

<b>REPORT TO:</b>	<b>Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub-Committee</b>  <b>14 July 2015</b>
<b>AGENDA ITEM:</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>Fostering Services and Adoption Services In Croydon</b>
<b>LEAD OFFICER:</b>	<b>Ian Lewis, Director of children and family early intervention and children's social care</b>
<b>CABINET MEMBER:</b>	<b>Cllr Alisa Flemming, Lead member for children, young people and learners</b>
<b>PERSON LEADING AT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING:</b>	<b>Ian Lewis</b>
<b>ORIGIN OF ITEM:</b>	This item is contained in the sub-committee's agreed work programme.
<b>COMMITTEE LINES OF INQUIRY:</b>	To scrutinise the effectiveness of the Fostering Service and the Adoption Service.

## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The Fostering Service has achieved success of growth in recruiting and retaining foster carers and in meeting the placement needs of nearly 50% of the total LAC population that is fostered. Most local authorities aspire to achieving 70% or more of children placed in-house, and Croydon's performance to date has to take account of its unique profile with 400 unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The recruitment and assessment function was outsourced in June 2013 to achieve further substantial increase of in-house placement and generate savings in relation to the children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. The culture of the service has undergone transformation and workshops with foster carers and with social workers will be concluded in July 2015 in completion of the transformation journey. The agenda for the workshops is to identify means to implement reflective supervision with foster carers, deliver improved mentoring, and agree standards of practice from supervising social workers and higher accountability. There is high placement stability for children in foster care in comparison with national performance. Risks in delivering a substantial increase in children placed in-house are possible if there is a further increase in unaccompanied asylum seeking children or the continued reduction in the numbers of local looked after children are not achieved.

- 1.2 The Adoption Service is achieving considerable success in recruiting and retaining adopters and in increasing the numbers of adopted children - the year end for 204/15 represents a 263% increase in adoptions from 2011/12. The timeliness of adoptions remains of concern for Croydon because of the impact on the timescales, measured as an average of performance over three years, of children who became looked after prior to the improvements began in the service in 2012. Performance against the timescales achieved this year is significantly better and it is anticipated that Croydon will achieve the national thresholds for timeliness by 2016/17. The Adoption Service is judged by Ofsted to be good and it is high performing in the preparation and training of adopters, in making suitable matches for children, and in preventing adoption breakdowns. It provides good support to adopters. The Service maintains its commitment to placing children with complex needs, including physical and learning disabilities, and older children, although this invariably impacts on timeliness.
- 1.3 Reports on Adoption and Fostering are regularly received at the Corporate Parenting Panel. This report for the Children and Young People Scrutiny Sub Committee is presented within a SWOTT approach (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and timeliness) and addresses, in particular, the questions of Members about recruitment and retention issues, support, and impact of the large number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in the care of the council. In the Adoption section of this report the strengths and weaknesses are combined because strong performance improvement in timescales nevertheless falls short of government thresholds for reasons explained in the report, and strengths and weaknesses are, therefore, not so easily segregated.

## **2. FOSTERING**

### **2.1 Background**

The Fostering Service has responsibility for the statutory tasks and responsibilities as set out in the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards 2011 and Children Act Guidance Volume 4: Fostering Services Regulations 2011. The service provides for the recruitment, training, assessment, approval, and annual review of foster carers. The service has a staff of 19 social workers, two unit managers, and is delivered by the Delivery Manager, Spencer Duvwiama (acting). The primary task of the social workers is to visit their carers and offer professional supervision and support to them in order for the child in placement to achieve their best outcomes. Foster carer approvals are recommended to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) by the Croydon Fostering Panel. The Panel has an independent chair and members who are required to be drawn from social workers, foster carers, elected members, and other members with experience of fostering, education, short break care and family and friends care, be gender balanced and reflect the diversity of the local community. The Fostering Panel and ADM are required to make timely, high quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in

line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care.

2.2 Foster carers are required to undergo training from the outset of expressing their interest as applicants, and this is on-going during the assessment process and when they are approved and caring for children. The Guidance requires foster carers to undertake the following 5 Mandatory training modules (about 30 hours) during the first year of approval: Induction, First Aid, Recording, Safer Caring (enhanced & Safer Caring for Men), Health & Safety. This training is required for completing the Training, Support and Development (TSD) standards for foster carers through an evidence-based approach. In addition, training modules offered to foster carers during the year including Benefits, Croydon Policies and Procedures, Life Story work, Missing Persons, and Child Sexual Exploitation. Training is provided in-house from the Learning and Development Team and also from commissioned trainers. Connected Person's Carers can be members of the child's family, friends or other person (teacher, for example) with a significant connection to the child. The child is placed with a Connected Carer following a Viability Assessment undertaken by the child's social worker, and then they are assessed go for approval to the Fostering Panel. Some Connected Carers complete the full training, although this is offered but not required of them. The Croydon Foster Carer Association (CFCA) a voluntary membership association for our foster carers is notified of all newly approved foster carers to offer mentoring and support. The CFCA liaises closely with the Head of Service and Fostering Delivery Manager and is represented on the membership of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

### 2.3 **Strengths**

The fostering service did not prioritise recruitment of new foster carers until 2012 and for some years functioned at just over 100 carers despite the large size of the LAC population. There was heavy reliance on the council's own children's homes, the last two of which closed in 2012, independent residential children's homes, and independent fostering providers. The average cost of in-house foster placement is £400 per week per child; the average cost of independent foster care is £700 per week per child, and the average cost for residential care is £3,665.31 per week, per child. Based on the knowledge, demonstrated by research, that looked after children achieve better outcomes in a family environment by means of adoption and foster care in comparison with residential care, and given the spend reduction opportunities, work was started to:

- Increase the number of adoptions
- Increase the number foster carers
- Reduce the number of children placed in residential children's homes

2.4 Outcomes achieved to date are considerable and includes, the increase over this period in adoptions from 11 to 29, and 41 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO). Adoption orders and SGOs combined together mean that 70 children left care last year by means of a permanent arrangement. A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is an order made by a Court appointing one or more individuals to

be a child's 'Special Guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989 and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement. An SGO can enable a child to remain in his or her family as, unlike adoption, it does not end the legal relationship between the child and his or her birth parents. A Special Guardianship Order usually lasts until the child is 18.

2.5 There has also been a reduction in the use of residential children's homes from 41 placements to the current low level of 10 placements, which represents 1.25% of the LAC population. Most other councils have between 5-10% of their children in residential placements. In addition to significant spend reduction, the reduction in residential placements is a strong safeguarding measure given what is known from Rochdale and Rotherham about the vulnerability of child sexual exploitation for these children. The success in increasing the number of foster carers has been equally significant. Discounting the Connected Persons Carers (formerly known as Kinship Carers or Family & Friends Carers, Connected Persons Carers are approved to care for a named child/children only to whom they have a connection) the triple increase of new Foster Carers is strong performance in the highly competitive environment of London where there are a large number of local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies vying to recruit, and in the context of the local and national shortage of foster carers.

<b>Foster Carer Approvals By Type and Year</b>					
	<b>Connected Persons Carers</b>	<b>Foster Carers</b>	<b>Respite Foster Carers</b>	<b>Short Breaks Carers</b>	<b>Total</b>
2011/12	6	13		1	20
2012/13	10	37		1	48
2013/14	7	38	1		46
2014/15	11	31	1		
2015/16 (to 16Jun15)	2	6	1		9

<b>Foster Carer Approval Totals</b>			
	<b>Foster Carers</b>	<b>Connected Persons Carers</b>	<b>Total of Carers</b>
2012/13	190	49	239
2013/14	206	50	256
2014/15	217	61	278

2.6 The number of foster carers leaving the service in 2014/15 was 9, of which 5 resigned for personal reasons, including retirement, and 4 were deregistered by the Fostering Panel. Considered as a workforce of 278 carers the retention rate is 96.7%, suggesting that there are real strengths of supervision and support,

but consistency in the quality of supervision and support has been identified as an area for improvement in the transformation workshops by both foster carers and social workers. The scheme of allowances is competitive for London and the service does not experience a transfer of carers to the Independent Fostering Agencies as previous to 2011 when the scheme was revised.

2.7 The number of local LAC in Croydon is slightly below the national average, but the combined LAC population of UASC and local children is large; the largest in London and the 14<sup>th</sup> largest nationally. Although large, placement stability is good and better than the national averages for length of placements, and significantly better than the national average for number of placement moves, with less than 8% of our population having 3 or more placement moves in comparison with 12% nationally. The overwhelming majority of children and young people are placed within 20 miles of their home address. Sibling groups are placed together unless a Together or Apart Assessment concludes this is not in their best interests; siblings are not separated because of placement capacity.

<b>Age</b>	<b>In-house</b>		<b>IFA</b>	
	<b>Under 20</b>	<b>Over 20</b>	<b>Under 20</b>	<b>Over 20</b>
0 to 4	46	3	5	0
5 to 9	35	2	10	1
10 to 14	55	2	53	13
15 to 16	103	3	154	7
17 to 18	52	3	66	7
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>10</b>

2.8 Staying Put Arrangements were implemented in 2014, which enable care leavers aged 18 to remain with their foster carers to age 21 under the specified terms of the arrangements. Both the young person and the carer have to agree to the arrangement and if the local authority also agrees this to be in the best interests of the care leaver, as identified in their Pathway Plan, a license agreement is entered into by all parties. The status of the carer changes as they are no longer the foster carer for the care leaver. Payments are made to the staying put carer by the council and the housing benefit reclaimed from the care leaver, who is additionally responsible for making some payments to the staying put carer, such as for meals. There is a standard contribution from the council, enhanced at a higher level for care leavers with specified vulnerabilities. There is a grant from central government to Croydon to help implement the Staying Put Arrangements. Report on the Draft Staying Put Scheme went to Corporate Parenting Panel in July 2014, following which a number of improvements were made to the scheme in consultation with foster carers. The number of arrangements approved under the scheme this year stand at 15 and it is intended to considerably increase this number. All young people aged 17 years are advised of this opportunity at our internal “housing panel” for young people transitioning to leaving care. Certainly there is no restriction imposed by the council on these arrangements (where they meet the young person’s needs) but uptake by both foster carers and young people has been lower so far than anticipated.

2.9 Our foster carers are a high performing workforce of people dedicated and CYP20140715 AR06 Fostering Services and Adoption Services in Croydon

committed to the care of the children they look after on a daily basis. It is of note that the foster carer return for the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire that measures the emotional and mental health wellbeing of the child was 87% on 31 March 2014, just short of our ambitious target of 90%. The London average was 78% and the England average 64%. This performance is included in the data return to government for the 903. The performance for 2015 is also 86%.

## 2.10 Weaknesses

Croydon has 397 local LAC and 408 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in care and of these 621 are placed in foster care. There are 181 local children placed with in-house foster carers, and 100 local children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. There are 132 UASC placed with our in-house foster carers and 218 UASC placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. The remaining LAC not placed in foster carer are in various accommodation placements; these include, 10 children living in children's homes, 80 young people aged 16-18 living in Semi Independent Accommodation (this means living in a house together with other young people and cooking, washing and caring for themselves but with staff support on site), 7 young people in youth offender institutions (a very low level compared to the national average) and some others in pre-adoption placements etc. We currently have a total of 313 children with our in-house foster carers and 318 with Independent Fostering agencies. This means that we accommodate 64.4% of local children in-house and 38.8% of UASC. However, in total we are accommodating only 49.6% of the fostered LAC population in-house. The fostering service would have sufficient capacity to accommodate nearly all local children in-house, except for some children who would be better placed with a specialist IFA, and this is a considerable achievement in comparison with other local authorities. The unique situation of Croydon means that there is considerable UASC uptake of in-house placements.

<b>Percentage of children in-house by age</b>		
Age	In-house	IFA
0 to 4	90%	10%
5 to 9	77%	23%
10 to 14	48%	52%
15 to 16	39%	61%
17 to 18	43%	57%

2.11 As the above table shows, the majority of children aged 0 - 9 years are accommodated in-house, but this becomes less than 50% at age 10-14 years and less than 40% for 15-16 years, and just over 40% for 17-18 years; meaning that older children are more likely to be placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. However, almost all the cohort of the 195 new UASC coming into care had a stated age above 14 years and this impacts these percentages, as it does the gender profile of the LAC population with only 10.3% of the 195 UASC being female. This means that just less than 90% of foster placements for UASC will be for adolescent males. The predominant ethnicities of the 195 UASC coming into care in 2014/15 is shown in the table below (showing more than 5 children by country of origin). The additional table shows the age groups, demonstrating the predominant stated age of UASC on arrival to be 14-15

years.

<b>UASC Countries of Origin (more than 5)</b>	
Albania	112
Eritrea	21
Afghanistan	18
Syria	9
Vietnam	8

<b>UASC by age (new arrivals)</b>	
0-10	4
11-13	15
14-15	132
16+ (Rota)	44

- 2.12 This means that the majority of placements made for UASC new admissions in 2014/15 were for adolescent Albanian males. The fostering service has experienced breakdowns of placements for this particular group because of their behaviours towards female carers. This was explored by the Permanence 1 Service (social work to LAC who are UASC) with Albanian social workers who came to Croydon as part of a joint initiative between the service and the Home Office to facilitate returns to Albania when identified children could be safely returned to their families and local communities. The Albanian social workers explained the gender assumptions of Albanian males from the country districts. These changes of placement impact the performance on placement stability.
- 2.13 Although foster carer recruitment has been successfully driven, it was recognized by managers and social workers that the culture of the service required change and that team building was needed. Sickness has impacted on the ability of the service to conduct annual reviews of foster carers, with 21 currently out of timescale, but sickness is now being managed and a robust plan is in place to bring all reviews within timescale by end of July 2015. Assessments of foster carers were previously commissioned from agency social workers and varied in quality and timeliness.
- 2.14 There is a need to increase the number of Short Break Carers for children with disabilities. There are currently 7 short break carers, however, the council operates Calleydown Children with Disabilities Home which provides day care and overnight short breaks to 46 children with severe learning disabilities. Children with physical disabilities are offered a range of short break care through independent providers. It is intended to recruit a specialist social worker to the Fostering Service to increase the number of short break carers.

## 2.15 Opportunities

In the past year it was recognized that the fostering service required transformation to achieve great placement capacity in-house, to build team identity and morale, and to deliver consistent standards of supervision and support to foster carers. Workshops were organized for foster carers and social workers, and children in placement were surveyed. The collaboration between

social workers and foster carers in the workshops has been constructive in shaping the future direction of the service. The final stages of the transformation project are in sight with two days of workshops for social workers and foster carers in July 2015. These will be led by the Head of Service and the intention is to create very clear expectations of the standards required of supervision and support from social workers, and the standards of care and behavior required of foster carers so that both can be held accountable for improvement. Team building exercises in July with the social workers will also be undertaken to support the culture of change. The training of all social workers in Systemic Family Therapy has included the Fostering Team and is impacting on improved understanding of how the fostering service adds value to the work of the child's social worker and to the outcomes for the child.

2.16 In order to increase in-house capacity and choice to meet local children need, the opportunity was identified in 2014 to outsource the assessment and recruitment of foster carers to an independent specialist provider. Network Recruitment Services (NRS) has an established track record of foster carer recruitment and timeliness of assessments and was successfully commissioned, following tender, by Cabinet Member Decision (Ref: 7/15/CFL) on 16<sup>th</sup> March to begin work on 1<sup>st</sup> June. The contract is for 2 years with an option to extend for 1 year, with annual targets for the recruitment of in-house foster carers. These targets can be flexed depending on the identified need. Based on current requirements, 41 new in-house foster carers are required in Year 1 of the contract (2015/16), 40 in Year 2 (2016/17) and 31 in Year 3 (2017/18). Years 2 and 3 recruitment requirements are based on current forecasts but will be adjusted as required. The procurement strategy report approved on the 14<sup>th</sup> August 2014 identified that net annual savings of £333,160 (2015/16), £653,270 (2016/17) and £921,823 (2017/18) will be generated. The recruitment is targeted at providing foster carers for older children.

## 2.17 **Threats and timeliness**

The NRS contract was implemented to schedule in June 2015 as part of the fostering transformation project. The other part of the project, to drive culture change in the service so that it is less a silo service provided to foster carers and more a service that adds value to the placement outcomes for the child and to the work of other social workers and professionals working with the child, will be completed in July 2015.

2.18 The 'Looking after the Right Child' plan was implemented in 2014 to ensure robust actions were in place to keep children safely within their families where appropriate and return them home safely when appropriate, and this led to a reduction of the local children in care by 50 in 2014/15. Further reductions are planned in the next three years and are being project managed and monitored as a Croydon Challenge project. At the same time, there was an increase in UASC coming into care. This increase seems to have reached a plateau, but the trends in UASC numbers are impacted by government policy and international crises and situations. Croydon cannot control UASC numbers.



2.19 The numbers of local children in care are more controllable through the measures put in place under the Looking after the Right Child' plan (early family intervention for children on the edge of care, rigorous scrutiny by Heads of Service of all requests for care, robust scrutiny by Independent Reviewing Officers of care plans) but are reactive to local and national pressures; for example, a child death, or the increased use of Police Protection Orders. Increases of both the UASC and of the local children are a threat to the actions taken to create greater sufficiency of in-house placements and decrease of IFA placements.

## 2.20 **Fostering: Summary of overall performance**

The Fostering Service is demonstrating sustained outcomes in the improvement journey to good. The Ofsted Inspection criteria for good particularly focuses on recruitment and retention of foster carers, sufficiency of placements, and keeping siblings together unless there are good reasons for separating them. The impressive outputs of foster carer recruitment in the previous 3 years will be sustained and improved upon by the recently commissioned service from NRS. The retention of existing carers is very high. Siblings are never separated for reasons of placement availability, and only when there are safeguarding concerns supported by a Together or Apart assessment. Numbers of children in residential care are very low and these placements are regularly monitored by senior managers. The service is ambitious, and both foster carers and social workers are eager for cultural change with clear expectations of the high standards they will hold each accountable for delivering.

## 3.0 **ADOPTION**

### 3.1 **Background**

The purpose of the Adoption Service is to improve permanence outcomes for children by means of adoption. Identifying and placing children for adoption in a timely way means that young children will benefit from the security and nurture of loving adoptive parents without unnecessary delay, and delay is known to be harmful to early child development. The Adoption Service is working hard to implement the government's adoption reforms, and has made sustained progress and improvement in the last 3 years. The Adoption Scorecard was introduced by the government in 2011 to monitor the numbers and timeliness of children who have a plan for adoption:

- Scorecard Indicator A1: monitors the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (in days)
- Scorecard Indicator A2: monitors the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on

a match to an adoptive family (in days)

- Scorecard Indicator A3: monitors how many children wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)
- Adoption from care: monitors the numbers adopted and % leaving care who are adopted
- N61 monitors the % of looked after children adopted during the year, placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption.

3.2 The performance of the council against these measurements was poor, with considerable delays in timescales and very low numbers of adoptions. In 2010 there were only 9 adoptions and in 2011 there were only 11 adoptions, many taking well over 3 and 4 years to complete. The Statutory Guidance on Adoption specifies that when a child becomes looked after, the child's need for a permanent home should be addressed and a permanence plan be made at the second Looked After Child Review, four months after the child became looked after. However a poor understanding of permanence needs and planning, reviews failing to be robust and scrutinize the plan, changes of social worker, delays in legal proceedings, lack of management oversight, create drift; prior to 2012 some young children had been in care for several years before becoming placed for adoption. The Family Justice Review conducted in 2011 condemned the length of time it took to conclude care proceedings which at that time was a national average of 57 weeks. Reduction in the timescale to 26 weeks was recommended and became a statutory requirement in 2014. This impacts on adoption timescales because concluding care proceedings early and receiving court authority to place, improves the timeliness of placements.

3.3 A child is brought into care by social workers from the Children in Need Service (CIN) and transfers, usually at the second Looked After Child Review at 4 months, to the Looked After Children Service (LAC). Care proceedings are initiated in the CIN Service and completed in the LAC Service. In 2011/12 it was recognized that a reorganization of the structure of Children's Social Care was required to improve timescales and delivery across the whole of the Children's Social Care agenda and this was implemented in 2013. At the same time other measures to improve on the quality and efficiency of outcomes for children and families were introduced: the new Child Record System (CRS), the role of Consultant Practitioners, Systemic Family Therapy training, electronic procedures and library for social workers, and learning and development matched to the needs of social workers and the needs of the service. There was a culture change, embedding the values of the council, and ambitious for improvement. Improvement in adoption performance was and is recognized to be a whole system requirement. In addition from 2011/12 onwards every child referred for adoption is monitored by the Head of Service, LAC, and the Delivery Managers, at the fortnightly Permanence Panel meetings.

3.4 The improvement journey for the adoption service since that time has included the following:

- High level of management oversight and scrutiny
- Early involvement of the Adoption service in care planning
- Continuous learning from qualitative audit
- Learning from peer authority
- Improved case tracking, monitoring and review of all children waiting to be placed
- Care Proceedings Project led by the Director to improve timeliness of proceedings, and as part of this:
  - Establishment of specialist Court Team in the LAC Service
  - Appointment of Care Proceedings Manager
- Care proceedings and adoption process tracking joined
- From December 2014, statutory looked after reviews for all under 5 year olds now taking place within 10 working days after becoming looked after, instead of at 28 days (statutory timescale) and Permanency Planning Meeting at 15 days instead of Permanence Plan being made at the second statutory looked after reviews at 4 months. Review of Section 20 cases to ensure effective and timely actions
- Adoption service attending all legal planning meetings for under 5 cases while still in CIN Service
- Independent audits with an emphasis on permanence planning
- Work to minimise delays in securing placements for “hard to place children” including the following:
  - No delays in securing external placements if and when required
  - The use of Adoption Activity Days
  - Advertising targeted at specific black and minority ethnic groups, and improved web-based promotion.
  - Stronger operation of the South London Adoption Consortium
  - Review of post adoption support arrangements to encourage adopters for harder to place children.
- Stronger service user involvement to inform the review and redesign of post adoption service.
- Early allocation of an adoption worker within 15 days of the child becoming looked after. This will enable early family finding.

- Transfer of child from LAC social worker to an adoption social worker once a placement order has been granted, so that there are no delays in the matching and placement of the child in an adoptive home.

### 3.5 Strengths and weaknesses

The Adoption service was inspected by Ofsted in March 2012 and December 2012 and judged to be good. The plans for improvement, management and leadership, and quality of support to adopters were praised. The dedication, passion, and commitment of the team were noted. The service also agreed to an independent review of its improvement plan in 2012, and again, the progress made with implementing the plan was judged to be good. Timescales are still impacted by legacy cases of children entering care prior to the improvement measures and only now being adopted, and this led to the possibility of a ministerial intervention and notice of improvement in 2014. Croydon was visited by Sir Martin Narey, specialist adviser to the minister in October 2014, and a team from the Department of Education and the significant improvements were noted and the improvement plan endorsed.

- 3.6 There have been considerable improvements made to the numbers of adoptions and as the table demonstrates the year end for 204/15 represents a 263% increase from 2011/12 when improvement plans were made.

<b>Adoptions</b>	
2010/11	9
2011/12	11
2012/13	24
2013/14	24
2014/15	29

- 3.7 Last year there was a national decrease in the number of adoptions but Croydon improved on the previous year. An ambitious target of 35 adoptions has been set for 2015/16.

- 3.8 The Adoption Scorecards measure performance over the previous 3 years as cumulative totals. Therefore, Croydon's performance is still impacted by children becoming looked after prior to and in 2011/12 and by referrals made to the adoption service in 2011/12. The national thresholds for 2016/17 are for Indicator A1 426 days, and Indicator A2, 121 days. In order to achieve convergence with these thresholds we need to achieve performance better than the thresholds now in order to improve performance across the three year average. Our 3 year average for these indicators is for A1, 674 days, and for A2, 289 days. Based on our performance improvements our predicted achievements in 2014/15 were to achieve A1 within 245 days, and A2 within 80 days. Our current performance against these targets is for A1, 341 days, and for A2, 80 days. In 2013, the minister reported that 2 thirds of local authority adoption agencies were not meeting the thresholds.

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Threshold 2016/17</b>	<b>Current 3 year Performance</b>	<b>2014/15 Performance</b>
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A1	426	674	341
A2	121	289	80

- 3.9 Our aim is to achieve parity with the Scorecard thresholds by 2016/17 and the improvements in timeliness of care proceedings. In respect of the number of children who waited less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, the 2014 Scoreboard shows the national average as 51% against which our 2014/15 performance is 51.7%. It should be noted in respect of the Scorecard that although it measures the % of BME adoptions it does not measure the % of adoptions for children with physical and learning disabilities. These children present complex challenges to place with an adopter.
- 3.10 Croydon has a commitment to these children and does not impose restrictions on the time taken to match with an adopter, although it is the practice of many local authorities to restrict the time take to 6 months or a year and then to activate the alternative dual plan – usually for long term fostering. Many of the children adopted by Croydon have special needs, physical and learning disabilities. Both the Department of Education and Sir Martin Narey have agreed that this does impact on our achieving the timescales. The Scorecard has to be interpreted in this light and the ADCS and LGA have commented on improvements that could be made to give a richer understanding of a local authority's performance and outcomes for children. For example, as noted by Ofsted, the quality of preparation of adopters and children in Croydon, has meant that there have been no pre-adoption placement breakdowns or post-adoption breakdowns in the past 5 years. The Scorecard is a very important measure of performance and accountability, but it is not the only measure of the quality of work undertaken by the local authority.

<b>Sufficiency of adopters</b>	
Adopters matched with children placed	15
Adopters going inter-agency who have children placed	8
Approved and matched	8
Approved Adopters waiting for match	37
Prospective adopters in assessment / training	43

- 3.11 As can be seen from the above table, the adoption service is successful at recruiting and approving adopters. There is a Council webpage with a Free-phone number dedicated to recruiting adopters all year round. Information on adoption can be accessed through the Croydon Council website: <https://www.croydon.gov.uk/healthsocial/falaseservices/adopt>
- 3.12 There is an Information leaflet which can be accessed through this site which explains the process of adoption. Prospective applicants also have access to information about adoption via "First4Adoption". This is a Department of Educations sponsored webpage dedicated to recruiting adopters for all Adoption Agencies in England and Wales. For harder to place children such as those with a mental or physical disability, older and those from a black and ethnic minority background, specific targeted recruitment strategies are employed. These include, advertising in news media and/or commissioning an agency such as IAM to secure an adoptive placement in a timely way. During Adoption Week (October of every year) the service together with the South

West London Adoption Consortia partner authorities runs a series of recruitment campaign to attract new adopters. Additionally, the service can also 'buy' (fee payment to the agency providing the adopter to cover costs of training and assessment) already approved adopters through the Adoption Register, Adoption Activity Days, and Adoption Exchange Days and through the sharing of the PAN London data base.

- 3.13 The service has implemented the new 2 Stages Adopter recruitment process as stipulated by legislation and Adoption Statutory Guidance with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013. The recruitment of prospective adopters is based on the needs of children being referred to the team. A tracking and monitoring system is in place to ensure that the number and needs of children referred informs the recruitment strategy. Initial enquirers complete an on line form. They are provided with a comprehensive information pack within five working days and invited to attend an information day.
- 3.14 After the prospective adopter attends the information day, the adopter will be asked to complete and return a Registration of Interest Form (ROI), which provides the Agency with formal consent to undertake the necessary statutory checks. If the adopter returns the completed ROI form to the agency, and upon receipt, the Agency will write formally to the prospective adopter acknowledging receipt of the ROI. This becomes the formal contract between the prospective adopter and the Agency. Stage 1 is a 2 months 'adopter led' period of information gathering. An allocated social worker completes with the prospective adopter a Stage 1 Plan & Agreement. Group training sessions will be provided to support the adopters with this process. Prospective adopters with additional experience, such as second time adopters and foster carers adopting children in their care, will not be required to complete Stage 1 and proceed to Stage 2. Specialist preparation groups are also run for second-time adopters through the Consortia.
- 3.15 After completion of Stage 1, if the agency feels satisfied that the prospective adopters has completed sufficient learning and research to enable them proceed to Stage 2, they will be formally written to and allocated a social worker who will complete the assessment process. Where the Agency decides not to proceed to stage two, the prospective adopters will be provided in writing clear reasons along and information of our complaints procedure in case they wish to seek redress. The allocated social worker will meet with the prospective adopters within a week of allocation to complete the Stage 2 Agreements together with the adopters propose the Adoption Panel date. In Stage 2 prospective adopters are assessed, and information collated using the Prospective Adoption Report (PAR) produced by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. Adopters are assessed on their capacity to provide a home and to meet, most if not all, of the lifelong needs of children they then go on to adopt. They are matched on the basis that they may reflect and/or promote the child's race, culture, language and religion. Applicants are visited at home and in the case of a couple, together, and separately. Applicants are invited to make their own written as well as verbal contributions to their assessment. Work with the adopters' own children is also undertaken and other members of the household are interviewed. Relatives and referees are seen at this stage. The assessing adoption social worker will make a recommendation

about the suitability of the applicants to be adopters. The adoption social worker will provide a copy of the written report to the applicants twenty-eight days prior to Panel, and offer them the opportunity to discuss or make comments on the report. Prospective adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel when their application is being considered.

- 3.16 The service holds information meetings to which adopters are invited. These meetings provide an overall picture of adopting in Croydon and nationally, and will include information about children needing adoptive homes. This also provides an opportunity to talk to experienced adoption workers and adoptive parents.
- 3.17 The majority of children who are adopted through this service will have experienced some sort physical, emotional or sexual trauma and abusive. This can impact throughout their childhood and into adulthood. Sometimes this is not sufficiently recognized by adopters in the hope that “love is enough” to heal the child. Sometimes adopters are distressed when they realise or have to accept that love alone will not heal their child and that there is a requirement for therapeutic intervention. The Adoption Support Services Regulation 2005 makes it a legal duty for Adoption Agencies to provide adopters and their children and anybody affected by adoption with advice, support and assistance. The Adoption Service has a dedicated duty service Monday to Friday from 9-5pm. The Agency is also required by law to complete an assessment of need but which can only be done if the parent requests this in writing. This written request and subsequent assessment provides the basis for any future intervention. The service has a family therapist social worker based in the team and the service will refer to CAHMS or provide commissioned therapy when appropriate. The service runs support and peer mentoring groups for adopters.
- 3.18 Adoption support includes enabling the adopter to participate in a wide range of support groups and mediations services, for example, in relation to contact between an adopted child, birth siblings and family members. Financial assistance both pre and post adoption can include a regular allowance depending on their circumstances, start-up grants, and financial assistance with court application and fees for adoption applications. Financial support can last until the child is 18 years (or 21 if in higher education). There is a statutory requirement for financial support to be reviewed annually and to be means-tested. Therapeutic and other support needs can be assessed at any age for the child once adopted. Initial support and advice from the adoption service can be followed through with a full assessment of need if the adopter wishes, and a plan will be put in place following this assessment. The plan will detail the services and treatment to be provided. The assessment is reviewed periodically to ensure it is effective. In May 2015 the government implemented the Adoption Support Fund, available to all adoption agencies, to help adopters with specialist therapeutic services. Adopters living in Croydon who apply to the service to be assessed will benefit from the fund in their assessment identifies the need for specialist therapeutic resources.
- 3.19 Transracial adoptions are actively promoted by the adoption service through information given to prospective adopters at the Adoption Information meetings

and in the various adoption preparation groups that take place during the adoption assessment process. Typically, a transracial adoption might take place with a foster carer adopting a fostered child who is of a different race. There have been three recent examples of foster carers adopting children who are not of the same ethnicity as them. The adoption service has received positive feedback from both Ofsted and Sir Martin Narey for this approach to putting the needs for loving parenting first.

3.20 The Adoption Service guides Croydon residents who are seeking advice and help on adopting children from overseas to contact the Inter-country Adoption Centre for advice and assessment. This is an independent adoption agency that specializes in assisting prospective adopters to adopt children from overseas. The adoption service has a service-level agreement with the Inter-Country Adoption Centre for them to complete adoption assessments for Croydon residents who are adopting children from overseas.

### 3.21 Opportunities

Providing post adoption support services presents the opportunities to work closely with the consortia to commission or procure services or to commission and procure services as a single agency through Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Third Sector. The Adoption Support Fund this year also provides a unique opportunity to enhance the provision of support to all those affected by adoption and living in Croydon.

3.22 The Court Team and the Legal Cases Manager are now firmly established in the LAC Service and performance in timeliness of care proceedings has improved from the three year average of 53 weeks to the current performance of 28 weeks in the last quarter. The opportunity to achieve 26 weeks, the statutory requirement, or lower is within sight.

3.23 The number of BME adoptions as a percentage of the population is low in Croydon, as it is nationally. As can be seen from the tables below the largest number of children adopted last year are White British of which more than half were matched with adopters from other ethnicities.

<b>Racial Profile of Children</b>	<b>Number</b>
White British	18
Black Other	2
White & Black Caribbean	5
White & Asian	1
Mixed Other	1
Caribbean	1
White Other	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

<b>Racial Profile of Adopters</b>	<b>Number</b>
White British	8
Caribbean	2



White Other	3
White and Black Caribbean	1
Asian Indian	1
Black Other	2
Mixed Other	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>

3.24 The reasons for low numbers of BME children and BME adopters are complex. The 2013 Department of Education publication “Understanding, attitudes, motivation and barriers to adoption and fostering” suggests that barriers include ingrained misconceptions about the process, the assessment criteria, and the actual experience of caring for a child as a life-long commitment. The experience of the Adoption Service is that in some African communities adoption remains a European cultural phenomenon and these cultural barriers are taking time to change. The adoption service does undertake targeted recruitment for BME carers and also uses Mosaic which is an agency that specializes in securing adopters for BME children. Of the 29 Adoptions last year 6 were with their former foster carers and the adoption service is working with the fostering service to raise the profile of adoption with BME foster carers.

### 3.25 Threats and Timeliness

<b>Sufficiency of children</b>	
Adoption orders since 01.04 – 17.06	2
Children matched and placed	17
Children matched pre-placement	6
Children with placement order not matched	4 (8 placement orders expected in July)
Children on referral to adoption team	66

3.26 As can be seen from the sufficiency table above, including the 2 adoption orders made so far this financial year, the target of 35 adoptions should be achievable. Not all children on referral will progress to adoption by any means; these are children with dual plans for return home, Special Guardianship Orders, and fostering. Not all adoption order applications are successful. Threats to Scorecard timeliness thresholds remain for Indicator A1 as demonstrated above but the improvement of care proceedings timescales these last two quarters will enable better timescale outcomes this year. The Council struggles to recruit adopters for older children aged four and above as well as for children with special needs and BME groups. However this problem is a nationwide and not exclusive to Croydon alone.

3.27 The adoption service is successful at recruiting and retaining its adopters, however three months after approval, the service has a statutory duty to make approved adopters available to other agencies if they have not been matched with a Croydon child. This is done by uploading the prospective adopters profile on to the Adoption Register. The Adoption Register is a national database. A very small per cent of approved adopter do not go on to be matched with a child for various reasons, for example, unplanned pregnancy, changes in personal circumstance, breakdown in relationship, or for change of mind about becoming an adopter. The numbers of children approved for adoption has

decreased nationally from the middle of 2014 to present as have the number of placement orders from 1550 in Quarter 2 of 2013/2014 to 740 in Quarter 3 of 2014/2015. This means that approved adopters will wait longer for a match. The recruitment of adopters is intended to create sufficiency and choice of adopters for the number of our children referred for adoption, currently 66, but also to meet the government's agenda of creating a pool of adopters who can be supplied across the range of adoption agencies. This works well (as seen in the Sufficiency of adopters table we have 8 adopters supplied to other agencies) and there is an agreement for agencies to pay agreed fees to the supplying agency for the costs of recruitment, assessment, training, support, and approval.

### 3.28 **Adoption: Summary of overall performance**

The Adoption Service is good and is making sustained improvement to achieve Scoreboard timescales. The Ofsted inspection criteria for good includes, careful matching, creating attachments, and therapeutic materials. The service has been previously judged good for these; there have been no breakdowns since that time and the service has a qualified family therapist within the team. The criteria for good include early planning for permanence by means of adoption and SGO, also concurrent and parallel planning. Outputs since 2014 include first statutory reviews and permanency planning meetings delivered within 10 -15 days instead of at 28 days and four months, all children under 5 years have a dual plan that includes adoption, and the first Fostering for Adoption (foster carers approved for a child specifically to adopt) is progressing to adoption order hearing. Criteria for good includes close working relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and the Adoption Service has built a strong relationship with CAFCASS as evidenced by the one day conference they hosted with CAFCASS last year to explore areas for improved engagement. Recruitment and retention outputs are very good.

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