

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel 4 March 2020
SUBJECT:	Annual Report of Fostering Service and Panel
LEAD OFFICER:	Vanessa Strang Head of Service Report author – Rodica Cobarzan
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming, Children, Young People and Learners

1. Executive summary

The Fostering Service is staffed in main by a stable staffing group but there have been some challenges in achieving the level of practice Croydon Council would want to see from an experienced and committed fostering service. The service is working to develop with the aim of supporting the achievement of the best outcomes possible for our children.

The service has been successful this year in placing a significant number of children with Croydon Foster carers and an increased number of children have been placed with connected families, however the overall number of foster carers has not increased this year.

Due to the continued high number of looked after children and an increase in children in care leaving the service who remain put with their foster carers there remains a shortage of in house foster placements.

Recruitment and retention of foster carers is a priority particularly for older children, sibling groups, children with disabilities and long-term placements. Coram I has been since November 2018 Croydon's Council partner in recruitment of foster carers and targets for 2019/20 were set out in the Sufficiency Strategy and within the Recruitment and Retention strategy, but those have not led to increase in our foster carers numbers.

2. Introduction

This report complies with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards which sets out the condition that the Fostering Service Manager will monitor and report to the corporate parenting members about the management and outcomes of the fostering service.

3. Role of the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service continues to develop and improve practice to meet the needs of Children in care of Croydon Council in line with the requirements of national guidance and fostering standards.

The 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
- Working with Coram I, who is commissioned by Croydon to undertake the recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
- Private Fostering, since January 2020

The Fostering Service provides a range of placements with foster carers with a varied skill and experience base. There are a range of placements offered including respite; placements with foster carers who have particular experience and skills in transition to permanence through adoption, return home or placement with family; placements providing permanence through long term fostering by providing a family based model of care to support children and young people through to independence and beyond.

There are also family and friends who are presenting for assessment as connected carers to look after children in their extended family or social network. Fostering Service works alongside the Family & Friends Team to support carers Registered under Regulation 24 (temporary approval) and support them in full post approval by Fostering Panel and Agency Decision Maker.

All foster carers are supervised and supported by social workers within the fostering team and this includes all connected carers who are afforded opportunities to engage in training and support alongside other foster carers.

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.

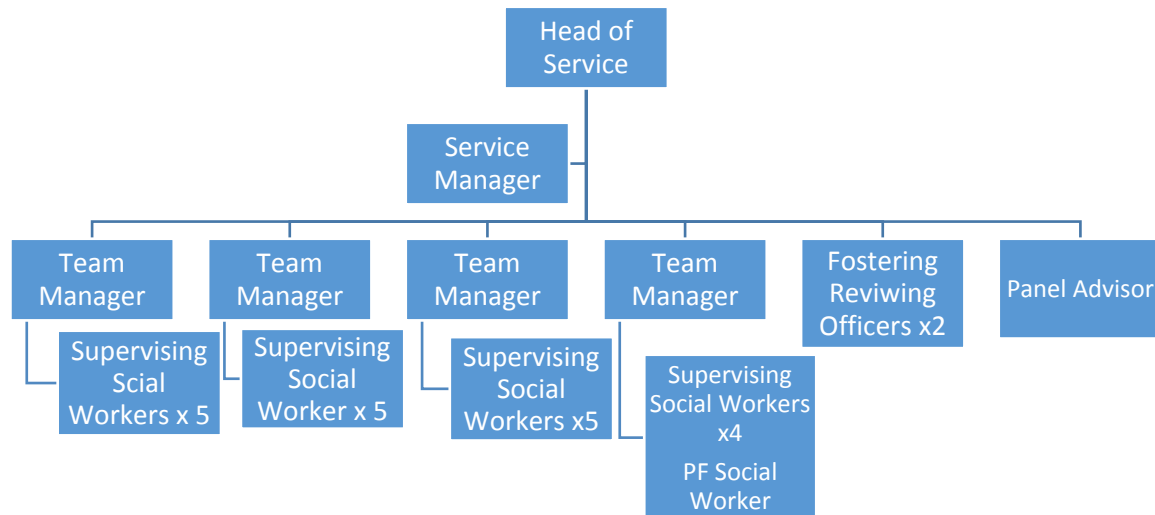
The priorities of the Fostering Service are to ensure that:

- 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 and thrive, being supported to reach their full potential.
- Ensure the holistic needs of any child are addressed and supported through health, education and social development enhancing opportunity to develop resilience and achieve.
- Support early Permanence for children in care and ensure that children who cannot safely remain at home are offered a permanent family base without delay

Since January the Fostering Service has taken the responsibility for Privately Fostered Children and young people in Croydon in line with The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2015 and National Minimum Standards. The assessment and monitoring of placements will be overseen alongside the other Croydon Services.

4. Service Structure

Croydon's Fostering Service is managed under the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Care Leavers. There is an operational Service Manager with responsibility for this service.



The social workers main roles and responsibilities are supervising and supporting Foster Carers but also ensuring that Foster Carers meet the fostering standards, are independently reviewed annually as well as monitoring quality of care and training and development of foster carers. The most significant aspect of this work is to ensure that children remain safe in foster care and Foster Carers feel supported and enabled to fulfil their responsibilities.

The Supervising Social Workers have also been involved in co-delivering with Coram I a variety of recruitment activities, including the Skills to Foster Training.

There are three permanent Team Managers who offer supervision and line management to staff within the team. An extra team manager has been temporarily engaged in December 2019 to add capacity and support with practice improvement, she is also managing the private fostering Social Worker and leads on Duty and Placement activity.

The two Fostering Reviewing Officers report to the Service manager and are responsible for overseeing the annual reviews of all our Foster carers and make recommendations about carers' terms of approval. The two Fostering Reviewing Officers have started in their roles in March 2019.

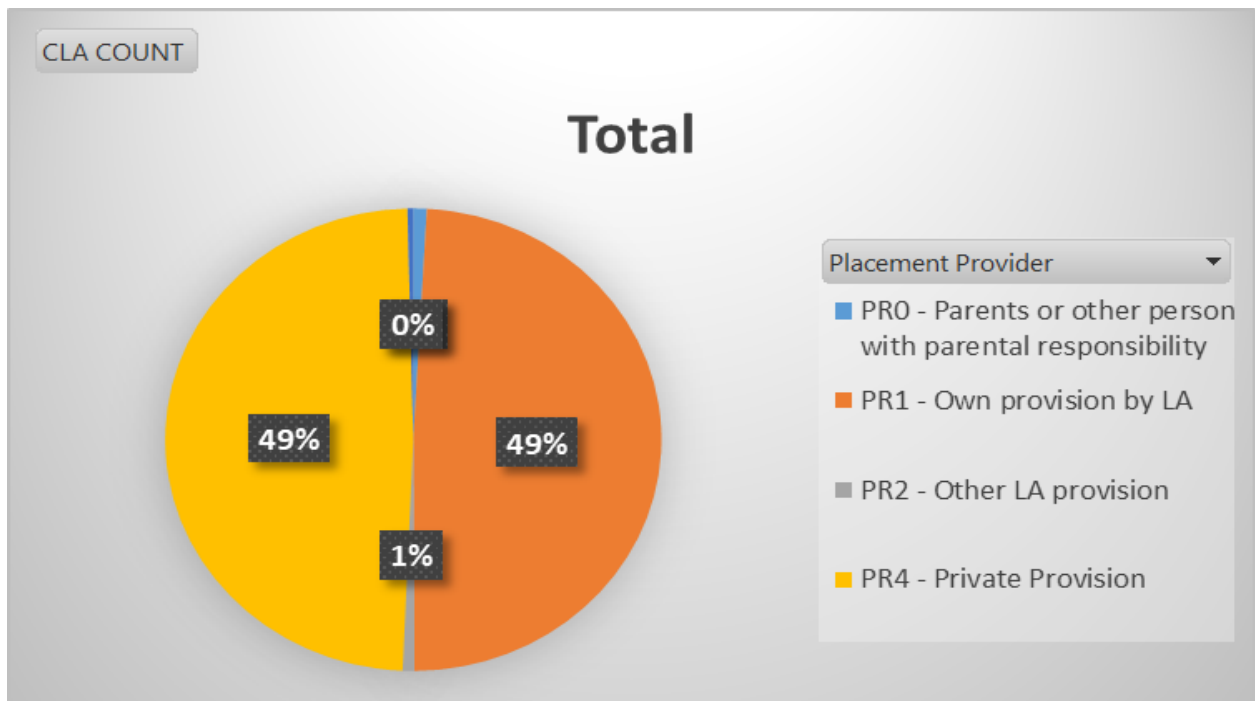
Since September 2019, Croydon has a full time Panel Advisor dedicated to this role including the monitoring of quality of reports to the fostering panel.

Fostering Service is mainly staffed by permanent staff, 78% of staff are permanently employed. There are currently a small number of agency staff who are covering vacancies or long term absences, two of the agency supervising Social Workers are in process of becoming permanent members of staff.

5. Supervision and Support to Foster Carers

The Fostering Service manages a total of 231 Fostering Households that offers Respite care, Short term Foster Carers and Long Term Foster Carers. We have a number of carers “Connected Persons Foster Carers” who are approved to care for specific children.

Croydon looks after just over 800 children who are placed in a variety of placements in accordance with their care plan.



In January 2020, 49% were placed with Croydon Foster carers, the remainder of our children in care were placed with Independent Fostering Agencies, residential units or in semi-independent accommodation, placed at home with their parents and a number of children are placed for adoption.

Whilst 49% of our children in care are in a Local Authority provision the service identified ongoing areas for improvement around the full utilisation of foster carers, maximising the use of our remaining in-house vacancies and enhancing the processes in place to match children with our carers. The focus continues to be on ensuring maximum use of in-house vacancies and that foster carers have the skills and knowledge required to care for the children in our care and to maintain their registration.

In 2019 there has been work towards only having carers who were actively fostering and committed to working with the department. This has meant that some foster carers have been deregistered due to being unable to take the children requiring placements; not actively fostering for prolonged periods and not meeting the requirements set out in fostering regulations.

Since April 2019 33 households (44 foster carers) were deregistered.

Deregistration reasons	Foster Home
Connected foster carers who secured permanence via a legal order or children turned 18 years	14
Carer deceased	1
Carer resignation (family issues x4, wanting to take a break x2, no longer has room x2, unhappy with support x2, resigned before panel when concerns raised about standards of carer or having had no placements x4)	14
Foster carer applied for SGO for the children	1
Deregistered due to standards for care.	2
Retired	1
Grand Total	33

During 2019 following a Service Review undertaken by Kathy Bundred in July 2019, who also reviewed the Fostering Panel, an analysis of the service data, case audits and feedback from the network (children, Foster Carers and professionals) the service explored how we could improve the quality of care for our children, the support and challenge to our foster carers as well as the training offer to staff and Foster Carers.

Training and development of Foster Carers was considered and further specialist training was commissioned and is due to start in 2020/2021 to meet the standard and the aspirations of the service. The training will provide experienced Foster Carers and newly approved Foster Carers further opportunities to learn how best to meet the needs of children with more complex issues such as violence towards adults or trauma.

In response to the Service Review we:

- Re-designed our training program to reflect the placement challenges and needs of Foster Carers.
- Coordinated in May 2019 a Foster Carers Awards Ceremony (the 2020 ceremony is currently being planned). This gave us the opportunity to celebrate our Foster Carers achievements with a dinner event and awards that recognized some of the extraordinary achievements of our Foster Carers.
- The Systemic Lead has undertaken reflective social work conversations with staff to promote better understanding of our children's emotional needs and empower them to support Foster carer to meet these needs. The Systemic Lead provides consultations to Supervising Social Workers and in some cases has supported Foster carers to increase placement stability. These support will extend to Foster carers in 2020.

- Introduced structured consultations for Foster Carers with CAMHS , those are also attended by the Supervising Social worker and Child's Social worker
- Trained eight foster carers to deliver training (UASC specific) and staff attend training events organised for Foster Carers to ensure joint learning
- Training has been provided to staff in various areas of practice, including Systemic Training which most permanent staff have now started
- Recently increased management capacity and reduced the number of foster carers Supervising social worker oversee in order to increase support and quality of practice
- Croydon Council continues to support Croydon Foster Carers Association and their work with foster carers. The Head of Children look After and Care Leavers, the Fostering Service Manager and A supervising Social worker attended the Christmas party in order to improve relationships and support for children and carers
- A foster carers Survey was launched in February 2019 in order to gather feedback from foster carers to understand the areas of the Fostering Service that are working well and what areas can be approved upon. Of the 106 respondents who commented on what was working well, themes included; Support from SSW's: 78% of foster carers said the support received from their Supervising Social Worker (SSW) was either 'very good' (53%) or 'good' (25%) an improvement from 69% overall last year. However we are mindful that just over half (53%) of respondents said support from Croydon's children's social care was 'good' or 'very good' an increase from a minority of 42% last year. Fostering panel: 67% of respondents said they had a 'good' (47%) or 'very good' (20%) experience of the panel
- Communication and Support- Support groups continued to take place each month facilitated by CFCA but the service plans to expand on this to cover a wider area and need. We plan to expand on our written and direct interaction with carers and increase the opportunities for feedback and challenge.

During 2019 the Fostering Service continued to implement actions around the strengthening and development of our service delivery including actions to improve consistency of practice and support provided to carers and strengthening the practice in the service.

Duty and Placements

There is a continued demand for foster placements for specific children and young people. These include:

- Parent and child placements. We do not have any carers who are approved to take a parent or parents and child when parent is over 18 years old.
- Sibling groups

- Teenagers and children with complex needs, particularly those who have suffered trauma and present with emotional and behavioural needs (often includes violence towards adults).

This demand has been evidenced through the number of referrals for these types of placements as well as our challenge to secure placements for teenagers in house or with the independent fostering agencies. Due to the increase in demand for older children with more complex behaviours we have had to go the independent fostering agency (IFA) market to make placements as reflected in the placement activity below.

Connected Persons / Kinship/ Family and Friends Foster Carers

The Family& friends Team works with the family or kinship network of the child, who put themselves forward to care for a child or young person who otherwise would be placed with a mainstream Foster Carer. Carers are assessed and presented to the fostering panel with a recommendation about registration as a Foster Carer for a specific child/children. A Supervising Social Worker has overseen and provided additional support to the temporary approved connected carers for the duration of the assessment.

The Fostering Service is responsible for the provisions of support to the Foster Carers following approval.

It is fair to say that there are some connected persons Foster Carers who don't always meet the fostering standards as applied to scheme Foster Carers but on balance they are assessed to be good enough and offer other benefits to children. Therefore, both the Courts and our Fostering panels are supportive and promote connected person's placements but they require extensive support and are not without challenge.

The high numbers of assessments and the tight timescales involved have meant that we operate a hybrid model of both commissioned assessments alongside assessments completed in house.

The service has creatively used resources to complete assessments often within very short timescales and to ensure that the assessments do not compromise the 26 weeks' timeline to conclude proceedings.

6. Recruitment Activity

This report gives a summary of the fostering recruitment activity carried out by Coram-i and Croydon Council from November 2018 to October 2019.

Coram-i took on the responsibility for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers for Croydon Council in November 2018. The long term aim was to transfer the service from an outsourced model and work in partnership with Croydon Council to business engineer for efficiency with the intention of transferring the service back to the council in the space of two years. Targets for the recruitment of foster carers were ambitious given: the recognised national shortage of foster carers (especially for those children categorised as 'hard to place'); the competitive local context and the fact that no

prospective foster carers or Social Workers were transferred to Coram-i from the previous provider. In effect the service had to be built from scratch.

The service was designed to have a small core team with use of Independent Social Workers (ISW) to cover assessments because of the need for speedy delivery at inception but also in order to give the council less obligation in relation to TUPE at the end of the contract. The dependence on ISWs has led to the need for extra quality control measures (additional supervisions, second opinion visits, midway reviews, training and practice audits) and this in a context where ISWs are in short supply in London. The contract is now in its second year and much information has been collected on the success of the recruitment strategies which in turn will aid the partnership to refresh its plans moving forwards.

Recruitment strategy

The recruitment strategy focused on the ethical value of fostering alongside the reward, incentives and high level support provided to carers. In addition to promoting fostering, our strategy was to promote Croydon Family Placement Service as the place to go to if you are thinking about fostering. Staff working within the recruitment and support teams needed to continue to adopt an approach recognising that potential and existing carers can choose any local authority or IFA to foster. This is particularly relevant in helping people move through the journey with Croydon and make those already approved very loyal to the authority.

We therefore looked to position Croydon Fostering as offering:

- A customer-focused service and a competitive foster carer package.
- A transparent, supportive and timely assessment process.
- Understanding and supportive SSW who are always 'on the other end of the phone'.

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

- Analysis of initial enquiry data – an ongoing monitoring system is in place via Framework and other database systems.
- Analysis of prospective carers' data – ongoing monitoring systems are in place.
- Analysis of referrals.
- Analysis of exit interviews/feedback to evidence how services can be improved and promoted.
- Analysis of 'drop out' stage – when do people drop out of the fostering process i.e. information pack, initial visit, preparation training, or assessment stage.
- Evaluation of individual recruitment channels used – including hits to the website and press coverage.
- Surveying of newly approved foster carers post-November 2018.

Marketing and other activities

Over the past year, we have carried out a variety of activities to advertise and market the fostering service. These have included:

- Redesigning and publishing posters and advertising materials including press advertising (JC Decaux, Coulsdon resident's magazine) and displays at museums and Town Hall.
- Foster carer case studies and video testimonies of existing carers produced
- A6 flyer included in Council Tax mail out to 180,000 households
- Sponsoring an award at the Premier Gospel Music Awards
- Radio ads on Premier Radios various stations
- Activity through Foster Care Fortnight (ad campaign, social media, interviews on Premier Radio, BBC London)
- Pop-up shop in Whitgift Centre, stand at Pride Fest and stands in BWH canteen as well as plasma screen displays at Croydon Council offices.
- Focusing advertising on fostering as a career
- Targeted advertising to specific groups (Croydon Churches Together, My Foster Family, Empty Nest Campaign, Ethnic Forum Hub, Black history month, Muslim Foster Friday). Muslim Foster Friday was the top social media post for Croydon in the w/c 14th October. Premier Christian Radio and publications.
- Involving foster carer association support group to update current carers and remind them of the recommend a friend scheme and how to be involved in recruitment events (on three occasions).
- 16 libraries received fostering display packs and pop ups at employment and careers fairs.
- Croydon care experienced young person undertook research of community groups in the Coulsdon area, made contacts and cascaded marketing materials as well as securing useful links made for follow up recruitment activity. Young person also attended skills to foster to provide input.
- Virtual schools Arena meeting
- Vinyl banners outside of schools and places of worship
- Sponsored youth football kit

Recruitment activity

(i) Summary

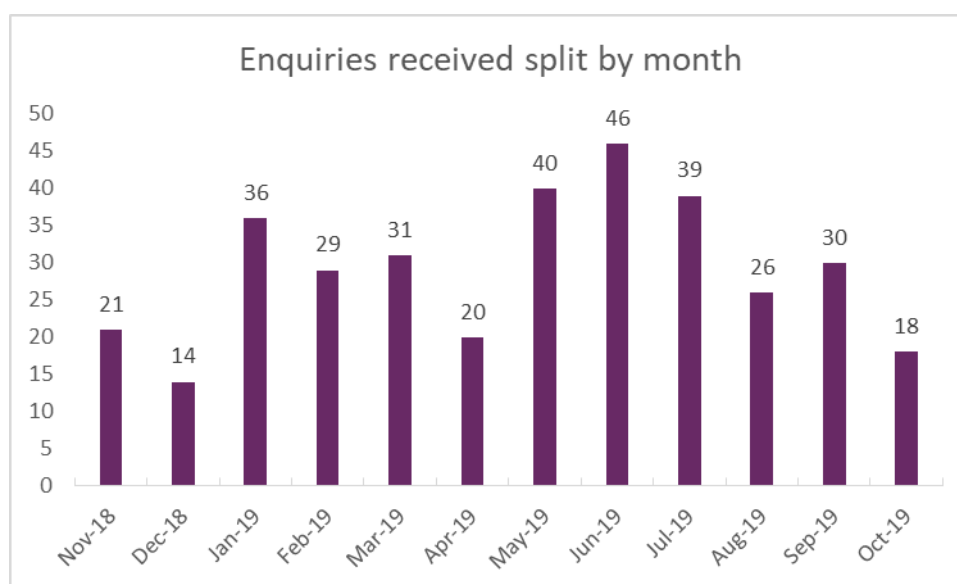
From November 2018 to October 2019, **350 enquiries were received and seven foster carers who were approved by Panel**. The fostering recruitment activity in Croydon and progression of cases are summarised below. The table outlines the number of cases that progressed to each stage of the foster carer recruitment journey in this time period.

Table 1: Summary of foster carer recruitment journey between Nov 2018 and Oct 2019

	Enquiries received	Carried out IHV	Progressed to StF	Progressed to Form F	Withdrawal during Form F assessment ¹	Still in assessment as at 31/10/19 ¹	Approved at Panel ¹
Number	350	96	72	32	9	16	7
Conversion rate		27%	75%	44%	28%	50%	22%

(ii) Enquiries

The 350 enquiries received over this time period (November 2018 to October 2019) is shown below, with clear peaks between May and July 2019, which correspond with increased activity around Fostering Fortnight.



Of the 350 enquiries received, 203 (58%) were not progressed any further. The most frequently cited reasons for closed enquiries were:

- Case specific reasons (no spare bedroom, motivation to foster, not at a stage where they were ready to proceed due to personal circumstances).
- Non-contact (we make several attempts to contact and if we are unable to get in touch with them after two weeks we close the enquiry and ask them to get in touch with us).
- Living too far away from Croydon.

Fourteen enquiries are currently on hold and a further 37 are still being progressed, leaving 96 enquiries that have progressed.

¹ Conversion rates for these metrics are taken as a percentage of the number of cases who progressed to Form F.

(iii) Initial Home Visits (IHVs)

96 enquiries resulted in an Initial Home Visit (27%). Of these a quarter (24) were rejected following the IHV. The most cited reasons for cases being rejected at IHV stage were:

- Lack of a dedicated spare bedroom.
- Current circumstances not suitable e.g. work commitments, no capacity to foster.

The average time taken between initial enquiry and the IHV was 40 days, with 19 IHVs (20%) conducted within two weeks of the initial enquiry and a further 40 (42%) within a month.

(iv) Skills to Foster (STF) training

Of the 72 households invited to STF following their IHV, 42 have now been to STF training and 19 households decided not to attend STF. The remaining 11 have yet to attend STF training. Ten of the 42 households that attended STF were not progressed to an assessment.

(v) Approvals

Seven foster carers were presented to Panel for approval between 1 November 2018 and 31 October 2019. All seven carers who went to Panel were approved. The approval terms for these seven carers are outlined below:

- 1 carer 0-18 year old mainstream/respice (preference 4-15 year old long term)
- 1 carer 0-7 year old mainstream
- 1 carer 0-18 year old mainstream
- 1 carer for 1 child (2 if siblings) aged 6-12
- 1 carer for 5-11 year old respice
- 1 carer 5-11 year old for 1 child
- 1 carer 0-11 year old for 1 child

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering state that an assessment should be presented to panel within 8 months of the application to be assessed. This timescale was met for all 7 cases.

In addition Coram-i also conducted a short assessment of a prospective carer who had originally been assessed by the previous provider and rejected by panel – this resulted in the carer being approved as a respice carer.

7. Key achievements during 2019

- Full review of the fostering service created an opportunity to identify the gaps in our practices and put in place an extensive programme of improvement
- Reviewed the way panel works and a new Panel Chair was appointed. The Panel had a focused workshop to consider its remit and reflect on practice. There is a plan to extend the “Central List” of panel members to increase diversity

- Reviewing and developing the foster carer's annual review process. This has seen an improvement in the number of Annual Reviewing undertaken timely and over 50% of these have had oversight from the newly appointed Fostering Reviewing Officers
- Introduction of foster carer reviews at fostering panel on a 3 yearly cycle with a full time fostering panel advisor in post
- Extended the Fostering Panels, the panel is now set to support permanency through long term foster care matches.
- Introduced new Supervising Social Worker visit template to improve recording and compliance with National Minimum Standards and also a record that puts the children at the centre.
- Recognised the need to improve the Foster carer's financial reward. There has been extensive consultation with Foster carers on the financial package, as well as benchmarking undertaken against other London boroughs and the new Financial Policy is to be implemented from 31 January 2020.
- Increase in fostering enquiries in the last part of 2019 and some progress in terms of new approvals
- Croydon foster carers respond positively and in general offer our young people the option of "Staying Put" when they reach 18 years old.
- Extensive work has undertaken in terms of improving the working relationships with other social work teams and services (VSK, Health etc)
- Foster carer project established to address issues raised by foster carers and the service
- Broadening of training programme with arrangements to deliver foster carer training and develop based on needs for 2020-2021

8. Key priorities for development during 2020-21

- Build on the Service relationships with Foster Carers by using systemic practice and develop confidence, competence and resilience to support children achieve a full sense of stability and security.
- Increase in children achieving permanency either by a court order or by making the arrangements in foster carer permanent. This increases the children sense of belonging and provides them with the stability that will contribute towards their overall well-being

- Use our placement stability guidance and support children to develop ways of managing their difficulties and carers to provide non-judgmental and nurturing care that is supported by systemic practice.
- Reviewing and developing foster carer support groups (to include specific groups for connected carers)
- Where appropriate increase the utilisation of our Foster carers , as mentors, ambassadors , support group facilitators, etc
- Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers as well and as a more responsive service
- Development of training programme tailored to their own needs and development , this includes an introduction to the systemic practice and other therapeutic parenting and online resources, including Foster carers attendance to Total Respect training
- Creating a training/learning event for Foster Carers around leaving care and preparing children for independence.
- Increase involvement of young people in training for our Foster carers and Young People being involved in Skills to Foster Training
- Foster Carer Handbook – to review the handbook and start work on offering the option of having a digital link to the handbook in the future.
- Build and enhance our links with the professional network around the child.
- Enabling the service to learn from Ofsted inspection and any recommendations made
- Work with Coram I to return the Recruitment and Assessment of Foster Carers in-house by November 2020.
- Increase in number of carers approved in line with the sufficiency strategy and build on work undertaken so far by Coram I.