care for the following groups of LAC: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10+ age group</li> <li>• Teenagers and those involved in gangs/offending</li> <li>• Children with disabilities</li> <li>• Sibling groups Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children</li> </ul>	10+ age group – <b>8</b> carers Children with disabilities – <b>1</b> in assessment Sibling groups – <b>2</b> UASC - <b>2</b>
Demographically profiling to increase the numbers of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White carers</li> <li>• Younger carers</li> </ul>	White carers- <b>1 and 1 mixed couple in assessment</b> Younger carers: (under 50 years of age)- <b>3</b> Under 40- <b>0</b>
To meet the current and predicted need for our LAC in foster care by targeted recruitment methods	General increase in targeted prospecting across all channels
To increase word of mouth referrals from existing foster carers	We have had one referral from an existing foster carer during this year. Work continues to encourage our carers to refer potential applicants.
To increase the number of in-house foster placements	The work continues. The foster carer population has a number of older carers who are/have been planning to retire. Net gains are likely to be achieved once this situation changes.
To increase the conversion rate from enquiry to approval	We have had an increase in enquires relevant to the last year. This is perhaps due to the impact of Covid. The conversion rate has not

	been as high as we would like. This has largely been due to enquirers' lack of understanding of the requirements and expectations of fostering.
To establish and maintain a consistent cost per carer & return on investment	100%

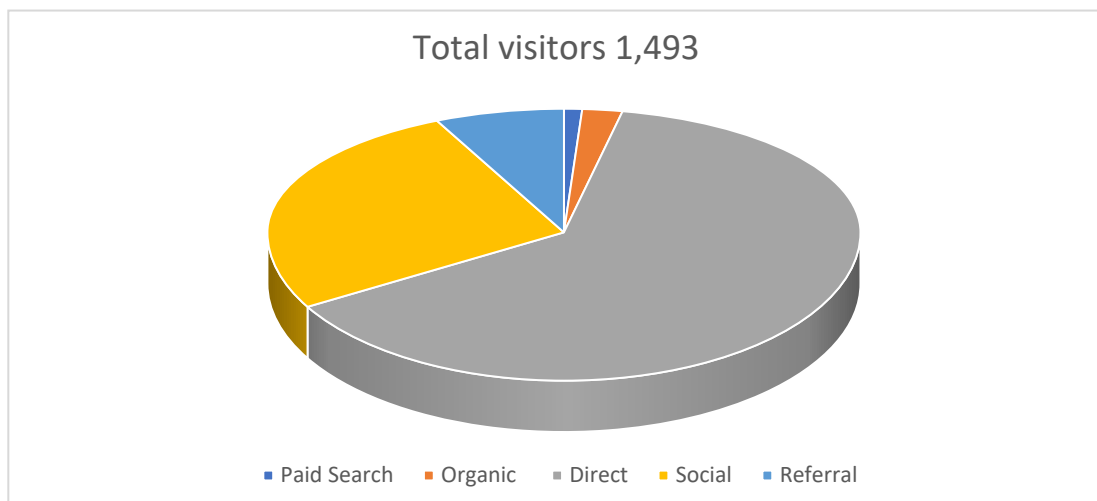
*\*No figures to reference from previous year*

### 5.6 Main barriers to recruitment:

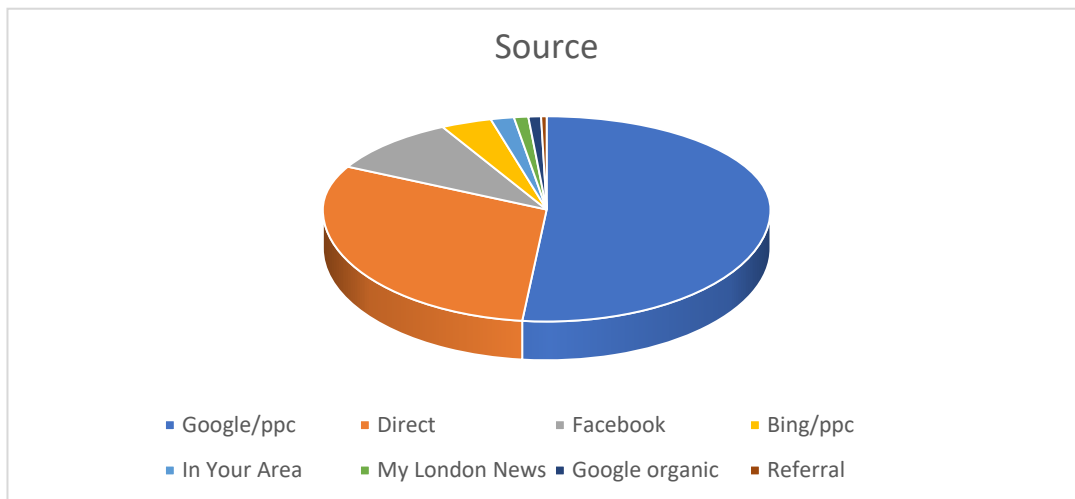
- Covid - lack of face to face events
- Lack of fostering specific social media channels
- No Outdoor advertising opportunities (contract ended with JC Decaux)
- No 'Your Croydon' print publication
- Not able to quickly take advantage of ad hoc advertising opportunities.

### 5.7 Google Analytics for landing page: [www.fosterforcroydon.gov.uk](http://www.fosterforcroydon.gov.uk)

Total visitors: **1,493**



**Source/Medium**



## 5.8 Summary and forecast

- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval is above national average
- Moving budget to online advertising and community engagement during lockdown maximized potential for enquiries resulting in a steady increase throughout the year
- New carers are approved to care for target needs of current LAC
- Improved website has provided enquirers with greater user engagement
- Creation of fostering specific social media channels has increased engagement with the community
- Raising awareness on the specific needs of our LAC in monthly online articles has increased the amount of quality enquiries
- Creating digital versions of fostering information has reduced the need to print and post and helps to portray Croydon Fostering as a forward-thinking organization.
- Forging relationships with faith and community groups has encouraged members of the public to enquire about fostering for Croydon.
- Clear and consistent messaging has enabled enquirers to understand the difference between fostering for an agency vs local authority
- Source of enquiry is not being clearly identified at first point of contact. 'Other' makes up 13% of all enquiries.
- 'Google' is too broad – did they click through from an ad, search 'fostering'? etc

- In Your Area advertising produced little results – not to continue
- Print advertising is costly and producing little results – not to continue
- Increase in online enquiries reflects lockdown and general shift to public consumer habits
- Word of mouth and referrals have increased
- Covid restrictions have limited face to face enquiries seeing a significant drop nationwide
- The move to supplying digital information and online marketing is greater than ever, next financial year will focus on re-marketing and contextual re-marketing to increase prospecting of transferring carers.
- Croydon specific, location-based advertising will be at the forefront of all campaigning in FY 22-23 as well as an increase in community engagement

## **5. Fostering Panel (prepared by the Panel Advisor)**

Here is a summary of the work undertaken by panel, practice and development, and the monitoring and quality assurance role of panel in relation to the reports presented during the period March 2021 – February 2022.

### **Introduction from the Panel Chair**

This has been another busy year with changes and some challenges. It was great to read the feedback included showing that Panel is now a positive experience by Social workers presenting and the carers attending, while being diligent in our scrutiny or assessments and reports.

The current panel advisor taking up the role in May 2021 has helped panel's goal of ongoing improvements to quality assurance and enhanced communication prior and post panel process. This has been particularly positive when panel have given advised or asked for a case to return to panel, ensuring actions are followed through.

The annual appraisals of panel members also meant a review of the central list, this was to ensure that panel had a rounded and diverse amount of experience and knowledge while providing consistency in its approach. This did see several longstanding panel members not continuing as panel members. As Chair of the panel, I am grateful for panel members' engagement to this process and the good work and commitment contributed by those who are no longer members of the central list.

Although it will be reviewed in the future, we remain delivering Panel virtually for the foreseeable future. It has been discussed that, if possible, future panel training days will be considered being delivered face to face rather than virtually.

As you will see from the data there has been a fairly high number of deferrals at panel during this period. Panel do anticipate that the ongoing collaboration between the Panel Advisor,

the Social Work team and their managers on the expectations of quality of reports, being evidenced based, capturing the voice of the child and with good analysis, that this figure will be reduced in the future.

Panel have been aware of changes in the Social Work team, again with a turnover of staff. This does seem to have settled down recently and we hope for a period of stability for the supervision and support of carers and an increase of assessments coming to panel.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all panel members, the administrative staff (Carole in particular) and the panel advisor for the ongoing commitment, flexibility to Panel, the Young People and Foster Carers of Croydon.

## **Panel Meetings**

The Croydon Fostering Panel meets on the first, third and fourth Tuesday of each month. Panels are either a full day of 5 cases or half a day of 3 cases. The agenda depends on the cases that are ready within the timescales for distributing the paperwork, 5 working days before the meeting.

There were 30 panel meetings held during this period; 3 panel meetings were cancelled due to insufficient cases ready for presentation. All meetings were quorate **Reg 24(1)**

Panel welcomes observers to the meetings by prior arrangement and during this period have had attendees from the fostering service and other children's services.

## **Membership**

Croydon Fostering Panel is chaired by Dylan Mclees-Taylor who is highly experienced in this role and a former foster carer.

The Central List members bring a wide variety of professional and personal expertise and experiences including, Care experienced, Health, Education, CAMHS, Foster Carer, Family Group Conference, Legal and Social Work.

Croydon reviews the Central List through the appraisal process which is conducted annually **NMS 14.1/14.8, Guidance 5.8**

During the appraisal process in 2021 a Core List of members was identified to ensure consistency which is particularly relevant if a case is deferred and needs to return to panel at a later date. **Guidance 5.4**

New panel members observe at least one panel as part of their induction, sign a panel agreement, and receive a copy of Effective Fostering Panels (Coram BAAF) Panel members will also receive a copy of the Croydon Fostering Handbook. **Guidance 5.14/NMS 23**

Panel has recently appointed 2 Vice Chairs from the Central List to ensure there is always cover should the Chair be unavailable.

The Panel Advisor has been in post since May 2021 and was the third advisor to this post within a year.

Panel is extremely well supported by the senior panel administrator. Members, social workers and families are highly appreciative of the work the senior panel administrator completes prior, during and post panel. The senior panel administrator is also supported in this role when necessary.

Future recruitment of panel members will need to be mindful of considering applicants with a knowledge of living and working in Croydon, to reflect the demographics of the local community.

### **Panel training, development and appraisal**

Training and development sessions were provided for panel members in September 2021. Following the business development meeting there was a forum to discuss the recently published guidelines from Coram BAAF – *The use of National Minimum Standards (NMS) in England as a benchmark on deciding on the suitability of foster carers including kinship foster carers*. During subsequent panel meetings it is evident that this discussion has influenced the way that members view and challenge when it appears that NMS standards have not been met.

Joint training was held with the Assessment and Recruitment Team. This proved to be a positive and productive day and further joint training days with other relevant services will be arranged.

Training around allegations and complaints against foster carers followed the business development meeting and was facilitated by the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service Manager.

Links to recommended relevant articles/programmes/changes and updates and legislation are regularly sent to panel members and discussed in AOB at meetings.

It has recently been confirmed that panel members will be given access to Croydon Learning resources.

Croydon is a paperless and currently, a virtual panel. Applicants join meeting via Microsoft Teams. There have been some challenges, but overall feedback has identified that panel attendees are able to do this confidently albeit there will always be the occasional technical issue. The panel administrator always sends out a link for attendees to trial to ensure they are able to log on and their SSW will also offer support if needed.

Panel members prepare their questions and analysis of paperwork prior to panel and send to the Chair ahead of the meeting. The Chair collates all information and formulates the questions for applicants and social workers. To ensure the meeting runs smoothly and minimise it feeling overwhelming and intimidating, the Chair asks all the questions but is clear with those attending it is a collaborative process.

A virtual panel means team managers and social workers no longer have to book whole days out of their busy schedule or wait around for their cases to be presented. Team managers can be instantly called into meetings if necessary.

The Panel Chair and Panel Advisor meet after every panel and whenever necessary in between. Relationships between the Panel Advisor, TM's and SSW's have been strengthened by regular meetings and advice pertinent to reports before they are presented

to panel and following the decisions made by the ADM. This assists with the panel's role of quality assurance, monitoring and raising standards.

The case analysis and feedback from for SW's presenting to panel has recently been updated from the previous version that asked panel members to score 1-10. It was felt this was an unhelpful and unproductive method of giving feedback. The new form focuses on the standard and quality of the report and presentation.

## **Appraisals**

All panel members had their annual appraisal in 2021. During this process the Central List was refreshed and reduced in line with Fostering Guidance and National Minimum Standards. This was a task that was overdue but is now complete.

The ADM completed the Panel Chair's appraisal

The majority of panel members were comfortable and in agreement to continue with virtual panels, knowing that the situation would be regularly reviewed.

## **Casework**

Croydon Fostering Panel considers; Applicants, Connected Carers Assessments, Long Term Matches, Annual Reviews, Resignations, Terminations, Standard of Care, Change of Approval. Any significant changes in existing foster carers' circumstances should also be presented to panel.

Panel are seeing carers that have not been back to panel for many years, some have not been to panel since their approval. The legal functions of a fostering panel also include considering the first review carried out in accordance with **Reg 28(2)** this issue has been escalated to senior management.

As part of good practice foster carers are now being presented to panel on a three yearly basis.

During this period Panel did not see the number of assessments of new carers that was anticipated (15). Panel considered 12 new applicants and 7 connected carers.

## **Recommendations and decisions**

The table below provides an overview of cases heard in this reporting period March 2021 – February 2022. Please note that although the table reflects the cases presented, those awaiting ADM Decision are from the February panels. There are also 2 complex cases from previous panels that have not yet had an ADM Decision.

## **March 2021 to end Feb 2022**

**30 panels – 123 cases**

Type of Meeting	Number of Cases	Outcomes
Approvals	12	12 approved
Connected Persons/ Family and Friends	7	6 approved, 1 deferred
First Year Reviews	19	18 reapproved, 1 deferred
3 Yearly Reviews	55	44 reapproved, 8 deferred, 3 withdrawn
De-registrations/Resignations	13	12 acknowledged, 1 deferred
Long Term Matches	13	11 approved, 2 deferred
Other matters	6	Change of Approval, Termination, Updates

### **Themes**

Panel dates are booked well in advance, which enables all concerned including supervising social workers, foster carers and applicants to focus their preparations within a specified timeframe. For a range of reasons this has not always been achieved. Delays include unforeseen circumstances leading to key individuals not being available, delays in statutory checks being received.

Foster carer reviews have highlighted gaps in feedback from professionals connected to the child or young person. Collaboration between the service managers across the system has promoted an improvement in this area. Where feedback has been received, they have help to provide the panel with rich information, to help the panel to fully understand the child's journey with the foster carer. The panel has commented that they fund the feedback received invaluable to the review process, particularly the feedback received from the child or young person.

The Panel Advisor has regular communication with the supervising social workers and their team managers, which has helped promote the improvements seen in the quality of the preparation for foster carer reviews and the quality of the reports being submitted for panel.

Carers not returning to panel was a theme from the last report. We are still seeing this but as good practice, all foster carers will now attend panel every three years.

The recording of unannounced visits has improved. The panel had highlighted last year that level of unannounced visits being undertaken were too low. In many cases the impact of Covid restrictions were cited as the reason. In actual practice supervising social workers



have been carrying out unannounced visits (in many cases) but were not recording it as this.

Panel highlighted that there are too many instances where foster carers have not completed enough training. The practice around this has been strengthened with the relaunching of the foster carers personal development plan (PDP). The supervising social workers are now ensuring that the PDP is a standard feature of the supervision and ad hoc conversations with their foster carers. This is given that the PDP will help ensure that the foster carer has the necessary skills to meet the needs of the child they are caring for; and gaps in knowledge/skills are being addressed.

Connected Carers are not sufficiently prepared for the role of foster carer. At panel carers are saying that their responsibilities have not been explained to them, for example, daily recording and training and they do not appear to have been offered the Skills to Foster course, which is a requirement as part of the assessment process. Connected Carers coming back to panel after their first year have said they would have welcomed the opportunity to attend this course and other training, sooner rather than later. The practice around these issues has now been strengthened. The team manager for Family and Friends ensures that the expectations/requirements of being a Connected Carer is explained and addressed during the assessment process. In addition, the Skills to Foster training has been adapted for Connected Carers and sessions are facilitated for them as part of the assessment process.

### **Communication with Service/agency**

The Panel Advisor attends regular meetings with Fostering Management Team, Panel Chair and ADM. Meetings are held with the SSW as and when needed. Significant issues raised within panel are communicated to the Service Manager as they are identified and at least, following each meeting, an arrangement is made to discuss.

### **User feedback**

Attendees at panel are encouraged to provide feedback on their experience of panel. Examples are provided below, and it is evident from these that the virtual panel has been a positive experience for the majority of those people that attended.

Panel members have commented on the difference in how the meetings are now chaired, which has also been reflected in the feedback.

#### **Foster Carers/Applicants**

- *Everyone was helpful and kind.*
- *Nice experience was online. Very helpful.*
- *I felt that Panel to be very professional and gave a thorough explanation of what would happen.*
- *I was very pleased and ultimately content with the discussion throughout. The Chair was an exceptionally good representative for other Panel attendees. Thank you all.*
- *We felt at ease and comfortable with all panel members.*

- *The introduction of the panel members, the questions asked, and the overall calm atmosphere made it a positive experience.*
- *An excellent explanation and talk, by the chair of the panel.*
- *I feel that the online panel process works really well, having completed both face to face and online, I feel that the online is less daunting and really moving with the times. I appreciated the information sent prior to panel. Thank you*
- *All went well so it was positive.*
- *I was greeted with a smile and the chairperson introduced himself and explained what was involved regarding the panel.*
- *I was very happy and felt uplifted after my experience of Panel and felt appreciated in my role as a foster carer.*
- *The panel ran the meeting efficiently and professionally and made us to feel more comfortable and at ease from start to the end.*
- *The questions were fair, and I did not feel under pressure. It was supportive experience.*
- *Because the decision made was the best for my 2 granddaughters.*
- *We were made to feel at ease, and as with other panels we did not feel as though we were on trial.*
- *F/C found the feedback form difficult to complete.*
- *I felt reassured by everyone taking part. We were very satisfied with the panel meeting and the outcome.*
- *As I am meeting the children's needs in all areas, I have done a vast amount of training to improve my knowledge in specific areas and there were positive comments made about myself from other parties.*

### **Social Workers**

- *My experience was positive. I normally explain introductory/welcoming process used by the panel to the foster carers before they attend, especially carers who have not attended the fostering panel for a number of years, which gives them an idea of what to expect.*
- *F/C told me that she was made to feel at ease, she did not feel awkward at any time. She felt the panel members introduced themselves with a smile made her feel welcome. The Chairperson introduced himself and outlined the process which was very helpful. My experience of Panel attendance is positive. No improvement required.*
- *I felt it was positive for me and F/C. Prior to the date of attendance at panel I tried to reassure F/C that she would be ok, but on the day before panel, she told me that she was still nervous. So, it was pleasing to see how delighted she was when she received the feedback from the Chair of her continued approval. F/C said she felt nervous to begin with but as soon as the Panel Chair started the conversation she felt at ease. F/C said that the experience was positive for her. No improvement needed*
- *My experience of attending panel on this occasion has been positive. I felt adequately prepared, thanks to the panel advisor, who had made the expectations of the panel clear to me prior to attending the panel. This allowed me to prepare in advance and collate the necessary information required for the panellists to review when making a decision. FC shared after Panel, that she felt it was a positive experience. Prior to attending, FC had shared her anxieties around potentially being misunderstood. FC was pleased when*

reporting that she did not feel this way during the panel, and she felt “heard and listened to” .

- The panel advisor has been a very positive ‘go-to’ panel member. She explained the expectations of panel, as well as sharing advice on how information required can be obtained and presented to panel. With the support of the panel advisor, preparation for the Panel was not the overwhelming task I had envisioned it to be, considering the lack of information at hand for this particular case. The process was smooth, and I felt supported throughout the process due to the collaborative approach experienced with the panel advisor in the lead up the panel date.
- Panel was a positive experience, panel members were welcoming and asked relevant questions, they gave lots of praise and positive feedback. The applicant expressed that panel was a positive experience. I understood the role of panel as I have attended panels previously.
- Whilst I understand that it is difficult to always keep within panel’s agreed time slots, it does add additional stress on applicants who are waiting to be presented.
- Positive. Panel was very welcoming to the foster carers, who initially were very concerned about attending Panel, despite my reassurances. The couple had not returned to Panel for a number of years and were evidently anxious. Thank you to the panel advisor and for all the Panel for a positive experience for both the foster carers and myself.
- "Positive for the following reasons:
  - The demeanour (smile) of the Chair and his tone of voice set the tone of the meeting
  - The fact that questions were predominantly asked by one person rather than different panel members made it less daunting for the applicants, and for myself." The carers expressed that they had preconceived ideas that it would be a nerve-racking process however they were pleasantly surprised. The panel provides an essential level of scrutiny in assessing the suitability and capability of applicants to meet the needs of children. I am not sure if there are any plans to resume face-to-face panels, however I feel that using a virtual conferencing platform creates a less intimidating atmosphere. Consideration could be given to its continued use.
- Positive – questions and feedback provided in a sensitive and supportive manner.
- F/C said it was a positive experience for her, she was less nervous than when she was being approved as a carer. F/C said she felt that she was well prepared for Panel. Panel is well organised from my perspective, Panel Advisor is excellent, she always ensures that we are well prepared, for example, if a document is missing, she would ensure that we have the necessary documents available. Although I am always nervous about attending Panel, it is generally an enjoyable experience for me, I actually get some tips to improve my practice, based on the questions which are presented to me.
- Very positive. It was good
- Positive, made to feel relaxed when participating in the review.
- Felt people were listening when I was speaking as they were making eye contact and showed expression listening
- The applicant expressed feeling overwhelmed with the amount of panel members. She was initially anxious seeing that amount of people. But then as the review began, she felt at ease. She was happy with panel’s comments about her care and delighted with the decision of continue approval.

## Conclusions and recommendations

**Guidance 5.2** states that; *Fostering panels are intended as multi-disciplinary bodies with a considerable element of independence from the fostering service. Panels therefore play an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice. Panels are required to give regular feedback to the fostering service.*

One of aims of panel over the last year has been to drive up the standard of reports presented to them. This is progressing and aided by the regular communications with the fostering service. Building and strengthening relationships with the Assessment, Fostering, Family and Friends, and Child Care Teams is ongoing and positive. Supervising social workers have expressed they appreciate the constructive feedback and guidance in order to amend reports prior to them being distributed to panel.

The feedback and analysis from Panel on reports presented; Form F assessments need to be more robust, and the Coram BAAF guidelines followed more routinely. Safeguarding issues to be more thoroughly explored and risk assessments completed where necessary.

The quality of Foster Carer reviews is improving but still variable and there are instances where the National Minimum Standards have not been met. In some cases, better evidence could have been provided on how the foster carer was supported to meet these. However, there are strong evidence that the standard of reviews are improving.

It still appears to be a struggle for supervising social workers to receive feedback from all other professionals for the foster carer reviews, and this is ongoing. The importance of this has been communicated to the relevant teams and it is hoped the situation can be improved.

Panel will defer cases that do not provide all relevant information or evidence discussions have been had around areas of potential vulnerability.

Panel members are committed to contributing to the safety and well-being of the children that Croydon look after and ensuring the people that do that are fully supported.

Panel have met some amazing carers over the last year and feel humbled and privileged to be a part of the process that means children and young people feel safe, happy, heard, wanted, and are receiving the care they deserve.

## **6. Impact of Covid 19**

The restrictions continued to impact on our ability carry out the recruitment events. However, as the restrictions are lifting (or have lifted) we have started to facilitate our recruitment events again and this is gathering pace.

There was significant impact on how training and support has been delivered and accessed as it has had to be mainly 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.

Supervising social workers and assessing social workers have used creative means to minimise the impact of the restrictions; working safely to support carers in carrying out their fostering tasks and applicants to engage effectively in assessment process.

## **7. Escalation Policy**

Whilst there are no management data available to support this notion anecdotally, we know that the escalation policy for foster carers is having a significantly positive impact. Feedback from the CFCA committee and other foster carers informs of this. Also, since the implementation of the escalation policy (September 2020) the fostering service has had no more than 2 complaints via corporate complaints.

The CFCA committee has highlighted that some foster carers have disclosed their apprehension about using this escalation policy, as they have a good relationship with their supervising social worker and would not want to affect that relationship. All carers are being encouraged to activate the policy/procedure if their issue has not been resolved by their supervising social work (at stage 1).

Because of how the escalation policy was designed to be used it would not be possible to pragmatically capture data as stage 1. Consideration is being given to how data could be captured at stage 3.

Currently, escalation is triggered manually in writing or verbally.

## **8. Key achievements during 2021/22**

- The implementation of the extensive programme of improvement has gathered pace and is having a positive impact. Feedback from the foster carers and others within the children's social care system supports this notion.
- The fostering panel advisor has spearheaded strong and sustainable improvements in relation to the fostering panel and its interface with children's social care.
- The role of the fostering reviewing officers have been strengthened. They work closely with the IRO service, ensuring that the care provided by the foster carers and the support provided by the fostering service and the wider children's social care system remains robust. The performance around the timeliness of fostering reviews have remained excellent (around 98%).
- Foster carer reviews presented at the fostering panel on the first year following approval and then on a 3 yearly cycle routinely happens routinely.
- Extended the Fostering Panels, to support permanency through long term foster care matches.
- Increase in fostering enquiries since 2020 and the 30 for Croydon campaign is taking hold.
- Croydon foster carers respond positively and in general offer our young people the option of "Staying Put" when they reach 18 years old. Increase seen in the number of Staying Put arrangements.
- Extensive work continues in terms embedding the improved working relationships with other social work teams and services (Virtual School, Health, etc.), which is having a good impact.
- Foster carers participating in the development of systems, for example the

foster carer portal.

- Broadening of training programme with arrangements to deliver foster carer training and development based on their PDP.
- Development of the mentoring offer, ensuring that robust support is provided to connected carers, newly approved carers and those who from time to time might need support from a mentor.

## **9. Key priorities for development during 2022/23**

- Strengthen 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).
- Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers as well and as a more responsive service.
- Further improve 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.
- Enhance our links with the professional network around the child.
- Enabling the service to learn from Ofsted inspections and audits.
- Increase the number of approved carers in line with the sufficiency strategy.
- Begin the work to further develop the fostering service, enabling enhancements to be made to the support to foster carers via an extended family approach.

**1. CONSULTATION**

N/A

**2. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

N/A

**3. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT**

N/A

**4. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

N/A

**5. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

N/A

**6. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT**

N/A

**7. DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS**

**7.1 WILL THE SUBJECT OF THE REPORT INVOLVE THE PROCESSING OF 'PERSONAL DATA'?**

**NO**

**8** Approved by: Róisín Madden Director Children's Social Care

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**APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT**

1. Croydon Council Fostering Service Statement of Purpose 2022/23
2. Croydon Foster Carer's Association Annual Report to Corporate Parenting Panel