

# Croydon Fostering Service Annual Report 2023/24



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## **PURPOSE OF ANNUAL REPORT**

1. The purpose of this document is to report on the activity of the Fostering Service fulfilling obligations in the Fostering Services Regulations (2011) to review and improve the quality of care, and National Minimum Standards (2011) to report to the executive side of the Local Authority. It will cover performance and developments in the council's delivery of Fostering Services; how the council is compliant with key national minimum standards; the service offered to those seeking to foster and those children in care who are fostered. This report details the work of Croydon Council Fostering Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 and sets out plans for service development until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025.

## **KEY MESSAGES**

2. The Croydon fostering service has experienced a number of changes of leadership in 2023/24 and ended the year after successfully recruiting a permanent Service Manager to the role to continue to drive forward the council's plans involving the development and transformation of the Fostering Service and the implementation recommendations from the Fosterlink Diagnostic Report.
3. One of Croydon's priorities was returning to a Fostering Service fully staffed by a permanent workforce, this has been largely achieved with all but one positions in the Fostering support teams filled.
4. Croydon is committed to ensure that there are Croydon carers to care for Croydon children and although there continues to be challenges in regards to foster carer recruitment and sufficiency of placements there is clear impetus, energy and focus in regards to recruiting and training foster carers with ambitions to achieve net positive recruitment by 2025.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

5. When a child enters care, it is one of the most important and significant changes in their life and it is crucial that the families who look after these most vulnerable children through foster care provision are the best they can be. As part of its wider agenda to create a better future for the most vulnerable children and families, Croydon Council wants every child to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. For those children who cannot remain with, or return safely to their birth families or to their Family and Friends, good quality foster care offers the best opportunity for them to experience a warm and loving family environment while the most appropriate plans are made for their future.

6. The Fostering Service is a service for children in Local Authority care. It is committed to supporting stable homes for children and young people where foster care is the identified plan. The service is a key element to ensure children and young people placed are with carers in or as near to the borough as possible.

## **ROLE OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE**

7. The Fostering Service in Croydon is responsible for:
  - I. Support, supervision and training of foster carers, including family and friend carers.
  - II. Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster placements in accordance with fostering national minimum standards
  - III. Promoting placement stability and permanence planning for our children
  - IV. Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
  - V. Support of Special Guardianship Carers
  - VI. Private Fostering
8. The priorities are to ensure that:
  - I. All children who come into care have an experience of safe, secure and consistent care
  - II. All children experience a safe place within which they can play, grow, thrive and are supported to reach their full potential
  - III. The holistic needs of the child are addressed and supported through health, education and social development enhancing opportunity to develop resilience and achieve.
  - IV. Support for early permanence for children in care and to ensure that children who cannot safely remain at home are offered a permanent family base without delay.
9. Croydon has a varied range of foster carers with wide ranging skills and experience who provide placements including respite; transition to permanence through adoption and long term fostering. We also assess and support family and friends who want to look after children in their extended family or social network, these are called Family and Friends foster carers (also referred to as Kinship Carers). All foster carers are supervised and supported by Supervising Social Workers from the fostering teams and provided with training opportunities.

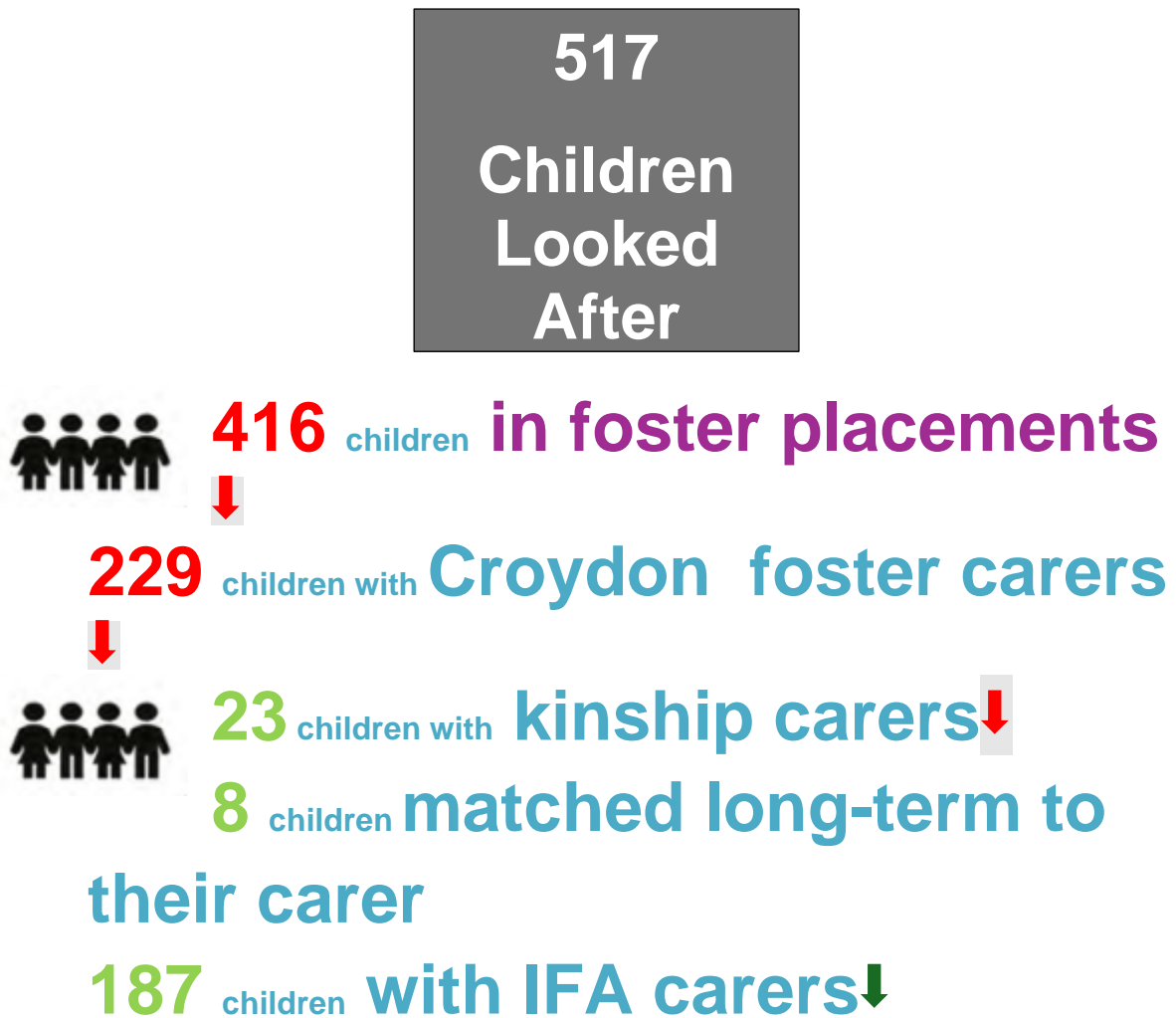
## **THE NATIONAL FOSTERING CONTEXT**

- 57,020 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2023.

- This is 68% per cent of the 83,840 children in care looked after away from home.
- There are around 43,405 foster households in England at 31st March 2023 (down from 43, 905 at 31st March 2022). Of these, 35,005 were mainstream foster care households, which accounted for 59,380 foster carers.
- In the year ending 31 March 2023, there were 125,195 initial enquiries from potential mainstream fostering households. 25,820 were to Local Authorities.
- Initial enquiries were 9% lower than the previous year

## CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN CROYDON

As at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, there were:



10. In March 2023 the number of children looked after by Local Authorities in England rose to 83,840, this is an increase of 2% on the previous year.

11. The trend in Croydon was a near 2% decrease in children looked after from 526 in 2023 to 516 in 2024.

12. The number of children matched long-term through the fostering panel was **eight**, this is a key indicator for monitoring over the next twelve months.

### CHANGING AGE PROFILE

#### Children with Croydon Foster Carers

Year	Age Group					Grand Total
	a) 0 - 4	b) 5 - 10	c) 11 - 15	d) 16 - 17	e) Over 17	
<b>2023/ 2024</b>	41	39	73	73	3	<b>229</b>
<b>2022/ 2023</b>	33	41	88	80	4	<b>246</b>

#### Children with Croydon and IFA Carers combined

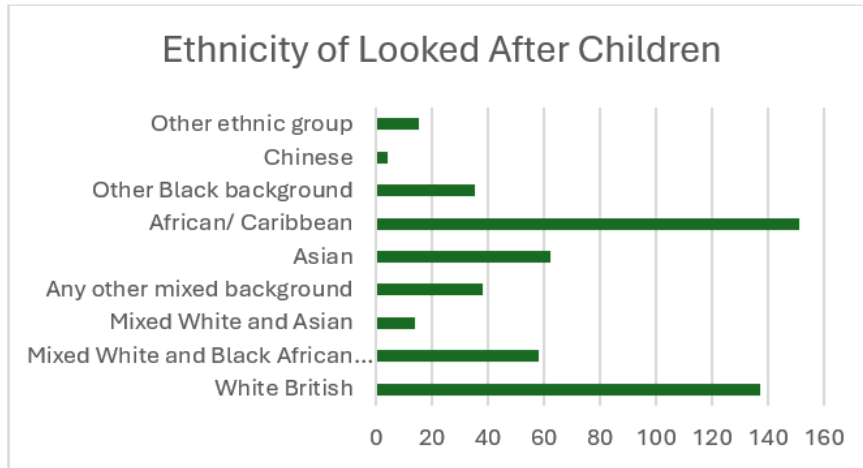
Year	a) 0 - 4	b) 5-10	c) 11-15	d) 16-17	Total
<b>2023/ 2024</b>	67	70	136	143	<b>416</b>
<b>2022/ 2023</b>	53	83	159	154	<b>449</b>
<b>2021/ 2022</b>	58	84	169	155	<b>466</b>
<b>2020/ 2021</b>	61	97	199	221	<b>578</b>

13. The largest demographic of children in foster care continues to be those aged over 11 years of age. Further analysis of this data is required to fully understand the underlying reasons for this. However, in general terms factors such as the following may have played a role;

- Exposure to extrafamilial harm on young people including child sexual and criminal exploitation.
- Adolescent behavioural challenges
- Breakdown of kinship care arrangements
- Unaccompanied asylum seeking children

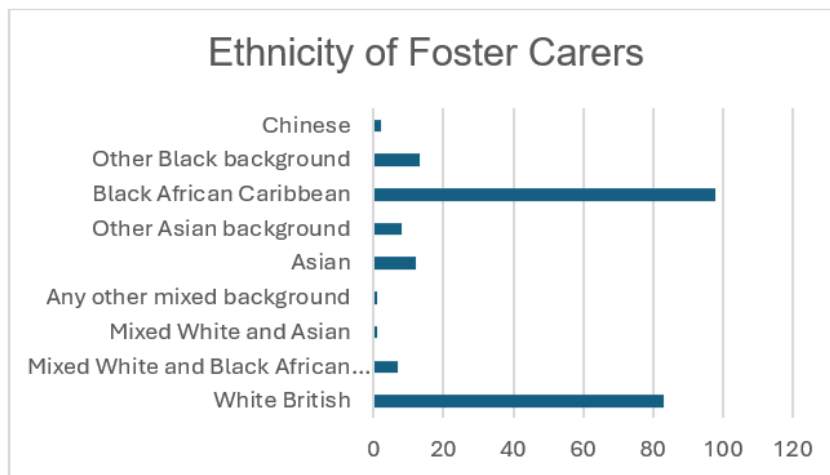
14. Croydon recognises these pressures and has a multi-agency approach to provide support to young people and families and to ensure the right support and resources are made available to foster carers to meet the needs of all children.

**ETHNICITY OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN IN CROYDON**



15. The majority of looked after children in Croydon were either from a White or Black African Caribbean background with a significant number of Asian children.

16. The demographics of Foster carers in Croydon is broadly reflective of looked after children enabling Croydon to achieve better matching of children to carers.



**CROYDON'S PROVISION OF FOSTER CARERS**

At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024



**149** approved  
fostering  
households↓



(from 176)

**23** Family and Friends carer households↓ (from 34)



**14** vacancies

**276** maximum number of places available

17. In 2023/24 - **32** foster carer households were de-registered. This is a reduction from 38 in the previous year. The majority of these were resignations followed by retirements (not all resignations were presented at the fostering panel).

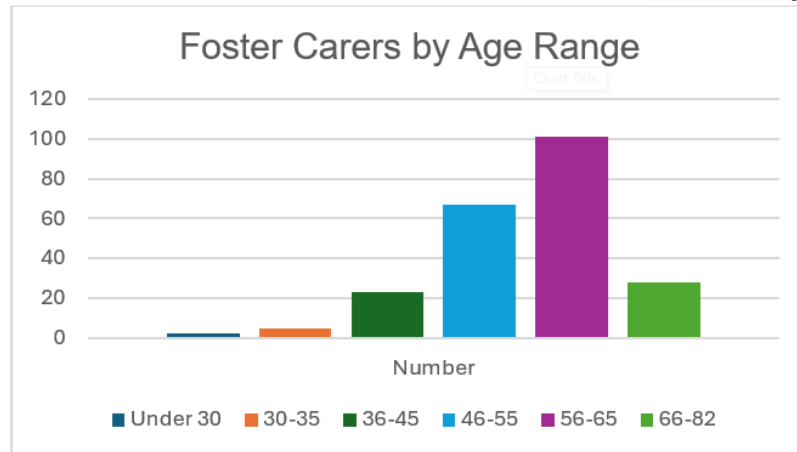
18. Previously where a foster carer did not have a vacancy but had a young person 'Staying Put' carers were expected to resign and reapply to be a carer when they had a spare room. This is no longer the expectation as of the end of 2023/24 with the introduction of the 'On Hold' policy which aims to prevent premature deregistration and allow carers to remain supported and registered until they are available to return to fostering.



Inhouse Carer Numbers, Capacity And Utilisation

Year	Number of Households	Number of Approved Places
2024	149	276
2023	176	306
2022	204	355
2021	222	395
2020	241	452
2019	233	451

19. The table above illustrates the number of in house Foster Carers in Croydon over the past six years. The decline in carer numbers is evident particularly after 2021. There is little quantitative evidence regarding the reasons for this decline as historically limited information regarding resignations has been collected. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that in addition to resigning when they no longer had a room due to staying put, Croydon had an older cohort of carers who decided to end their career at the end of Covid-19. Also, some of the carers who were approved during pandemic (when approval and assessment procedures were relaxed by the government) did not have the longevity or resilience and subsequently resigned.
20. The column on the right indicates the number of bed spaces the fostering households were approved for in total.
21. The snapshot at the end of 2023/24 was that there were 229 children with Croydon Foster Carers which shows that Croydon utilised the foster carers at 83%.
22. The duty Social Workers and placement officers strive to find places for children in house as a priority, keeping Croydon children in or close to Croydon. However, 100% utilisation may not be achievable as some carers are approved for respite only so would not always have a vacancy, some places may only be available if siblings were in the same foster home and there is also a cohort of 'staying put' young people who would occupy some of these places.



23. Croydon has a committed cohort of foster carers. 90 have been fostering for Croydon for over five years. 31 of those for over 15 years. The chart above shows the age range of Foster Carers and illustrates the need to recruit the next generation of carers to ensure placement sufficiency in the future.

24. Fostering recruitment will need to target carers who are able to care for a range of children requiring foster homes. This is particularly necessary in order to increase placement choice for adolescents, unaccompanied minors and those at risk of child sexual exploitation, gang involvement and offending. Croydon has a higher rate of first time entrants into the youth justice system than the London and national average. Many of these young people have been traumatised and their behaviour can reflect this. In addition, we have a number of children with disabilities who have specialist needs and there will be a focus on recruiting foster carers with additional and relevant skills who can offer short break or longer term care to these vulnerable children.

## PLACEMENTS AND STABILITY

25. The joint work and decision making between the Placements Team and fostering has sought to improve the timely identification of placements. The liaison between the fostering service and care teams also aims at early identification of the need for placements and for support for existing placements in order to avoid placement disruption or unplanned endings.

- Performance for **short term stability** (Where children have experienced three or more placements) - **7**
- **Long-term stability** (those in care for 2.5+ years and in same placement for 2+ years) **74**

26. In addition to careful matching of children Croydon has a range of support services that can be utilised to ensure placements are supported such as the clinical team that will offer support and clinical consultations prior to placement disruption and specialist practitioner consultant from Young Croydon who offer support for children at risk of exploitation.

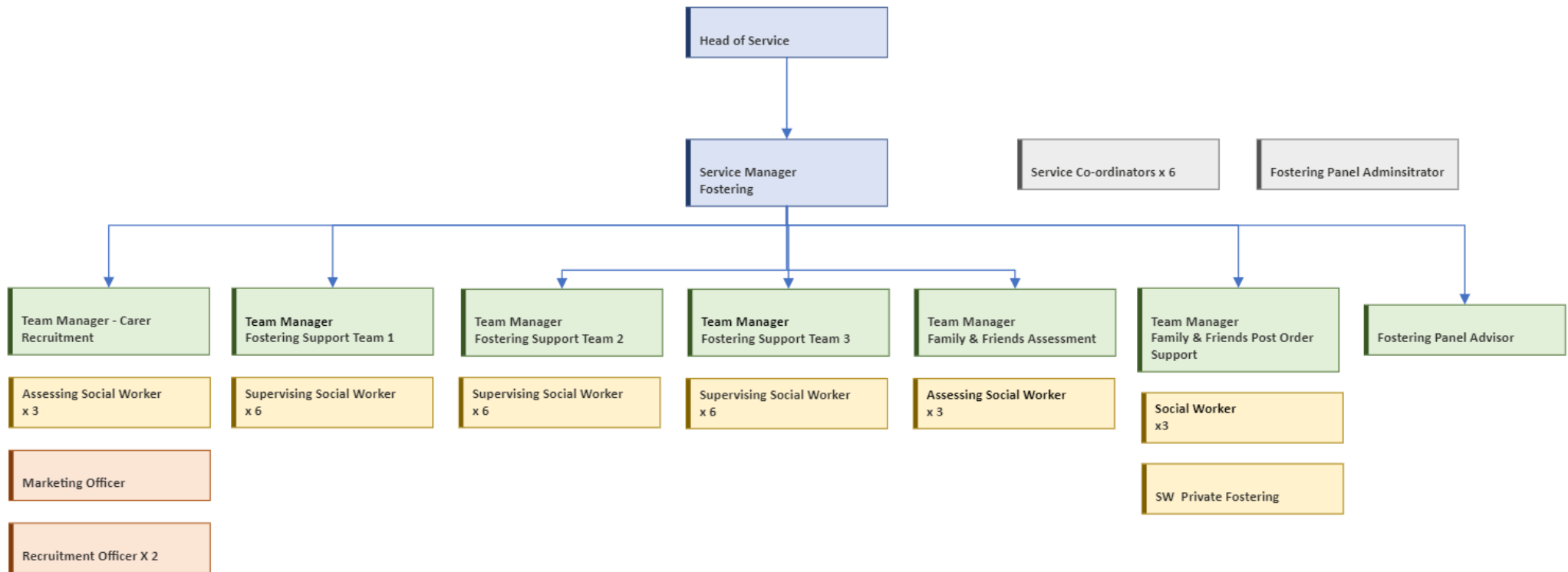
## **FRIENDS AND FAMILY FOSTER CARERS**

27. The Family and Friend teams have a focus on assessing and supporting Special Guardians, as well as assessing friends and family foster carers and presenting them to fostering panel to consider recommending their approval as foster carers. Wherever possible - when the children cannot be reunified with their parents and where there is a positive assessment - the local authority would support them applying for a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) to secure permanence for the child/ children outside of the local authority care system.

28. In addition to the Special Guardianship Orders granted in Care Proceedings during 2023/2024 which enabled children to leave care five Family and Friends Carers were approved at the Fostering Panel.

**SERVICE STRUCTURE**

**Fostering and Kinship Care**



There is one locum Social Worker in the Fostering Support team. This contrasts with only two permanent Social Worker in the Family and Friends Assessment and Post Order support and Private Fostering teams. In 2024/25 we will seek to fully staff the service with permanent Social Workers and managers.

**RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY**

29. This year has seen an increase of **72%** in the number of people enquiring to foster for Croydon and an increase of 16% for approvals.

This is a result of:

- Increase in online advertising including Google Display Network & Pay Per Click advertising
- Implementation of search and re-marketing for online prospecting
- Increase in 'refer a friend' incentive
- Creation of transferring carers package
- Improving Social Media presence
- Support offered to Fostering Champions in initiating recruitment events

Target Summary:

	Total requests for information	Total initial enquiries	Total home visits	Total assessments	Total approvals	Total no. of approved places
<b>Target</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>25</b>
2021-22	330	185	55	27	9	U/K
<b>2022-23</b>	<b>471</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2023-24</b>	<b>811</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>20</b>

Activity Conversion Rates:

From	To	2022-23	2023-24
Requests for Information	Initial enquiry	39%	20%
Initial Enquiry	Home Visit	36%	38%
Home Visit	Assessment	28%	48%
Assessment	Approvals	63%	43%
Initial Enquiry	Approval	6.5%	7.9%

Objectives vs Outcomes

Objectives	Outcomes/target achieved
To assess and approve 15 new sets of foster carers in 1 financial year	13 approvals / 87%
Recruit carers who can care for the following groups of CLA: 10+ age group Teenagers and those involved in gangs/offending Children with disabilities Sibling groups Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children	Of the 13 households approved:  11 approved for 10+ 9 approved for teenagers 0 for CWD 6 for siblings 9 for UASC
Demographically profiling to increase the numbers of:  Younger carers	Younger carers: Under 50 – 11 individual carers Under 40 – 3 individual carers  21 individual carers recruited in total
To meet the current and predicted need for our CLA in foster care by targeted recruitment methods	General increase in targeted prospecting across all channels
To increase word of mouth referrals from existing foster carers	Up by 4%
To increase the number of in-house foster placements	Not yet met due to carers leaving the service – updated retention package available for more details
To increase the conversion rate from enquiry to approval	7.9% up by 1.4% on previous year
To establish and maintain a consistent cost per carer & ROI	Achieved

30. Despite good performance in recruitment of thirteen new foster carers in 2023/24, there were also 32 deregistrations making a net loss of 19 carers.
31. There will inevitably be a loss of Foster Carers each year due to resignation or deregistration. However, the Croydon Foster Service's ambition is to have a net positive recruitment position by 2025/26.

Potential Barriers to Recruitment:

- Cost of living crisis – people feel they are not in a financial position to foster
- Housing pressures mean less people have a spare room – particularly in London
- In-house capacity to produce creative, engaging and regular content across all social media platforms
- Dissatisfaction of carers not recommending Croydon as a Fostering Service
- Lack of quality enquiry data in order to analyse effectively and adjust approach accordingly

Summary and forecast

- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval remains above national average of 6%
- Increase in events and community engagement has produced quality conversations and leads
- Pixels on the fostering web pages and the implementation of re-marketing has increased the number of quality leads and conversion rate
- Social media engagement has resulted in an increase in enquiries
- Greater community engagement has increased the amount of quality enquiries
- More work needed to forge relationships with faith and community groups, encouraging members of the public to enquire about fostering for Croydon.
- Transferring carers financial package has enabled the recruitment of more experienced carers.
- Source of enquiry is not being clearly identified at first point of contact. 'unknown' makes up 29% of all enquiries.
- Uplift in Refer a Friend reward has enabled us to increase quality enquiries from word of mouth referrals
- Re-marketing and contextual re-marketing has increased the prospecting of transferring carers.

## **TRAINING AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

32. Skills to Foster training is currently a two day course in Croydon. The main post approval foster carer training is delivered via [fosteringtraining.com](http://fosteringtraining.com) via its suite of online courses.
33. There is also a number of face to face courses run for foster carers covering;
- Allegations
  - Trauma
  - Gender Identity
34. Backup/support carers have access to five training links in [fosteringtraining.com](http://fosteringtraining.com) (in addition to first aid training) and are also able to attend face to face training.
- Health and Safety in the Fostering Home
  - Child Sexual Exploitation
  - Allegations
  - Disclosures
  - Safeguarding and Safer Care

## **SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CARERS**

35. Despite its rewards, being foster carer can be a very demanding vocation. Croydon's Fostering Service recognises this and understands good outcomes for children can only be achieved when foster carers feel valued, supported and equipped to provide the attention, commitment and care that children who may have experienced trauma in the form of neglect, abuse, exploitation and loss require.

36. Croydon's offer to foster carers encompasses the following:

### Support

- Mentoring scheme for new carers 52 weeks (mentors receive £75 per week)
- A range of Support Groups including, New Carer, Men in Fostering, Connected Carers.
- Croydon Foster Carer Association membership
- Fostering specific clinical therapist
- Access to consultant Practitioners from young Croydon (Specialists in Child Exploitation)
- Access to extensive training and professional development including practice library
- Annual Foster Carer appreciation event
- Fostering hub support system (One pilot hub currently, others in development)
- Access to the Systemic Service
- Dedicated SSW and out of hours duty system

### Finance



- Competitive fees of up to £480 per week
- Birthday allowance (£180-260 dependent on child's age)
- Festival allowance (£180-260 dependent on age)
- Holiday allowance for carer- £700 paid once annually
- Holiday allowance for child – paid once annually at double the maintenance allowance (between £360-550 dependent on child's age)
- Fostering Champion Scheme – foster carers can be paid to help with recruitment events and activities (£12 ph.)

#### Benefits

- Discounted Parking and tickets at Fairfield Halls
- Paid membership to FosterTalk
- Regular newsletters from the Service Manager and regular virtual meetings.
- Transferring carer welcome payment of £1500 and retainer fee of £300 pw for 12 weeks upon approval (T&C's)
- Refer a friend fee of £1200
- All placements are Croydon children
- Discounted leisure activities through Croydon GLL centres
- Blue light Card Membership

### **STAYING PUT**

37. The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a duty on the local authority to provide 'staying put' arrangements for children in foster care to continue to live with their former foster carer beyond their 18th birthday and potentially up to the age of 21 years if they are in education. This is a welcome development for young people many of whom are not ready to move into independent living and who want to remain as part of a family. The service was well-placed to implement these changes as we were already enabling young people to remain in their placements while they completed exams and were prepared fully for independence.

38. On 31st March 2023 there were **46** young people in staying put arrangements with Croydon Foster carers.

39. The Staying Put guidance and the Staying Put policy is in the process of being updated.

### **THE FOSTERING PANEL**

40. Fostering Services Regulations (2011) and National Minimum Standards (2011) require a Fostering Panel to be constituted, chaired by an independent person. Panel members include representatives from Children's Social Care and independent members with a range of experience. The panel makes recommendations about the approval of foster carers, matches of children for long-term foster care and in certain circumstances reviewing the approval of

foster carer. Final decisions, based on the panel’s recommendations, are made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

A report detailing the activity of the Fostering Panel is included as Appendix 1.

**REVIEW OF FOSTERING SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2022/2023**

41. This section reviews the commitments to improvement within the service stated in the Annual Report 2022/23 and reflects on the progress made. The Service Priorities from previous years will continue into 2023/24 as most remain relevant. A new Service Manager joined the Fostering Service in Q4 of 2023/24 and has the lead role in developing and driving the plan together with the team managers, supervising social workers and foster carers.

**Service Priorities 2022/23:**

Priority	Ongoing	Achieved
Build on the service’s relationships with Foster Carers by using systemic practice and develop confidence, competence and resilience to support children achieve a full sense of stability and security.		X
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.	X	
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.	X	
Reviewing and developing foster carer support groups (to include specific groups for connected carers)		X
Where appropriate increase the utilisation of our foster carers, as mentors, ambassadors, support group facilitators, etc.	X	
Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers as well and as a more responsive service	X	
Development of training programme tailored to their own needs and development, this includes wider access to the systemic practice and other therapeutic parenting and online resources.	X	
Reinforcing the expectations around Staying Put and making the related information more clear for carers and staff.		X
Improving the digital presence of Croydon Council Fostering Service.		X

Improve carers understanding of the issues around leaving care and preparing young people for independence.	X	
Increase involvement of young people in training for our Foster carers and Young People being involved in Skills to Foster Training.	X	
Increase participation of our Children Looked After and Care Leavers, to help shape the fostering service.	X	
Foster Carer Handbook – to review the handbook and continue work on offering the option of having a digital link to the handbook in the future.		X
Enhance our links with the professional network around the child.	X	
Enabling the service to learn from Ofsted inspections and other service reviews.	X	
Increase the number of approved carers in line with the sufficiency strategy.	X	

### Service Priorities 2023/24

42. Some of the priorities from 2022/23 will be carried over and in addition the Fosterlink report and the development and transformation plans and vision of the team have provided the Fostering Service with a number of priorities for the forthcoming year.

Priority	Target Date
Update the Foster Carer fee structure	August 24
Review the Structure of the service to assess and support more Family and Friends carers as a result of the national kinship strategy	September 24
Introduce a specialist enquiry managements system for recruitment assist in conversion of enquiries to assessment	October 24
Croydon specific, location based advertising & intelligent online prospecting for Foster Carer Recruiting	October 24
Join the London Permanence Partnership Consortium to improve information sharing and benchmarking with neighbouring Local Authorities.	May 24
Move towards a net positive fostering recruitment position in order to increase the number of Foster Carers in Croydon.	March 25
Reduce the number of illegal placements in Family and Friends by improving tracking of Reg 24 placements.	November 24
Complete a satisfaction Survey of Foster Carers to understand their current experience of Fostering for Croydon.	April 24
Embed the work of the clinical consultant in Fostering practice to support children and carers and avoid placement breakdown.	May 24
Improve quality of reports submitted to the fostering panel by ensuring papers are submitted early and reviewed by team managers and the panel advisor.	May 24

Increase number of foster carer support groups and reflective spaces	August 24
Recruit a dedicated lead for Foster carer training	August 24
Produce catalogue of face to face and hybrid training for Foster Carers	September 24
Complete evaluation of the pilot Fostering Hub	July 24
Launch a second Fostering Hub in Croydon	March 25
Support carers to improve completion of TSD	August 24
Develop stronger mechanisms for matching with the Children Looked after teams and the IRO service	July 24
Recruit additional members to the Fostering Panel to improve diversity and local representation.	August 24
Complete a No Detriment Policy for connected persons who do not want to foster.	December 24
Improve engagement in training of Special Guardians and Family and Friends carers	September 24
Create a council website landing page for Special Guardians and Private Fostering.	August 24
Recruit Permanent Staff to the Family and Friends and Post Order Support teams.	September 24

## COMPLAINTS

The Fostering Service reviews complaints received about the service and uses these to inform service development.

In 2023/24 we received 21 complaints four of which were upheld after investigation. The complaints that were upheld related to a delay in the service and others related to poor or limited communication.

**Khalil Campbell**  
**Service Manager – Fostering & Kinship Care**  
**July 2024**

**ANNUAL REPORT FOR CROYDON  
FOSTERING PANEL  
March 2023 – March 2024**

The annual report provides a summary of the work undertaken by Croydon fostering panel during the period March 2023–March 2024.

## **Introduction**

As the panel Chair, this year I was asked to compile this report. The report highlights that panel has continued more productive, consistent, and constructive.

With the consistency and diligence of Claire Rabanal in her role as panel advisor I believe panel is effective in supporting and contributing to raising standards, but we strive to improve.

Carole Westrip remains an invaluable in her role leading the panel administration, delivering in a professional, calm and organised way (as ever).

There has been no change to the central list during this time and panel feel more established, settled and benefitting more from the members diverse experience and knowledge.

I am proud of the work that Panel has completed in this period and continue to be impressed and appreciative of the work of all Panel Members, Panel Administration, and the Panel Advisor.

The information in the report has been heavily contributed by Claire and data from Carole.

## **Panel Meetings**

The Croydon Fostering Panel meets on the first, third and fourth Tuesday of each month. Panels are either a full day of 5 cases or half a day of 3 cases. The agenda depends on the cases that are ready within the timescales for distributing the paperwork, 5 working days before the meeting. [\[NMS 14.3\]](#)

There were 33 panel meetings held during this period an increase from 28 for the previous year.

4 panels were cancelled in this time due to insufficient cases ready for presentation this is reduced from 9 panel meetings were cancelled in the previous year. All meetings were quorate [\[reg 24\(1\)\]](#)

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

## Membership

Croydon Fostering Panel has been chaired by Dylan Mclees-Taylor since March 2020. I am an experienced fostering and adoption panel chair as well as being brought up in family that fostered and also fostered myself.

Panel is supported by 2 vice chairs. Sean Tully who has a social work background, and Stacey Hunter who has a legal background specialising in children and families.

We have not had any changes to the central list this year, there was no new recruits and members leaving. The Central List members bring a wide variety of professional and personal expertise and experiences including, Care experienced, Health, Education, CAMHS, Foster Carer, Family Group Conference, Legal and Social Work. Croydon reviews the Central List through the appraisal process which is conducted annually.

[\[NMS 14.1/14.8, Guidance 5.8\]](#)

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

Social workers and students are welcomed and encouraged to observe panel as part of the induction/development.

Panel is extremely well supported by Carole Westrip who is the senior panel administrator. Members, social workers, and families are highly appreciative of the work Carole completes prior, during and post panel. Louise Phelan supports Carole in this role when necessary and can seamlessly step in to take the minutes and other duties associated with the meetings.

Future recruitment of panel members will need to be mindful of considering applicants with a knowledge of living and working in Croydon, to reflect the demographics and diversity of the local community. The diversity of panel is something that the panel advisor and I have acknowledge needs improving. This was also highlighted in feedback from an attending social worker (see under User Feedback further on).

Currently there is not a kinship carer member on the central list and panel would benefit from having a kinship carer as a member of the central list and is a priority for further recruitment.

## Panel Training and Development

Links to recommended relevant articles/programmes/changes and updates and legislation are regularly sent to panel members and discussed in AOB at meetings. During panel members' appraisals we explored their experience and knowledge in the hope to have members contributing to future training and development days.

There has been some frustration with training in this time, Claire the Panel advisor has had a couple a training days set up only to have to cancel due changes in management and lack of staff made this difficult to achieve.

Some panel members were able to attend the CoramBAAF training arranged for the SSW and ASW (2 trainings) but numbers were limited and SW's prioritised.

The business meeting was also cancelled due to no permanent service manager and the interim service manager departing suddenly. Now we have a permanent service manager and head of service in place this will be arranged for September when there is a clearer idea how the service will be developing/changing.

Later in the year panel will also a be given a presentation to introduce the fostering hubs, an update on how the pilot period went and the plans for further development. Training with clinician the systemic support Shakila Emmanuel to understand support offered/available to fostering families and young people is also hoped in the next year.

We have communicated that panel training will be mandatory and we plan for this to be delivered face to face.

Croydon is a paperless and since March 2020 a virtual panel. Applicants join meeting via Microsoft Teams. There have been some ongoing challenges, often small glitches such as a camera not working, issues with audio or links needing to be resent if not working. However, overall feedback has identified that panel attendees are able to do this confidently albeit there will always be the occasional technical issue. Carole always sends out a link for attendees to trial to ensure they can log on and their SSW will also offer support if needed.

Holding panels virtually means that 5 cases can be presented rather than 4 when held face to face, and lessens anxiety for those attending, as well as the stress of travel and parking.

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

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

The Panel Chair and Panel Advisor meet after every panel and whenever necessary in between. Relationships between the Panel Advisor, TM's and SSW's have been strengthened by regular meetings and advice pertinent to reports before they are presented to panel and following the decisions made by the ADM. This assists with the panel's role of quality assurance, monitoring and raising standards.



Panel members do not have Croydon devices and so work from differing platforms and technologies. Panel members do not have Croydon email addresses. Paperwork is sent via Egress and works well.

## **ADM CHANGE AND MEETINGS**

In January 2023 there was a change in the ADM to Dawn West – Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance - which to date has meant the decisions are now being made within 7 days, in fact they are often made on the day the ADM receives them. [\[NMS 14.9\]](#)

The panel advisor and ADM meet monthly and whenever necessary but there is also effective communication between them.

## **Appraisals**

All panel members had their annual appraisal in 2023

The ADM completed the Panel Chair's appraisal.

All panel members have signed their new Panel Agreement – no panel member can sit on panel if they have not signed their agreement.

## **PANEL BUSINESS**

Croydon Fostering Panel considers; Applicants, Family and Friends Carers Assessments, Long Term Matches, Annual Reviews, Resignations, Terminations, Standard of Care, Change of Approval and Regulation 25 extension requests. Any significant changes in existing foster carers' circumstances should also be presented to panel.

Claire the panel advisor was able to ensure that all Reg 25 cases now come to panel and is always mindful of timescales ensuring that they are able to come to panel before becoming beyond timescales and becoming illegal placements.

Panel are still occasionally seeing carers that have not been back to panel for many years.. The legal functions of a fostering panel also include considering the first review carried out in accordance with [\[Reg 28\(2\)\]](#)

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

Attendees to panel are provided with a virtual book beforehand that gives details of the panel members they will see during their meeting.

The table below provides an overview of cases heard in this reporting period April 2022 – March 2023 and the ADM decisions.

<u>Type of Panel Business</u>	<u>Number of cases 2023-2024</u>	<u>Number of cases 2022-2023</u>	<u>Outcome 2023- 2024</u>	<u>Outcome 2022- 2023</u>
Assessments	<u>15</u>	13	<u>15 approved</u>	13 (1 case to IRM but then approved)
Family and Friends Persons/ Family & Friends/Kinship	<u>5</u>	7	<u>5 approved</u>	7 approved
First Year Reviews	<u>15</u>	14	<u>15 re-approved</u>	14 re-approved, 1 to return for update
3 Yearly Reviews	<u>40</u>	34	<u>37 re-approved, 3 deferred</u>	32 re-approved, 2 deferred, 1 to return
Standards of Care	<u>2</u>	2	<u>2 re-approved</u>	2 re-approved
Brief Report to Panel	<u>1 (withdrawn)</u>	0	<u>Applicant to provide feedback</u>	
Conclusion Report		1		
De-registrations	<u>1</u>	0		
Resignations	<u>10</u>	14	<u>10 noted</u>	<u>14 noted</u>

Long Term Matches	<u>8</u>	5	<u>8 approved</u>	5 approved
Panel updates	<u>3</u>	4	<u>Noted by panel</u>	
Panel returns following deferral	<u>2</u>	4	<u>2 re-approved</u>	4 re-approved
Reg 25	<u>19</u>	5	<u>17 agreed</u> <u>2 declined</u>	5 extensions given by ADM
Variation of approval	<u>4</u>		<u>4 approved</u>	

As the chart above shows many of the figures are similar to the previous year. The numbers that are significantly different are an increase in 3 yearly reviews up from 34 to 40 and resignations reducing from 14 to 10. The clearest difference however has been the increase in Reg 25 cases. This has jumped from 5 in the previous year (prior to these 5, Reg 25 cases were not coming to the fostering panel), to 19 this year.

In the 2022- 2023 year there had been 28 panels and 103 cases and in the period 2023 – 2024 - 33 panels -125 cases.

## Themes and Areas for Improvement

Panel continue to see themes during this period as were highlighted in the previous year. Foster carers not sending regular logs, attending training, completing TSD within the required timescales, and feedback not received from other professionals.

Panel reiterate to foster carers how important keeping logs are as part of a child's life story, as well as protecting themselves should an allegation be made.

In an attempt to support the department, these issues are included in the minutes as actions and are now followed up by the panel advisor at 3 monthly intervals following panel.

Panel have been encouraging and acknowledging where the voice of the child is clear in relevant reports. We continue to try to find ways that panel can bring the voice of the child to panel process and questions.

The issues of regular logs, training, attendance of support groups is more pronounced with the Kinship families. Through the Reg 24 carers, there is a number who live away from the borough and face additional barriers to access to support and training adding

to family members often not as clear of the need to fulfil all aspects of the fostering task as often less motivated to do so.

Where NMS aren't being met, such as young people not having the option of their own room, training and or logs not being completed – panel are not always seeing the local authority acknowledging how this might be achieved or if not achievable why it is perceived to be in the child's best interest.

Panel have noted and highlighted several times that a placement have been made illegal by placing multiple children (above approval range), children placed when carers had been on hold, emergency placements also taking families beyond their approval numbers.

There have been examples of some foster carers having resigned within 18-24 months of approval and this reflecting panel's concern that there seems to be a lack of a matching process and inexperienced carers being matched with teens with additional complex trauma related behaviours and feeling overwhelmed, ill prepared and not fully supported.

Paperwork being received late remained an issue last year. Carole and the panel advisor are constantly having to chase paperwork and rearrange dates. This has resulted in panels being reduced to half a day or even needed to be cancelled. Last year, once the signed FRO report had been received, Carole provided a date for panel rather giving a choice of dates. This system did help to keep reviews that need to be presented to panel on track but gatekeeping and chasing by Carole and Claire was still needed.

Again, during this period there has been a lot of churn of staff including, social workers, management and senior roles. This does have an impact on communication, continuity and ability to build relationship and progressive and collaborative working.

There was a period of time during this period where we had a number of cases where the Independent Fostering Reviewer and Foster carer's social worker (with their team manager) presented differing and conflicting recommendations. This occasionally felt that panel was being asked to be arbiter as these differences were not settled prior to attending panel.

## **Communication with Service**

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

The panel advisor has also made links with the Independent Visitor coordinator to gain a better understanding of how the service works. Frequently at panel questions are asked about an IV for a young person who has not been referred to the service.

## **User feedback**

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

### **Foster Carers/Applicants**

*The panel chair quickly made me feel at ease and the panel seem friendly and they smiled!! Also they listened intensely to all I said. Their suggestions were all said in a positive way and they were very constructive. I felt good even before they came back with a decision.*

*The panel seemed to understand how it feels for a foster carer to be before a panel and tried their best to dispel all nervousness which allowed me to have the confidence to say all that I wanted to.*

*Having our panel over Microsoft Teams made us feel comfortable as we were relaxed within our own environment. There was a link to do a test run and I was confident it will be fine on the day.*

*Certainly we were ready for the panel to take place virtually and in fact we found it preferable this way. Being able to participate from the comfort of our own home was convenient and the 9:30am start meant it was easier for us as we didn't have to wake up really early for preparation and travel.*

*We were given an opportunity to make our points, answer all questions asked and panel took time to listen.*

*The Chair made us feel welcome and relaxed. By receiving the information about the panel members provided us with an insight to their background.*

*The chair was exceptionally competent at putting me at ease, explaining the process and making the experience fair and inclusive. I was even given the option – would I prefer to answer my questions first or would I prefer if the agency were asked questions directed at them first?*

*Everyone had my interest at heart, and very informative.*

*It was positive as I was very nervous and having all the panel members introduce themselves and seeing only chair member was putting the questions to me helped.*

*I personally think a mock panel would be good preparation, maybe mock questions with a SSW*

*Maybe a role play run through.*

*SW feedback*

*It was a positive experience*

*The panel was friendly to myself , the child SW and foster carer*

*I like the fact that the panel come in already prepared after reading question*

*The panel started by focusing on the positives from the paperwork which set a positive tone to the meeting. Everyone given an opportunity to speak*

*Experience was positive. This is because the panel process was explained, including why the chair was asking all the questions. Where questions were complex, the chair explained the reason for asking the questions. This helped put the applicant at ease.*

*Given the diversity in Croydon I feel the panel members should reflect this, it felt somewhat like case management as most of the questions asked were answered in the report. For example questions pertaining to the risk assessment of the applicants family member is a standard safeguarding check to underpin a thorough assessment of all frequent visitors to the household.*

*The applicant was nervous before panel but felt that she had been listened to and support during panel. At the end of panel, she stated that it was a positive experience for her.*

*This was a positive panel – appropriate language and tone of the chair was used .applicant felt confident answering questions.*

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

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

Croydon panel does aim to drive up the standard of reports presented and to offer support and guidance where appropriate.

In the role as Panel Advisor Claire continues to do a great deal of work of gate keeping and chasing to ensure cases are compliant and suitable for panel.

The Form C assessments presented have needed some work prior to being panel ready and this was mentioned in the report last year. There has now been a consistent team manager in place and that has helped with keeping the assessments on track. It does seem as if some of the assessing social workers are new to completing a Form C and being aware of when timescales for a reg 24 expire and the need to come to panel to seek a view regarding a reg 25 extension.

With the Reg 25 cases now being monitored and ensuring they come to panel within timescales the number of illegal placements has decreased. Panel currently do not have the figures of how many illegal placements there are at any given time. Maybe this is something for panel to add to the monitoring data.

Panel are still awaiting the roll out the CoramBAAF new Form F and Form K to replace the Form C. Claire the panel advisor has attended the forum for the Form K in anticipation of this.

The quality of Foster Carer reviews remains variable and there are instances where the NMS standards have not been met but, in some cases the foster carer could have been better supported to meet these. Reports/Reviews that contain spelling and grammatical errors is another area where there is room for improvement and a resolution needs to be sought rather than the response being that it is a CRS issue, and a report cannot be amended.

Sections 7 and 8 (Health and Safety/Safer Caring Policy) are routinely not completed and on further exploration with the SSW's, this issue remains. This means that the panel advisor needs to request separate documents, so panel have the relevant information. There does not seem to be a reason this happens, and it has been escalated to the team managers.

However, there are definite indications that the standard of reviews is improving, and SSW have expressed they appreciate the constructive feedback and guidance to amend reports prior to them being distributed to panel.

Croydon Panel members are committed to their role and the part they play in ensuring the children and young people of Croydon are cared for safely and enjoy a positive experience of family life that offers opportunities to thrive and develop with the support and care they deserve.

Panel would like to thank the dedicated foster carers and kinship carers that make this possible and the teams that support them to be able to carry out this vital and important role.

## **Reference Key**

*NMS – National Minimum Standards 2011*

*Regulations – Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended)*

*Guidance – The Children Act 1089 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Service*

*Unlawful Placements, Unregulated Placements, and ‘Other Arrangements’ – CoramBAAF Legal Consultant - April 2020*

**Dylan Mclees-Taylor**

**Independent Panel Chair**