

Non-Executive Template

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel 10 th December 2020
SUBJECT:	Children's Social Care Placement Sufficiency
LEAD OFFICER:	Rodica Cobarzan Head of Service Children Looked After and Care Leavers Sarah Risby Category Manager, Commissioning and Procurement
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	

SUMMARY OF REPORT:

Corporate Parenting Panel requested an update on Children's Social Care placement sufficiency.

This report sets out work undertaken to improve the quality and sufficiency of placements for Children Looked after and Care Leavers since February 2020 and outlines future next steps.

POLICY CONTEXT/AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON:

The commissioning and provision of effective, safe and efficient services for children and young people who are looked after supports the following corporate objectives:

- Children and young people thrive and reach their full potential
- Children and young people are safe, healthy and happy, and aspire to be the best they can be
- Safeguarding children and young people and improve their outcomes
- Good, decent homes ensuring that all people including children have the opportunity to access a suitable home

[Corporate Plan for Croydon 2018-2022](#)

The "sufficiency duty" was introduced by the Children Act 1989 and requires local authorities to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area which meets the needs of its children looked after and those who would benefit from being accommodated.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

This report is for information only and therefore there is no direct financial impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to note the progress and current action plan associated with the Council's Sufficiency Plan 2019-2021.

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 Croydon's Sufficiency Plan 2019-2021, sets out the following aim: *"to ensure that we have the right placements available at the right time and in the right place to make sure our looked after children are safe, healthy and happy, and will aspire to be the best they can be. Securing sufficient accommodation that meets the needs of looked after children is a vital step in delivering improved outcomes for this vulnerable group. It is also a vital factor in improving placement stability, which in turn is a critical success factor in achieving outcomes for looked after children."*
- 1.2 The need to improve placement sufficiency for children in care and the accommodation for care leavers was a recommendation from the ILACS inspection (Feb 2020). Linked to our Sufficiency Strategy, the Council set out the commitment, through Executive Leadership Team in January 2020, the need to conduct an accommodation strategy to set out the strategic commissioning plans for the following cohorts:
 - Children in care, including our unaccompanied minors
 - Care leavers
- 1.3 Current challenges facing the Council when considering accommodation placements include:
 - Emergency placements being made on the basis of "best available" rather than through sufficiently planned placements to best meet need.
 - Residential placements being made more than 20 miles away from birth family in order to safeguard the young person from contextual safeguarding risk, or because there is not enough local expertise to sufficiently safeguard the young person.
 - Croydon continues to care for a large number of UASC and this has an impact on the availability of resource to cover the need for all children (UASC and local CLA to remain within the borough)
 - Whether Semi-independent Accommodation (SIA) used, offers the right level and quality of support.
 - Care leavers should have more options for independent living, to prevent them having to live in shared accommodation where there is a preference to live more independently.
 - Effectively promoting staying put as the best option for young people in foster care and finding the best mechanism to encourage carers to keep placements going post-18.

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- The need for financially sustainable accommodation options for care leavers beyond the age of 22 when housing benefit entitlement changes, thus preventing potential homelessness.
- The need for continuing improvements around the join up of CLA, Leaving Care and Adults Social Care planning

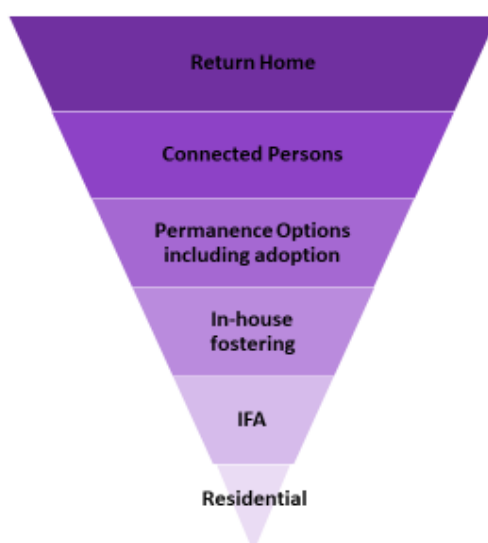
1.4 The challenges summarised above will be addressed in this report.

2. Vision for Children Looked After Provision

2.1 We currently have a range of early help and support services available for children and young people and their families who need targeted support; delivered either directly by the Council or in conjunction with Croydon's Early Help Partnership. Early Intervention and edge of care services can help support children and young people to remain living safely at home or with extended family wherever possible and aims to reduce the demand on statutory services.

2.2 If children and young people do become looked after by the authority, our aim is to match their individual needs to a suitable and stable placement as quickly as possible, and where appropriate look to achieve stable, permanent placements with local foster carers. In-house foster carers offer a flexible and more cost effective way to offer placements in a family setting, and are therefore considered first before looking externally to Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) or Residential settings. This means children and young people placed in IFA's or residential settings tend to be older and have more complex or specialist needs.

2.3 The diagram below, illustrates the emphasis of working with young people and their families to remain or return home or to stay with extended family. Where this is not possible, services will look to sequentially consider the most appropriate placement for the individual based on assessment of need and risk. We need to ensure our sufficiency and commissioning plans reflect anticipated need at all levels.



3. In-house Fostering

- 3.1 The Council have an 'in-house foster care first' model, for looked after children, therefore having sufficient high quality in-house foster carers is the backbone to our sufficiency and commissioning plans. With the natural turnover of foster carers; and an age profile where 30% of foster carers are aged 60 or above (as at Sept 2019), and the emphasis on long term placements or staying put arrangements, there is increasing pressure on in-house foster care placements.
- 3.2 Therefore the overall aim of the in-house fostering service is to expand and upskill the pool of local foster families, including those who can specialise in caring for more complex young people who may display behaviour which challenges and who may have historically been placed in expensive IFA or residential settings.
- 3.3 From the 1st November, the recruitment of in-house foster carers service has been insourced. This allows for direct control of the service which aims to increase the sufficiency of Croydon foster carers including for the following priority areas:
- Short breaks and Respite
 - Remand
 - Therapeutic (high need)
 - Parent and baby carers
- 3.4 We know that nationally there is a shortage of foster carers for certain children and the recruitment and retention of carers to foster for Croydon is one of our main priorities. Our recruitment strategy includes themed recruitment and marketing events to attract a variety of foster carers to meet a range of care needs. We have adapted our training and recruitment activities to be Covid safe and we are now undertaking online assessment and skills training for our new carers.
- 3.5 As a member of the South London Commissioning Partnership (SLCP), we will benefit from work the partnership are undertaking to consider each boroughs in-house fostering advertisement, recruitment and retention practice. The project will be working with foster carers in each borough as well as a number of IFAs to establish best practice and benchmark the offer from each authority with an aim to support Councils to increase recruitment and retention in their local areas.
- 3.6 The Social Work with Children Looked After and Care Leavers Service continue to ensure the fostering service is fully compliant with national minimum standards and fostering regulations and meets its statutory obligations in supporting children in care (CIC), those leaving care (staying put), as well as children in need (CIN).

3.7 The current “*staying put*” offer is being reviewed and the profile and benefits of “*staying put*” arrangements raised with both foster carers and young people wherever this is appropriate, to allow young people increased stability and to feel more prepared for independence. Targeted work continues with foster carers to promote the benefits of this scheme.

3.8 In January 2020 Croydon Foster Carers financial policy was brought in line with other local boroughs and the training offer was varied to support Foster carers learning and development.

4. Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)

4.1 Children and young people tend to be placed in IFA placements where there is a complex level of need or specialism that cannot be met by in-house foster carers. Our aim is to attract providers who are able to work with Croydon to divert and ‘step down’ children from residential care, but also ensure we have IFA placements that are the best value for money, that offer stability, and that are robust enough to accommodate young people with higher needs longer term.

4.2 South London Commissioning Partnership (SLCP), developed an Approved Provider Panel Agreement (APPA) for CLA placements to:

- Improve sufficiency
- Deliver consistent long-term prices
- Improve outcomes with good quality placements
- Drive competition and effectively manage a provider-led market as part of a wider SLCP strategy

4.3 The APPA went out to tender in October 2019, driving quality by only allowing bids from OFSTED ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ providers. It went ‘live’ in May 2020 with 44 IFA and Residential Care providers admitted. Prices from providers were higher when compared to Croydon’s previous internal framework from 2016, and the long-standing London Care Services (LCS) framework, which had suppressed placement prices over a number of years. Alongside the APPA’s robust terms and conditions, providers had a perception of higher risk and increased their prices accordingly. To improve the value for money, intense negotiations and market warming took place between July to September this year, with a refresh of the APPA taking place in October, to allow for new providers to join the framework and for all providers to submit new tender prices. This process is set to run and be fully evaluated and awarded by February 2021, with the hope that pricing will be more competitive and more providers will be on it.

4.4 The benefit of the South London wide APPA, is commissioning a model at sufficient size so to provide economies of scale and a wide variety of

placements across a larger pool of providers to better meet need. This should result in:

- children matched to the right placements to meet their needs
- increased placement stability
- value for money for local authorities

4.5 The nature of the APPA allows for frequent refreshes of the providers, to ensure the quality and breadth of provision matches demand and that costs can be refreshed as required. The APPA also allows for block booking of placements if boroughs want to secure specific volumes to meet particular need. When fully operational across the 8 South London Boroughs, contract management arrangements will involve a lead local authority for each APPA provider. Regular visits will be carried out with resources and information shared between placing authorities. This will result in a more consistent, effective and streamlined contract management process.

5 Residential Care

5.1 One of the key components of the developing accommodation strategy for Children Looked After and Care leavers is increasing sufficiency of residential placements in Croydon. Currently children looked after who have very high levels of need and display complex behaviours which challenge are often accommodated out with the borough and at times over 100 miles from family. While this may be due to contextual safeguarding risks, there is a need to increase in-borough provision and support our most complex and vulnerable young people within the borough.

5.2 Nationally and especially in London, demand for high quality, affordable residential placements is in crisis, with demand outstripping supply. Residential providers who operate low volume and high risk businesses are experiencing increases to the cost of living and of property prices. This is against a backdrop of high regulation from Ofsted, which providers mitigate against by insisting on high cost packages of care in order to support young people with complex needs. This is especially true for vulnerable adolescents who are not easily matched or have a number of placement breakdowns. Providers know that they will lose business if their Ofsted judgement were to be considered less than “good”, hence the front loading of cost to reduce the risk to the provider and ensure a level of profit is achieved.

5.3 As a ‘high risk’ spend area, a more strategic partnership approach to Residential placements is needed by working more with the market to meet a shared long term sustainable outcome, and reducing the reliance on expensive spot purchasing.

5.5 We are currently investigating the options for block booking residential beds across a number of homes both in the borough and across London. It is hoped

that this strategy will create more of a partnership approach with providers to collectively work together longer term to deliver high quality stable placements for our young people. This will be achieved by guaranteeing a number of beds for providers which can be secured at a lower price, therefore achieving better value for money for Croydon compared to spot purchasing. It is hoped that by working more effectively with a smaller number of residential providers, the Social Work teams will be able to work closer with residential staff, to ensure a more effective wrap around support system is in place for our most vulnerable children and young people.

- 5.4 The SLCP APPA also has provisions for residential Children's homes, including homes which specialise in children and young people with disabilities. The improved pricing and terms and conditions listed on this lot are designed to improve placement stability and quality and reduce the need to spot purchase places in residential care for our young people.

6. Semi-Independent Accommodation

- 6.1 Semi – Independent Accommodation (SIA) is unregulated provision which is sometimes used when young people over the age of 16 are better suited to more independent living arrangement which can prepare them for adulthood. SIA provision can also be accessed by our care leaver's who may move on from a fostering or residential setting and need additional support while they prepare for independence. Although this type of provision has its benefits and there are examples of good practice in the sector, Croydon is aiming to utilise this type of provision less and to encourage foster carers to continue supporting their young people through *Staying Put* arrangements beyond the age of 18 years.
- 6.2 Where it is appropriate for the young person to move into SIA we are creating a new Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) for SIA provision for those aged 16-25 to specifically better cater for the following types of need:
- I. **Emergency /Short term supported accommodation:** to enable the young person to return to live within their family home or to provide an interim solution.
 - II. **Semi-independent 24 hour staffed accommodation for 16-18 year olds:** in small group living arrangements for a maximum of 6 young people.
 - III. **Semi-independent accommodation for Care leavers 18-25:** with allocated support (not 24 hour) in group living environments.
 - IV. **Group or Independent Accommodation for young people aged 18-25 whose needs may require additional specialist support:** primarily but not exclusively associated with mental ill-health, substance misuse, criminal behaviour, learning disability and/or autistic spectrum.
 - V. **Single gender group living schemes:** for young people aged 16+ at risk of criminal exploitation.

- VI. Training flats for Care leavers aged 18+:** to trial living independently prior to a permanent move.
 - VII. Outreach support:** to facilitate and sustain the move for young people aged 18-25 to independent accommodation.
 - VIII. Other types of semi-independent accommodation services:** that may be required and that will be specified at call off stage.
- 6.3 By January 2021 the DPS will be operational and will be frequently refreshed to ensure the breadth, quality and value for money from the market is as competitive as possible. The DPS is also flexible enough that we are able to redefine quality and other contracting measures according to our young people's needs at regular intervals.
- 6.4 For existing framework provision and any spot purchased places which are commissioned off framework, there is a risk based approach to compliance visits to check both the quality of the physical home and the provider's approach to procedures such as safeguarding, safer recruitment, H&S in the home, key worker hours and general wrap around support offer. This programme of visits is being carried out by the Commissioning and Placement teams with Children's Social Care senior management also attending visits. Visits are followed up by a report and an action plan of remedial work to be completed if necessary, and may result in decisions as to whether future usage of a provider is both safe and good value for money.

7. Accommodation options for care leavers

- 7.1 Work has been undertaken to map out the current cohort of care leavers aged 18-25 using and triangulating data across at least three council directorates, to understand need, complexities and demand for leaving care support, especially for our UASC population. This work will then feed into future recommissioning opportunities for accommodation and wrap around support for care leavers.
- 7.2 Alongside Adult Social Care and Gateway, work has commenced to recommission the supported housing for vulnerable adults and care leavers aged 18-25. Currently roughly 50 care leavers reside in semi-independent or supported housing accommodation, with around 30 in spot purchased semi-independent accommodation and around 20 in block purchased supported housing arrangements. A review of current arrangements including the quality and effectiveness of meeting the needs of our care leavers residing in supported housing arrangements is being undertaken.
- Future options for commissioning supported accommodation for care leavers who may not be ready to live entirely independently broadly include:
- Use of registered social landlords
 - Semi-independent providers
 - Support exempt housing

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- Supported Lodgings arrangements – which are broadly similar to staying put arrangements, but not in a home you were fostered in
 - Increased utilisation of staying put where both young people and carers agree – and a review of policies here, including how young people in Independent Fostering Agency placements are dealt with
- 7.3 Opportunities are being explored to provide financial management skills and independence training to care leavers, to better equip them from leaving their looked after placement. Scoping is taking place with a well-known and well-regarded charitable provider of these services to open a project in Croydon, as well as a stock take of some of the internal benefits and tenancy readiness training already on offer.
- 7.4 For the c.430 care leavers who currently reside in the private rented market, significant work needs to be done corporately to improve the range of financially sustainable housing options for care leavers in and out of the borough. Currently private tenancies are sourced by a housing allocation officer through the Care Leavers Housing Panel, however properties are often only financially viable for care leavers under the age of 22 when they can claim housing benefit at a higher rate. When the rate reduces at 22 years of age, they often find accommodation in the private rented market inaccessible. While this is promised to be fixed in the budget by central government from April next year, in these current times of rapid change and uncertainty, it seems pertinent not to rely on this change, and continue to progress options within the authority. Options being explored include:
- Increasing social housing offer to care leavers – our current allocation policy is much lower than other London boroughs who have more limited social housing stock such as Enfield and Hammersmith and Fulham
 - Social Letting agency model
 - Exploration of the local authority as a guarantor on tenancies care leavers find themselves.
 - Engaging Place department to increase our role as corporate parents to improve access to accommodation for care leavers through all new housing schemes.
 - Re-scoping alongside Housing Initiatives Colleagues as to the effectiveness of the Guaranteed Rent Scheme in particular, and whether other options are available to serve our residents
- 7.5 Work is also taking place with the transitions team about how we better work with Care Leavers who either have disabilities or mental health issues, or who have concerns that do not meet statutory thresholds. Our goal is to improve the offer here, and have less care leavers being sent 'from pillar to post' between different housing options.

3. CONSULTATION

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- a. Sessions were recently held with the coordinators for EMPIRE and the Care Leavers Forum, and the Engagement Lead for SLCP to plan an engagement strategy. The strategy is due to be drafted by Christmas, and is focussing on several key elements to begin with:
 - i. We want to establish a consistent feedback loop, which includes feeding back to those we have consulted what the impact of their feedback has been
 - ii. No new consultation if the questions we're seeking answers to have already been answered – Council officers must be clearer as to what consultations have taken place, and take the learning from these
 - iii. We want representation from all elements of young people in care – and this includes young people in residential and semi-independent, whose views are regularly not heard in traditional commissioning engagement work
- b. SLCP have led on the 'All About Me' project which over 250 children and young people have contributed to. The 'All About Me' profile document allows young people to put forward information about themselves which can be used as part of the referral process and wider social work with young people. The document has been praised as a positive tool by social workers and their young people and is being adopted by Croydon as part of core social work practice.
- c. As part of the Accommodation Strategy, 20 in-depth interviews with care leavers was undertaken to understand the services they receive and put forward the voice of the young people and their experience of care leaver accommodation and support. The consolidated report will form part of the overarching Accommodation Strategy.
- d. We aim to ensure that the work of our advocacy service feeds more into our plans than it previously has done – and that themes are taken as an area for improvement, or feedback.
- e. We will also continue to consult with staff in our placements and social work teams to establish where good practice, pockets of difficulty and ways of approaching issues are.

4. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

- a. There are no financial implications directly arising from this report which is presented for information only.
- b. The Interim Executive Director of Children, Families and Education has asked for a financial model to be created which outlines our future projections of local

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CLA and the likely costs if no additional intervention or change to commissioned places were to take place. Scenario mapping will be introduced to understand what financial impact each of the commissioning plans will have to projected future spend for each type of accommodation.

- c. The financial model which is being developed by PwC in conjunction with the Head of Finance for Children, Families and Education and the Commissioning and Procurement Team for Children, Families and Education, will be a key component of the Accommodation Strategy.

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APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: None