

Non-Executive Template

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel 10 th February 2022
SUBJECT:	Croydon Children's Social Care update on children with a plan for adoption
LEAD OFFICER:	Derek Dyer Service Manager & Permanence Lead, Children and Families
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alisa Flemming, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People & Learning
WARDS:	ALL
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	N/A

SUMMARY OF REPORT:

This report will provide an overview of the children currently subject to a placement order who have a plan for adoption. Following the presentation by Adopt London South this report will also consider how Croydon has developed its permanence framework in the year 21/22 and the planned improvements for the next financial year.

COUNCIL PRIORITIES 2020-2024

Ensuring decision making for adoption in partnership with Adopt London South contributes to the Croydon renewal plan in that we are focusing on providing the best quality core services that we can afford, delivering evidence based outcomes for our young residents across the child's journey through children's social care services.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There are no financial recommendations within this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to:

1. Review and note the performance in relation to children with an adoption plan

1. Background and Context

- 1.1. From 1st October 2019, 4 Adopt London RAAs were established across London (North, South, East and West) covering 23 local authorities. The 4 RAA's are hosted by Islington, Southwark, Havering and Ealing and they work collaboratively as Adopt London.
- 1.2. Whilst Croydon retains its status as an adoption agency Adopt London South (ALS) undertake many of the functions of the adoption process. When a parallel plan for adoption is identified a referral is made to ALS and a family

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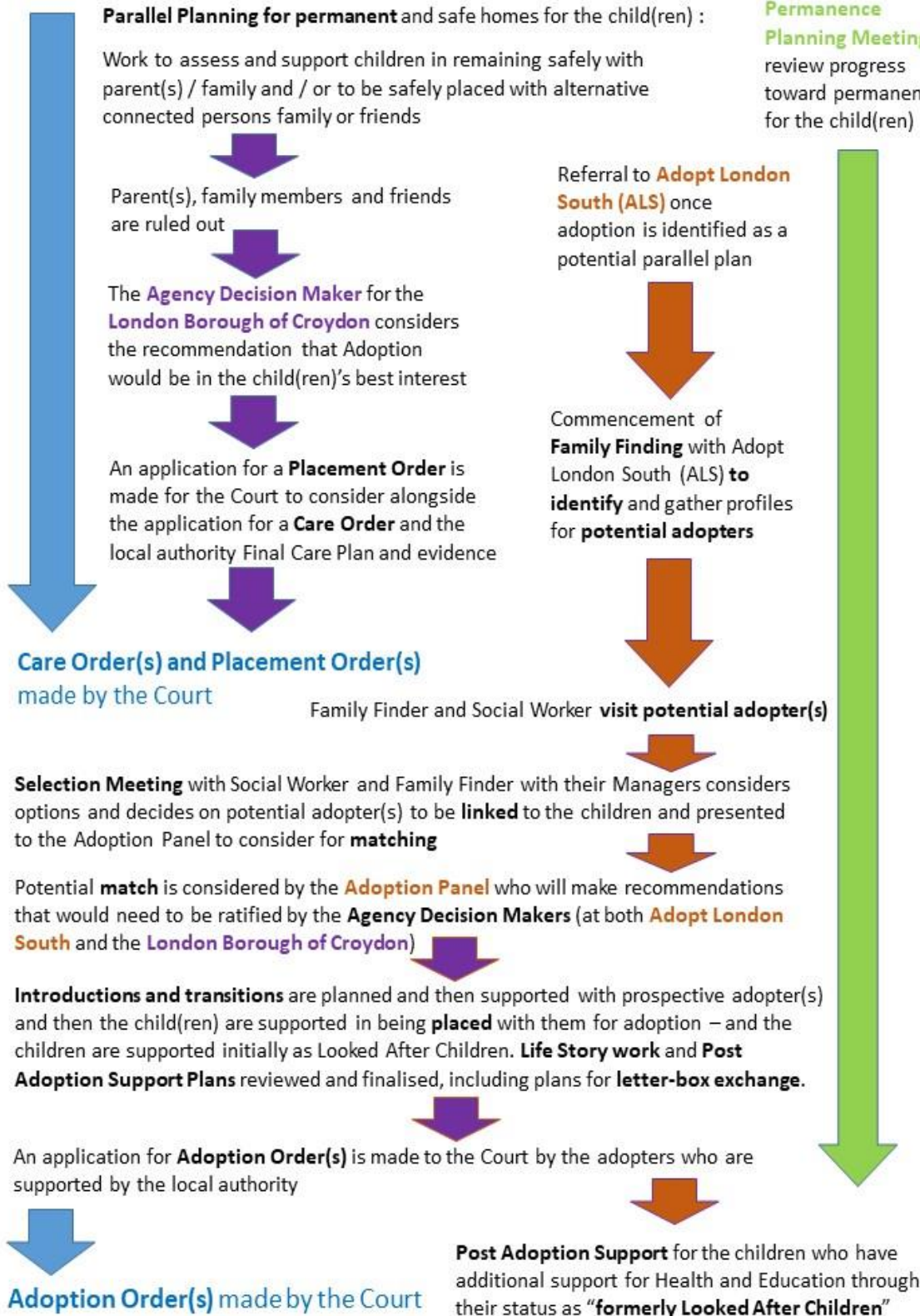
finder dedicated to Croydon children begins the process of identifying possible matches for our young people.

- 1.3. There are a number of checks and balances that ensure plans for adoption are reviewed and tracked as they progress through the system. At team level this occurs through line managers chairing care planning meetings and supervisions. The oversight of independent reviewing officers through the child looked after review process also provides scrutiny of children's care plans. Adoption plans are also scrutinised through the Family Court system where children are legally represented and appointed a CAFCASS Children's Guardian.
- 1.4. During the year 19/20 a permanence service manager had oversight of adoption arrangements in the borough and acted as the service lead for all forms of permanence. During the year 20/21 the elements of this role were divided between the service manager for fostering, who now oversees the team that undertake connected person and SGO assessments, and the service manager for children in care who now acts as the strategic link with ALS and adoption.
- 1.5. A weekly permanence panel has been established that reviews permanency for all children subject to social work intervention, with a specific focus on families entering care proceedings. Children with a parallel plan for adoption are considered within this panel which has representation from across children's services and is chaired by the permanence lead.
- 1.6. Permanence planning meetings (PPMs) are also convened routinely for all children and can be chaired by any manager within children services. In circumstances where specialist knowledge around permanence is needed such as planning introductions between a child and their adopters or perhaps planning more complex life story work, the permanence team manager and permanence lead also chair PPM's regularly to provide consultation, support and learning around specific areas of permanence.
- 1.7. A monthly adoption tracking meeting considers all children where an Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decision endorsing a plan for adoption has been obtained to ensure that any issues around drift are addressed. This is attended by the ALS family finder and is chaired by the permanence lead.
- 1.8. Where a parallel plan for adoption is identified the social worker completes a 'child permanence report' which provides information on the child, their birth parents and other relevant information to be shared with (i) the court (ii) the Agency Decision Maker and (iii) prospective adopters.
- 1.9. Within the adoption framework the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) endorses the plan at two stages. First, that adoption is in the child's best interests and again when they child is matched to their adopters. In Croydon the agency decision maker is currently the Director Roisin Madden.
- 1.10. Figure 1.1 below sets out the decision making process around adoption:

KEY STEPS IN ADOPTION DECISION MAKING

Pre-Proceedings and then Care Proceedings under the Public Law Outline

Permanency Panel and child specific Permanence Planning Meetings review progress toward permanence for the child(ren)



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- 1.11. Where it is decided that a child should be placed for adoption during the course of care proceedings, the local authority must apply for a placement order. It is essential that the application be issued without delay and placement orders are therefore applied for at the end of care proceedings along with the local authority application for a care order. A plan for adoption is considered endorsed by the court when a placement order is made at the end of proceedings.

2. Children subject to Placement Orders

- 2.1 As at 5th January 2021 there are 22 children subject to placement orders who have plans for adoption. 13 have moved to their prospective adoption placement and they have been living in their new home between 3 and 18 months. Of the 13 children living with adopters 5 have adoption hearings already arranged in early 2022.

- 2.2 Where an adoption order application has not been issued immediately after the child has been placed for 10 weeks there has been a range of reasons for delay. For some families monitoring children with additional needs and ensuring they are settled has been meant the social worker remains involved for a longer period and the applications for an adoption order was made slightly later.

- 2.2 In addition to the 13 children placed with adopters there are 9 children still living in a foster placement who are subject to placement orders and family finding is ongoing for them. Where family finding is ongoing there are a range of activities to help them find a family. Activity days, which are usually a useful method to enabling matches with prospective adopters have been significantly impacted by the lock-down. However, there have been a number of successful online events. There are also specific websites and adoptions pathways such as 'link-maker'.

- 2.3 The adoption tracking meeting which is chaired monthly considers all young people subject to an ADM decision where they are at in the process of adoption. Where there is delay this is considered within the adoption tracking process and through PPM's where the social work team and family finder can review the child's profiles and we can be clear that there is grip and pace around family finding.

- 2.3 In addition to the children currently going through the process of being adopted, 10 young people have successfully been adopted since April 2021.

3. Early Permanence

- 3.1 As has been discussed identifying a plan for adoption at the earliest possible stage in a child's care journey contributes to improved outcomes for them

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later in life. Early permanence (or foster to adopt) placements are therefore a model of good practice in promoting early attachments to primary care givers.

- 3.2 Where it is clear that adoption is a likely option children may be placed with an early permanence carer for the duration of the care proceedings. At the conclusion of care proceedings the child remains with their carer who then goes through the process of applying for an adoption order to become that child's parent.
- 3.3 In the year 20/21 Croydon had 5 EP placements and whilst there has just been 1 at the end of Sept 2020, there are two children currently placed with EP carers going through care proceedings.
- 3.4 ALS run periodic workshops on the use of EP and where they are viable encouraging the use of EP placement is a priority for the practice system.

4. Life Story work

- 3.1 One of the biggest questions that adopted people have is 'who am I?' as practice around supporting adopted people has evolved a greater understanding has developed that explaining to children they are adopted as early as possible assists them in developing a cohesive identity as an adopted person. Maintaining children's first name is also an important way to help them thread together the elements of their adopted and birth identities, although ultimately this is decided by adoptive parents and some do decide to change their child's full name.
- 3.2 Good preparation for adoption and good life story work contribute towards successful adoption. Life story books provide an accessible and child-friendly method for adopters to explore with their children how they have come to be where they are today. Whilst there are general principles about what constitutes life story work every young persons' story is unique to them and so every life story book is different.
- 3.3 All children who are adopted receive (i) a life story book and (ii) a later in life letter that are quality assured by managers prior to being provided to adopters. Some life story books are comparatively straight forward and involve the social worker being able to collate a full set of photographs about the maternal and paternal birth family, as well as information about any carer(s) the child lived with prior to moving to their 'forever family'. Others are more complex where for example the details of a birth parent are not known or there were complex trauma that led to their removal. The life story book is aimed at age 3-5 or the age of the child at the time of placement if older. These books are designed for the adopters to read the book together with the child.
- 3.4 Later in Life letters are aimed at older children around the age of 14-18 and go into more depth about how the child came to be placed with their adopters. It is important they are considerate of language and provide an honest and

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sensitive account of the reasons the child was separated from their birth parents and ultimately adopted.

- 3.5 There are a range of tools that exist to help social workers construct life story books and later in life letters. Guidance is available to staff on the practice library about how to complete life story work and some specific resources have been purchased such as the Richard Rose and Joy Reece Models, which are two of the most popular models of life story work that professionals refer to. The permanence service manager and team manager also provided support to individuals and teams completing life story work using good practice examples and presentations at team meetings.
- 3.6 The guidance around life story work is that for best practice the life story book should be completed by the second statutory review if not before. The Later in Life letter can be drafted before the child is adopted and finalised with the adopters including reference to the Adoption ceremony as appropriate.
- 3.7 It should be noted that life story work for the purposes of adoption is completed often when children are very young and non-verbal. A life story book and later in life letter are provided to adopters who take forward the work throughout their child's minority. There is also life story work that is undertaken directly with children and this occurs for a range of care experienced young people in addition to the work that is completed for adoption. In the year 21/22 social workers in the Children in Care service have received training in 'Narrative Approaches to Why Am I in Care' from a care experienced adult Dr Jenny Molloy and there is a focus within the service around life story work as a continuous and evolving process. These two different forms of life story work, directly with children and for the purposes of adoption, are distinct from each other and require slightly different although related skills.

5. Developing the practice framework

- 4.1 Since a report was last provided to corporate parenting panel January 2021 there has been an audit of 336 adopted children going back to March 2002, ensuring that every child's file was properly secured and adoption case records had been created to protect the anonymity of adopters and their newly adopted children.
- 4.2 The 'adoption pathway' is a system within the local authorities reporting system that provides a clear mapping process of all decisions relating to a young person's adoption. The adoption pathway had not been routinely utilised since the inception of ALS in 2019 and a re-launch is planned for 2022 to ensure that all children being adopted in Croydon are done so using the 'adoption pathway' to record their journey. This will positively impact on the collation of data about key aspects of the adoption process. A review of the design of the adoption pathway is underway to ensure it is accessible to users and training around launching and recording data in the adoption pathway will be launched in April 2022.

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- 4.3 The permanence lead is working with key stakeholders to develop a 1 day training course around permanence that will include training around good practice in writing child permanence reports and launching the adoption pathway as well as an applied and informed understanding of permanence practice. This training course is currently under construction and will be implemented with the re-launch of the adoption pathway in 2022.
- 4.4 Helping children understand and develop a clear narrative about why they are in care is a key priority in the children in care service plan for 2022. This work has already begun and a service meeting, dedicated to reviewing life story work techniques took place in Sept 2021 with further experiential learning planned for 2022. We will be expanding the consultations around constructing life story book and later in life letters through a workshop approach where by social workers can attend demonstrations about life story work for adoption. A separate consideration is being given to how to develop skills around life story work for older children and imbedding narrative approaches which is part of our systemic practice model.
- 4.5 A comprehensive review of the systems around adoption allowances is currently taking place which will facilitate a clear and transparent approach to assessing and decision making around adoption allowances. The review of existing adoption allowances is expected to be completed by April 2022. The development of an 'adoption allowances' form to demonstrate transparency around decision making is under construction and this will launch in the new financial year along with the launch of permanence training and the re-launch of the adoption pathway.

2 LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

N/A

3 HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

N/A

4 EQUALITIES IMPACT

N/A

5 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

N/A

6 CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

N/A

7 DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

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

NO

8 Approved by: Róisín Madden Director of Early Help & Children's Social Care

CONTACT OFFICER: *Derek Dyer, Service Manager Children Looked After,*
derek.dyer@croydon.gov.uk

APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT

None