

Croydon Fostering Service - Annual Report 2024/25



WE ARE CROYDON

CONTENTS	Page
Purpose of the Annual Report	2
Key Messages	2
Background Information	4
Role of the fostering service	4
The National Fostering Context	5
Children in Foster Care in Croydon	5
Changes in Age Profile	6
Ethnicity of Looked After Children and Carers	7
Croydon 's Provision of Foster Carers	8
Foster Homes and Stability	10
Friends and Family Foster Carers	11
Service Structure	12
Foster Carer Recruitment Activity	13
Training and Development	15
Support for Foster Carers	16
Staying Put	17
The Fostering Panel	17
Review of Development Plans	18
Complaints	20
Appendix 1	
Chair's Annual Report of the Fostering Panel 2024/2025	

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 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025 and sets out plans for service development until 31st March 2026.

KEY MESSAGES

2. Croydon's fostering service has made significant strides this year. Strong permanence planning, dedicated support for foster carers, and a deeply committed team have laid a solid foundation for children in care to thrive. This progress reflects the ongoing commitment to creating stable, nurturing foster homes where every child feels safe and supported and carers are expertly supervised.
3. In October 2024, Ofsted rated Croydon's children's services as **Good** overall, highlighting tangible improvements since the last inspection. We are especially proud that our fostering services were recognised as a key strength - delivering positive outcomes for both children and carers.

Highlights from the Ofsted Report:

- **Permanence and Matching:** "Most children have a clear plan of permanence and are carefully matched with suitable carers." This reflects our strategic approach to long-term planning.
 - **Stable and Supportive Homes:** "Most children live in foster homes that meet their needs well and are making positive progress." Our focus on stability ensures that children feel secure and can flourish.
 - **Strong Foster Carer Support:** "The assessment, support and supervision of foster carers are mostly undertaken effectively to support foster carers in caring safely for children." This speaks to the robust infrastructure we've built around our carers.
 - **Valuing Identity and Relationships:** "Social workers and foster carers support children's identity needs well by encouraging and supporting birth families' involvement." We are proud to champion a child-centred approach that honours family connections.
4. We have successfully recruited permanent staff, sessional workers, and fostering panel members, contributing to a local, stable and skilled workforce.

We are grateful to all former and current colleagues and panel members who have played a vital role in shaping and strengthening the fostering service.

5. Alongside our transformation partner **IMPOWER**, Croydon is reimagining how we deliver fostering services- achieving better outcomes for children and families while ensuring value for money.
6. Our partnership with **Fosterlink** continues to drive innovation in recruitment. In 2023/24, we launched our first-ever Croydon Fostering Week, celebrating carers and raising awareness. Croydon's recruitment activities are responsive and engaging.
7. A proprietary foster carer enquiry handling system launched in October 2024 has boosted conversion rates from initial interest to home assessments, helping us build a stronger, more diverse pool of foster carers.
8. Recognising the vital role of kinship care, senior leaders have increased resources for our family and friends' team. Additionally, the team now uses the CoramBAAF Form K, a more tailored and effective tool for assessing connected persons, replacing the previous Form C.
9. Supporting and retaining foster carers remains a top priority. Following the success of the pilot fostering hub, two more are in development, with recruitment for hub leaders having begun in March 2025. The new hubs are set to launch in 2025/26. We also implemented an interim uplift in maintenance fees, aligning them with National Minimum Allowances to better support our carers.
10. Croydon deeply values the dedication and expertise of its foster carers. Through collaborative work with our 16+ services in the **Staying Close** project, we are providing extended support to care-experienced young people with Foster Carers offering vital out-of-hours emotional support, ensuring no young person ever feels alone.
11. The fostering service is a reflective service and a safe space for learning. Working with the Practice Improvement Consultants a programme of auditing has been agreed to enable the service to reflect on practice and identify opportunities to enhance the delivery of our services and support.
12. These achievements reflect more than just progress, they represent a collective commitment to making a lasting difference in the lives of children and young people across Croydon. With a dedicated team, passionate foster carers, and strong partnerships driving our vision forward, we are building a service rooted in care, stability and vision. As we look ahead, we remain focused on continuous improvement, innovation, and ensuring every child has a safe and loving home.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

13. When a child enters care, it marks one of the most significant and life-altering moments they may experience. It is essential that foster families provide not just adequate, but exceptional care; particularly for children who have faced trauma. As part of its commitment to building a better future for vulnerable children and families, Croydon Council is dedicated to ensuring that every child grows up in a safe, stable, and loving home. For those who cannot remain with or safely return to their birth families or extended family networks, high-quality foster care offers the best chance to experience the warmth and security of a family setting while long-term plans for their future are developed.
14. The Fostering Service supports children in the care of the Local Authority, including those on short breaks. Its core mission is to promote stability by ensuring children and young people are placed in secure, nurturing foster homes when foster care is the identified plan. The service plays a vital role in placing children with foster carers who are located within, or as close as possible to, the borough helping maintain community connections and continuity in their lives.

ROLE OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE

15. The Fostering Service in Croydon is responsible for:
- I. Support, supervision and training of foster carers, including early permanence and family and friend carers.
 - II. Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster homes in accordance with fostering national minimum standards
 - III. Promoting stability and permanence planning for our children
 - IV. Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
 - V. Support of Special Guardianship Carers
 - VI. Private Fostering
16. The priorities are to ensure that:
- I. All children who become looked after by Croydon council have experience of safe, secure and consistent care.
 - II. All children experience a safe place within which they can play, grow, 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 opportunities 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 undue delay.
17. Croydon benefits from a diverse group of foster carers, each bringing a wide range of skills and experience to support children in need. They provide various types of care, including short breaks and respite, long-term fostering, and support for transitions to permanent homes through adoption. In addition, the service assesses and supports relatives or close family friends, known as Family and Friends foster carers (also referred to as Kinship or Connected Persons Carers), who wish to care for children within their extended family or

social network. All foster carers receive regular supervision and guidance from Supervising Social Workers within the fostering teams, along with access to ongoing training and development opportunities.

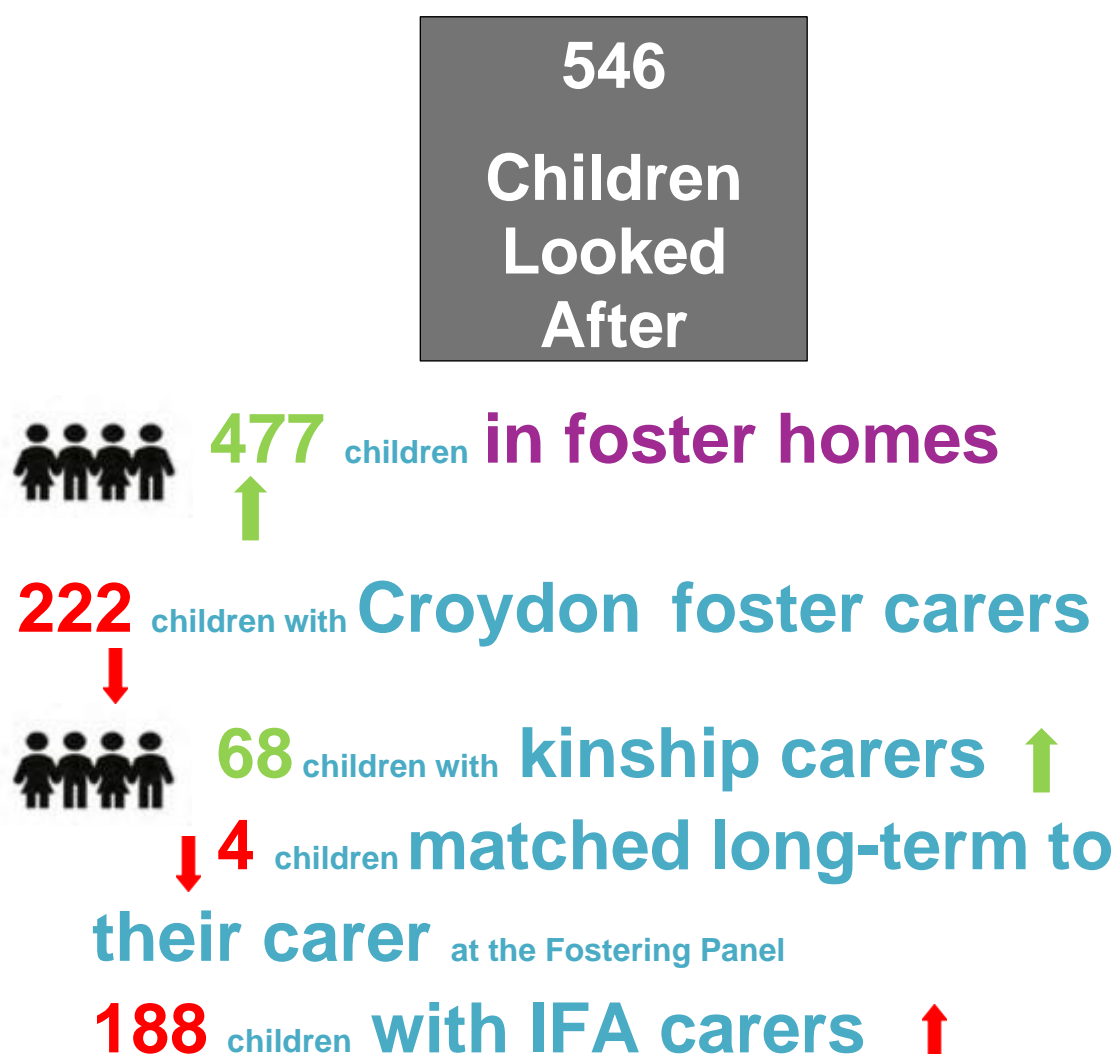
18. According to Ofsted, as of March 2024, nationally there were 57,065 approved mainstream foster carers. This is a decrease of 4% from last year (59,380). Of these, 11% were approved during the year. Of the new approvals, LA carers account for 45% and IFA carers account for 55%. The proportion of newly approved LA mainstream carers is lower than the proportion of all LA mainstream foster carers (56%) active in March 2024. In the LA sector, the total number of approved mainstream carers has decreased by 15% since 2020.

THE NATIONAL FOSTERING CONTEXT (according to the DfE)

- 83,630 were looked after on 31 March 24 in the UK.
- 57,000 children were living with foster families in the UK as of 31 March 2024.
- At the end of March 2024, there were 42,615 households fostering in England. The number of households has decreased steadily since 2021.

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN CROYDON

As at the 31st of March 2024, there were:



19. 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.

20. The trend in Croydon was an increase in children looked after from 520 in 2023 to 546 in 2024 an increase of 5%.

21. The number of children cared for by family and friends increased from 23 in 2023/24 to 68 in 2024/25.

22. The number of children matched long-term through the fostering panel was four, this was lower than expected, however the number of children living with family and friends was significantly higher than previous years indicating that Croydon children are not only achieving matching but are residing with more family and friends.

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	
2024/ 2025	38	38	77	67	2	222
2023/ 2024	41	39	73	73	3	229
2022/ 2023	33	41	88	80	4	246

Children with Croydon and IFA Carers combined.

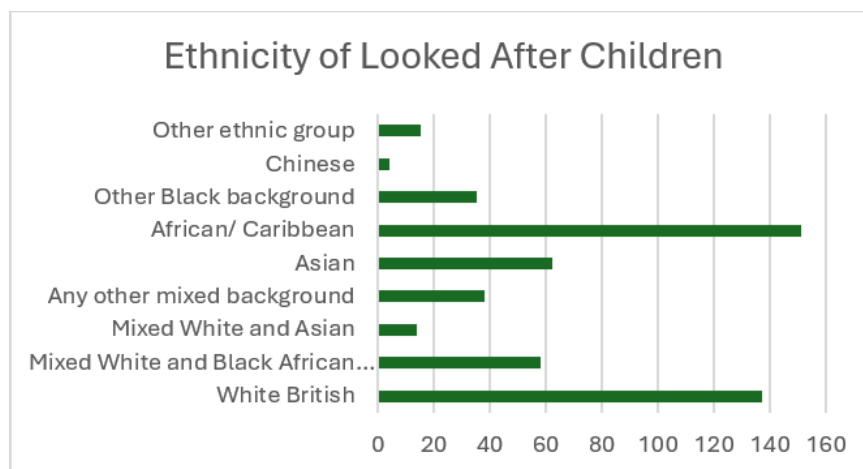
Year	a) 0 - 4	b) 5-10	c) 11-15	d) 16-17	Total
2024/ 2025	70	89	144	134	426
2023/ 2024	67	70	136	143	416
2022/ 2023	53	83	159	154	449
2021/ 2022	58	84	169	155	466
2020/ 2021	61	97	199	221	578

23. The largest demographic of children in foster care continues to be those aged over 11 years of age. Data indicates that outside of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, abuse and neglect and families in acute stress were the primary presenting needs. 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

24. Croydon continues to recognise 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

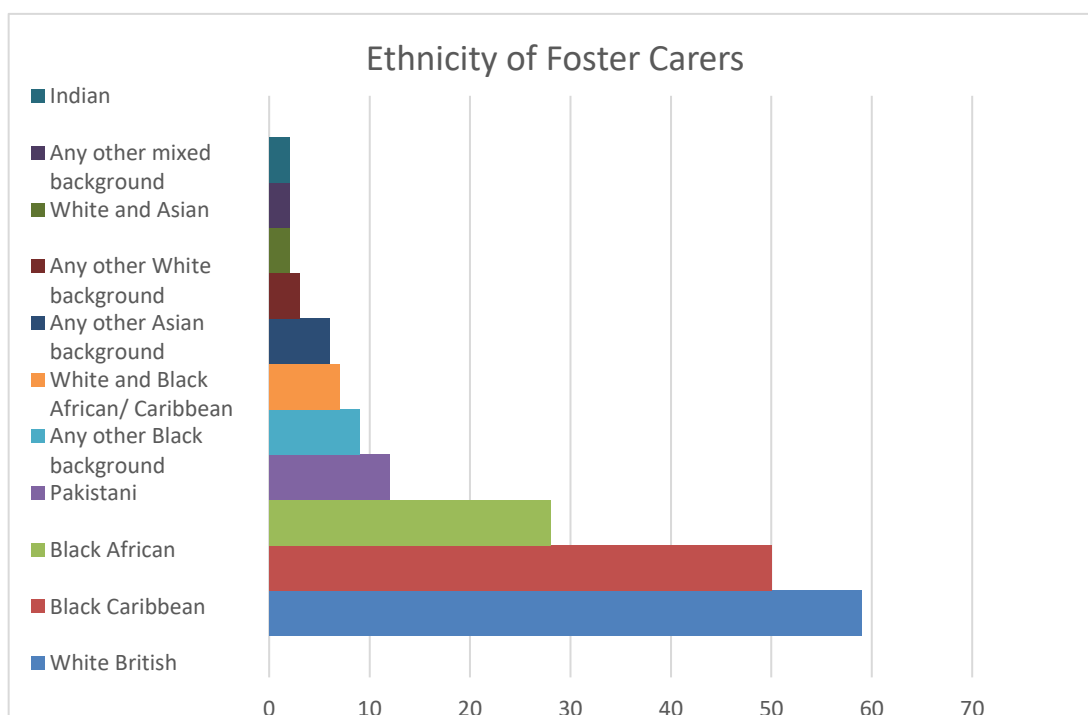


25. The majority of looked after children in Croydon were either from a White or Black African Caribbean background with a significant number of Asian children.

26. The demographics of foster carers in Croydon are broadly reflective of looked after children enabling Croydon to achieve better matching of children to carers.

27. Work is underway to improve the matching of children to carers using the valuing care approach which will enable us to better understand the specific needs of children and the strengths of foster carers.

ETHNICITY OF FOSTER CARERS IN CROYDON



CROYDON'S PROVISION OF FOSTER CARERS

At 31st March 2025



139 approved fostering households

↓ (from 149)

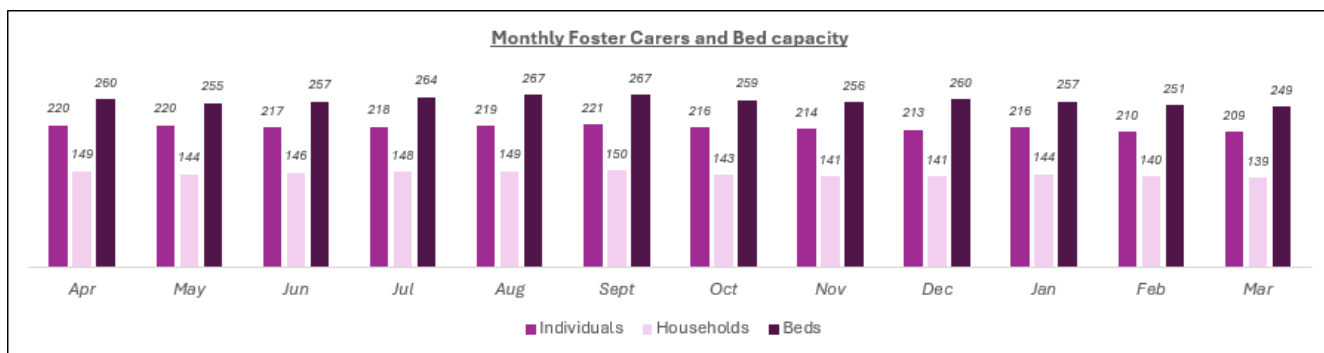
28. In 2024/25 – **23** foster carer households were de-registered (plus 9 connected carers). **32** carer households were de-registered in 23/24. Data collection on the reasons for deregistration needs to improve within the service to include more categories, at present data largely reflects resignations (without additional information regarding reasons) and retirement (4).

29. Previously when 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
2025	139	249
2024	149	260
2023	176	306
2022	204	355
2021	222	395
2020	241	452
2019	233	451

30. The column on the right indicates the number of allowed children in the carer's fostering approval across the service in total.



31. The snapshot at the end of 2024/25 was that there were 222 children with Croydon Foster Carers which shows that Croydon utilised foster carers at 89%, an increase from the previous year of 7%.

32. The duty Social Workers and home-finding officer strive to find places for children ‘in-house’ as a priority, keeping Croydon children in or close to Croydon. 100% utilisation is not realistic or 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

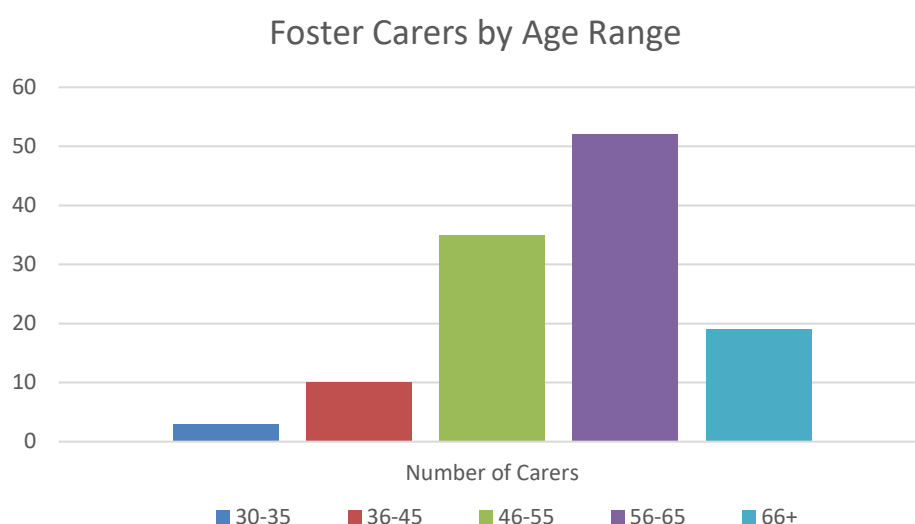
33. The utilisation table above also illustrates the number of in-house Foster Carers in Croydon over the past seven years. The decline in carer numbers is evident particularly after 2021. This decline in foster carer numbers is a national trend.

34. Croydon celebrates and appreciates its carers, there are currently 20 foster families who have fostered for over twenty years, three of these have given thirty years’ service. They have demonstrated care, commitment and resilience.

35. There is a need to recruit and retain carers who can offer Croydon children a similar level of commitment through their public service as Foster Carers and it is important that the fostering service through its development offers these carers appropriate support, supervision and reward.

36. Eleven of the carers who left Fostering in Croydon last year were over 60 years old. In one sense this is positive as this shows that a main reason that foster carer numbers are reducing is not because of reasons within the Council’s control. However, this does not make us complacent, and Croydon is focused on improving the support and reward offer to carers which is expected to improve carer retention.

37. With twenty-six carers currently registered in Croydon above the age of 65 it is probable that there will continue to be a comparable number of resignations in relation to retirement in the coming years. Croydon remains committed to the target of net positive recruitment in future.



38. The chart above shows the age range of Foster Carers and illustrates the need to recruit the next generation of carers to ensure sufficiency for foster homes in the future.

39. 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 choices for adolescents, large sibling groups, unaccompanied minors and those at risk of child sexual and criminal exploitation. 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. Many times, these young people enter into care with little warning and Croydon has identified the need to develop a resource that can be used in such emergencies.

40. 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.

FOSTER HOMES AND STABILITY

41. The joint work and decision making between the Homefinding Team and fostering has sought to improve the timely identification of in-house foster homes. The liaison between the fostering service and care teams also aims at early identification of the need for a foster home for a child and for support for children in existing fostering arrangements in order to avoid disruption or unplanned endings.

42. Performance for short term stability (Where children have experienced three or more moves) – **6%** (improvement since last year which was 7%)

43. Long-term stability (those in care for 2.5+ years and in same foster home for 2+ years) **76%** (an improvement from last year which was 74%)

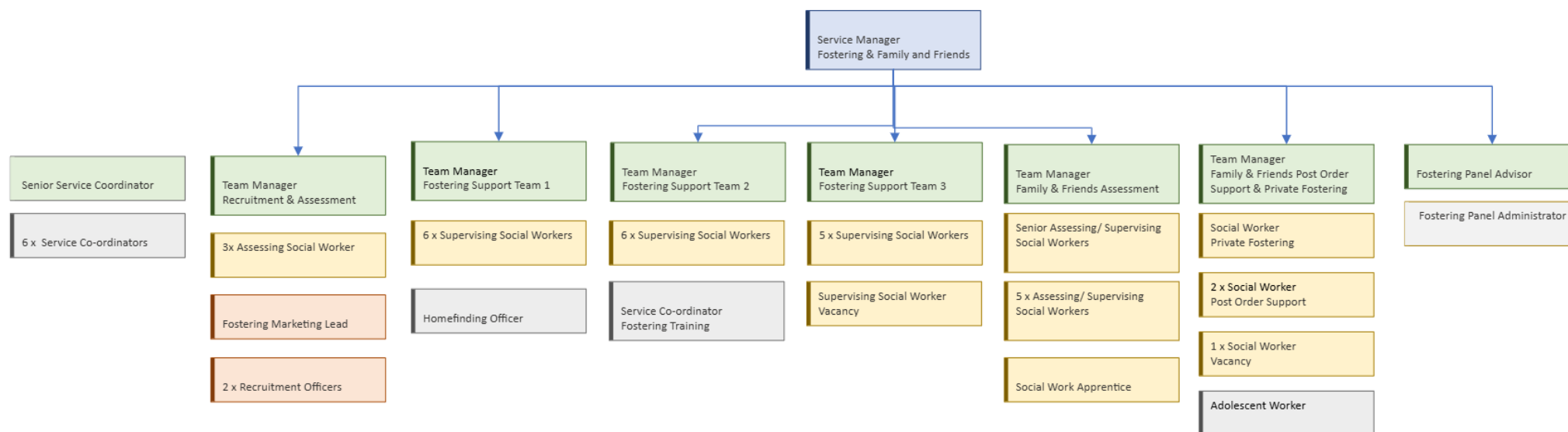
44. In addition to careful matching of children Croydon has a range of support services that can be utilised to ensure placements are supported such as the clinical team that will offer support and clinical consultations prior to placement disruption and specialist practitioner consultant from Young Croydon who offer support for children at risk of exploitation.
45. A new support function has been added to the service with the recruitment of an Adolescent Worker to work with carers and young people to improve stability and relationships in the home and to reduce risks outside of the home. It is expected that the successful candidate will commence their role in the service in early 2025/26. It is important to note that the support of the Adolescent worker will also be available to Special Guardianship carers to ensure these arrangements are also well supported and children remain in their care.

FRIENDS AND FAMILY FOSTER CARERS

46. The Family and Friends 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 children outside of the local authority care system. This approach aligns with the government's kinship strategy.
47. In addition to the Special Guardianship Orders granted in Care Proceedings during 2024/2025 which enabled children to leave care twenty-four Family and Friends Carers were approved at the Fostering Panel compared to five in 2023/24.
48. The increase in approvals at panel was largely due to the practice adopted by the Service Manager in 2023/24 to ensure that all family and friends carers under assessment were presented at the fostering panel so the courts were able to consider making a care order or Special Guardianship Order (SGO) without adding any delay to the court proceedings.
49. An additional benefit to the carers being approved at the fostering panel was that they receive the higher rate skills payment as foster carers which is protected for two years if the court then decides to make an SGO.

SERVICE STRUCTURE

Croydon Fostering and Family & Friends Service



50. Permanent employees have been appointed to all filled positions in the Fostering Service (although three current locum workers are moving to permanent contracts at the time of writing this report). This contrasts with only two permanent Social Workers in the Family and Friends Assessment and Post Order support teams last year.

51. The caseload of Supervising Social Workers averages around twelve. However, it is expected that this will reduce when several supervising social workers return from maternity and long-term sick leave.

52. Post Order support Social Workers have caseloads of around 35 cases (these are needs assessments as they do not hold cases), recruitment to the vacant position will help to reduce this.

53. The Family and Friends assessment team has a mixed caseload of six viability and full assessments (which they have to supervise as foster carers) with the added pressure of court deadlines for their reports. This is the only team in the service that attracts the recruitment and retention payments.

FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY

Target Summary:

	Total requests for information	Total initial enquiries	Total home visits	Total assessments	Total approvals	Total no. of approved places
Target	300	200	60	30	15	25
2024-25	1472	137	92	44	12	16
2023-24	811	165	62	30	13	20
2022-23	471	184	67	19	11	15
2021-22	330	185	55	27	9	U/K

Activity Conversion Rates:

From	To	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Requests for Information	Initial enquiry	39%	20%	9%
Initial Enquiry	Home Visit	36%	38%	67%
Home Visit	Assessment	28%	48%	48%
Assessment	Approvals	63%	43%	27%
Initial Enquiry	Approval	6.5%	7.9%	9%

Objectives vs Outcomes

Objectives	Outcomes/target achieved
To assess and approve 15 new sets of foster carers within the financial year	12 approvals / 80%
Recruit carers who can care for the following groups of children: 10+ age group Sibling groups Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children Babies Respite	Of the 12 households approved: 5 for 10+ 7 for siblings 4 for UASC 4 for babies 3 respite
Demographically profiling to increase the numbers of: Younger carers	Younger carers: Between 60-70 – 5 carers Between 50-60 - 2 carers Between 40-50 – 3 carers Under 40 – 2 carers
To increase word of mouth referrals	26 referrals made an increase of

from existing foster carers	by 14
To increase the conversion rate from enquiry to approval	9% up by 1.1% on previous year

54. Despite good performance in recruitment of twelve new foster carers in 2024/25, there were also 32 deregistration's making a net loss of 20 carers.
55. 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 in the near future.

Barriers to Recruitment:

- Lack of data and needs analysis to effectively recruit target needs of looked after children.
- Housing pressures mean less people have a spare room – particularly in London
- Cost of living crisis making it financially difficult for people to chose fostering as a career.
- Dissatisfaction of some current and former carers not recommending Croydon as a Fostering Service.
- Work commitments and lifestyle making it difficult for people to commit to a full time fostering role

Summary and forecast

- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval remains above national average of between 6 - 8%. Croydon is currently 9%
- Employment of Recruitment Officer (Marketing) has enabled us to increase our presence on social media and drive online efforts
- Pixels on the fostering web pages and the implementation of re-marketing continues to increase the number of quality leads and conversion rate
- Croydon Fostering Week enabled us to increase community engagement and quality leads resulting in 40 additional enquiries, 14 home visits and 5 applicants attending Skills to Foster.
- Increase in the number of people transferring from agencies.
- Implementation of fostering specific CRM system increases response rate and management of enquiry timeline
- More work needed on recruiting younger carers and those from LGBTQ+ communities.
- Number of requests for information proves the appetite to foster is there but converting them is can be challenging.

TRAINING AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

56. Skills to Foster training is currently a two-day course in Croydon. The main post approval foster carer training is delivered via fosteringtraining.com via its suite of online courses.

57. Take-up of training has been positive over the last year and applicants under assessment and Special Guardians have been given temporary (renewable) licenses for the training to help in their caring task.

Course Uptake



58. The table above illustrates the uptake of courses by Croydon carers as opposed to other fostering organisations who use this service.

59. There are also a number of face-to-face courses run for foster carers covering.

- Allegations
- Trauma
- Gender Identity

60. Backup/support carers also have access to five training links in 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

61. Work commenced in 24/25 to increase the number of face-to-face courses offered to foster carers and it is hoped that there will be a full catalogue of face-to-face courses available to foster carers from 2025/26 to complement the online offer and further improve carers skills and knowledge.

SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CARERS

62. Despite its obvious rewards, being a 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.

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

- Mentoring scheme for new carers up to 26 weeks.
- A range of Support Groups including, New Carer, Men in Fostering, Connected Carers, reflective spaces.
- Croydon Foster Carer Association membership
- Fostering specific clinical therapist
- Access to consultant Practitioners from young Croydon (Specialists in Child Exploitation)
- Access to Adolescent Worker
- Access to extensive training and professional development including practice library.
- Annual Foster Carer appreciation event
- Fostering hub support system (recruitment to two additional hubs is underway)
- Dedicated SSW and out-of-hour duty system

Finance

- Competitive fees of up to £499 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.
- 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.
- Discounted leisure activities through Croydon GLL centres.

STAYING PUT

64. 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.

65. On 31st March 2024 there were 18 young people in staying put arrangements with Croydon Foster carers.

66. The Staying Put guidance, and the Staying Put policy is in the process of being updated in collaboration with the Young People's 16+ service.

THE FOSTERING PANEL

67. 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 2024/2025

68. This section reviews the commitments to improvement within the service stated in the Annual Report 2023/24 and reflects on the progress made. The Service Priorities from previous years will continue into 2024/25 if they remain relevant.

Service Priorities 2023/24:

Priority	Ongoing	Achieved
Update the Foster Carer fee structure (interim uplift to maintenance allowances was applied in Feb 2024)	X	
Review the Structure of the service to assess and support more Family and Friends carers as a result of the national kinship strategy		X
Introduce a specialist enquiry managements system for recruitment assist in conversion of enquiries to assessment		X
Croydon specific, location-based advertising & intelligent online prospecting for Foster Carer Recruiting		X
Join the London Permanence Partnership Consortium to improve information sharing and benchmarking with neighbouring Local Authorities.		X
Move towards a net positive fostering recruitment position in order to increase the number of Foster Carers in Croydon.	X	
Reduce the number of unregulated placements in Family and Friends by improving tracking of Reg 24 placements.		X
Complete a satisfaction Survey of Foster Carers to understand their current experience of Fostering for Croydon.		X
Embed the work of the clinical consultant in Fostering practice to support children and carers and avoid placement breakdown.		X
Improve the quality of reports submitted to the fostering panel by ensuring papers are submitted early and reviewed by team managers and the panel advisor.		X
Increase number of foster carer support groups and reflective spaces		X
Recruit a dedicated lead for foster carer training (<i>a lead has been assigned to Fostering from the Workforce Development service to assist in developing Foster Carer training</i>)	X	
Produce a catalogue of face to face and hybrid training for Foster Carers	X	
Complete evaluation of the pilot Fostering Hub		X
Launch a second Fostering Hub in Croydon	X	
Support carers to improve completion of TSD		X
Develop stronger mechanisms for matching with the Children Looked after teams and the IRO service		X

Recruit additional members to the Fostering Panel to improve diversity and local representation.		X
Complete a No Detriment Policy for connected persons.	X	
Improve engagement in training of Special Guardians and Family and Friends carers	X	
Create a council website landing page for Special Guardians and Private Fostering. Special guardianship Croydon Council Private fostering Croydon Council		X
Recruit Permanent Staff to the Family and Friends and Post Order Support teams.		X

Service Priorities 2024/25

69. Some of the priorities from 2023/24 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
Update the Foster Carer fee structure
Move towards a net positive fostering recruitment position in order to increase the number of Foster Carers in Croydon.
Complete a No Detriment Policy (SGO Payment policy)
Improve engagement in training of Special Guardians and Family and Friends carers
Recruit a dedicated lead for foster carer training
Producing a catalogue of face-to-face and hybrid training for Foster Carers
Launch additional Fostering Hubs in Croydon
Support carers to improve completion of TSD
Consider service innovations to improve sufficiency of Foster Homes
Explore innovations including the use of AI to improve the supervision of Foster Carers.
Embed the work of the adolescent worker to support stability for the child and carers.
Further embed collaborative work with other Social Work teams in order to increase participation of foster carers and care experienced young people in the design of the fostering service.
Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers as well and as a more responsive service
Increase carer specialisms in fostering (Emergency carers/ Parent & Child, Children with Disabilities)
Further develop the training and mentoring offer for foster carers
Increase fostering capacity assessment using VCARE framework
Improve the capture and use of information in the service in order to improve carer utilisation and compliance with KPIs of Supervising Social Workers.
Increase visibility of Fostering in Croydon through Croydon Fostering Week and the use of physical marketing media
Increase numbers of matches presented at the fostering panel/ Fostering ADM
Work with Fosterlink to improve Foster Carer Recruitment
Explore the creation of a regional recruitment hub with the DfE and South London partnership consortium members

Reduce risk of data breaches and improve information security in relation to papers sent fostering panel members.
Review Terms of References for Fostering and Private Fostering Panels
Review and update fostering handbook and policies
Continue learning cycle resulting from audits and feedback.

COMPLAINTS

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

71. In 2024/25 we received 12 complaints, seven were resolved at Stage 1 and five were unsubstantiated. This is a significant improvement in the service that received 21 complaints in the previous year.

Version	Author	Name	Approved By	Name	Date	Review Date
1	Service Manager Fostering and Family Friends Care	Khalil Campbell	Director, Children's Social Care	Róisín Madden	April 2025	April 2026

**ANNUAL REPORT FOR CROYDON
FOSTERING PANEL**

April 2024 – March 2025

The annual report provides a summary of the work undertaken by Croydon fostering panel during the period April 2024–March 2025.

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.

The year has been positive with some significant changes, with a previous panel advisor leaving in September 2024 choosing to take early retirement, and we thank her for all her hard work and dedication. An interim panel advisor was appointed (October 2024 – April 2025) to enable the recruitment process for this important role to be undertaken. A permanent panel advisor has been appointed to the panel advisor role, and she started on 03 April 2025. We look forward to building on the good work completed by the previous panel advisors over the past year. However, despite these changes I believe panel remains effective in supporting and contributing to raising standards, but we strive to improve and to ensure that we continue to have independent oversight of the work placed before panel.

On top of the changes to panel advisor we have welcomed some new members to the central list and said goodbye to some valued colleagues. There was an identified need to add to Panel's Central List to ensure we had enough members available. We identified that there was a lack of diversity within the team, the need to strengthen members with care experience and the need for at least one member with a medical specialism. We have welcomed nine new members to panel with another one in the process of onboarding. Alongside our more established members we are building a panel that represents the local community and has representatives from a variety of backgrounds including, care experienced young people, education, health, mental health, foster carers, youth work and social work which is really exciting and has already led to some challenging but positive discussions - enabling continued good decisions to be made for children.

With all the changes the panel administrator remains a consistent part of the service and invaluable in her role leading the panel administration, delivering in a professional, calm and organised way and keeping things going during this period of transition.

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/s over the past year.

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), and capacity of panel. [NMS 14.3]

There were 29 panel meetings held during this period a decrease from 33 for the previous year. Eight panels were cancelled in this time due to insufficient cases ready for presentation this is an increase from 4 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

The current chair of the fostering panel has been in post since March 2020. He is an experienced fostering and adoption panel chair as well as being brought up in family that fostered and fostered. Panel is supported by two vice chairs. One who has a social work background, and the other who has a legal background specialising in children and families.

We have had nine new members (with another in the process of on boarding), and with two 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 are conducted annually and took place in November 2024. [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 the panel administrator. Members, social workers, and families are highly appreciative of the work she completes prior, during and post panel.

Recruitment of new panel members was mindful of considering applicants with a knowledge of living and working in Croydon or brought something different to panel that was either underrepresented or was missing from the skill base. This has enabled panel to now reflect more consistently the demographics and diversity of the local community. The diversity of panel was something that the panel advisor and I have previously acknowledged required improving and we are pleased we are now moving in the right direction. However, this does not mean we do not have further to go to ensure panel fully reflects the local community whilst keeping the diverse professional backgrounds of panel. Currently there is not a kinship carer member on the central list which panel would benefit from; and whilst we have two panel members with care experience we would welcome more.

Panel Training and Development

Links to recommended/relevant articles/programmes/changes, 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 hopes of having members contributing to future training and development days. Whilst in the first part of the year training had not been formally delivered, we were able to have a full training day on 04 March 2025 where, missing young people and children exploited was presented by Croydon's Missing Manager. This was an area where panel lacked experience, and this was very helpful and has started the conversation about supporting teenagers and their carers. We received training related to grief and the impact on both children and their carers by an experienced practitioner having previously worked for a hospice. There was also an overview provided by panel advisor of the changes from form C to Form K.

Croydon is a paperless borough 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. The panel administrator 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 can lessen the anxiety for some attending, whilst others particularly those who struggle with technology, would prefer face to face. This continues to be under review.

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. Panel members are always asked at the end of the discussions with applicants/carers/ social workers and their managers if they have anything further to add/ask to ensure all areas are fully covered.

The Panel Chair and Panel Advisor have discussions after every panel and whenever necessary in between. Relationships between the Panel Advisor, Team managers and Supervising Social Workers have been strengthened over recent months by the panel advisor becoming fully part of the fostering management team, holding regular meetings and providing 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 electronically via Egress.

This process will be under review in the coming year, to ensure that the process continues to work and that we reduce the amount of paperwork being sent via egress. The head of Service, the Service manager, the Panel advisor, ADM and I meet every two months to discuss any area for development and this has successfully assured we are able to quickly identify what is working and any area's where there is development required.

ADM AND MEETINGS

The Fostering Panel Agency Decision Maker (ADM), Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, has been in post since January 2023. Decisions are being made within seven 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. There has been effective communication between the ADM and previous Panel Advisor, and I am sure this will continue with the new Panel Advisor going forward.

Head of Service and Service Manager

In September 2023 a new Head of Service for Specialist Services was appointed complimenting the Service Manager for fostering in February 2024. These changes have been positive and

have enabled practice to develop particularly around Kinship Carers where panel has seen a significant increase in kinship foster carers being approved. Five kinship carers were approved in 2023/2024 and that number increased to 24 in 2024/2025 with most of these being in the second half of the year. This increase is significant, and this demonstrates not only a government initiative to have more children in kinship placements, but Croydon's commitment to children and their families - ensuring wherever possible children remain within their families' network.

Appraisals

All panel members had their annual appraisal in 2024

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.

The Panel Advisor, alongside her colleague in the Friends and Family Team have been very pro-active in ensuring that kinship cases come to panel rather than being approved outside of panel or being left to become unregulated. They have been mindful of timescales, ensuring that they are able to come to panel before becoming illegal placements. This work, alongside that of

the previous panel advisor, in relation to reg 25 cases has reduced the number of unregulated placements. However, those cases that do (for a variety of reasons) become unregulated now have clear oversight from the ADM with the panel advisor working closely with the relevant teams to ensure they come to panel at the earliest opportunity.

Matching has been an issue this year, and the panel advisor and administrator have been attending service days to encourage CSW's managers and IRO's to focus on the need for matching with consideration to be given once they have been in placement for 12 months or longer or have been made subject to a care order. This will be a priority in the year to come. We acknowledge the pressure on the placements team and Croydon are working to avoid "careful matching" being compromised going forward as we continue to make improvements.

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)] and as part of good practice are being presented to panel on a three yearly basis.

The data below shows the work of panel over the past year.

Fostering Panel Stats 1.3.2024 to 31.3.2025

Number of Panels - 29

Panels Cancelled – 8

No of Cases presented - 119

Type of Meeting	Number of Cases	Outcomes
Assessments	12	12 approved
Connected Persons/ Family & Friends/Kinship	30	24 approved 4 deferred 1 withdrawn 1 negative
First Year Reviews	14	12 re-approved 1 withdrawn 1 postponed
3 Yearly Reviews	20	20 re-approved (1 SOC, 4 returns following deferral, 1 change of circumstances)
Brief Report to Panel	1	
De-registrations	0	
Resignations	12	
Long Term Matches	4	4 approved
Panel updates	2	

Panel returns following deferral	2	
Reg 25	22	

As the chart above shows, many of the figures are similar in some area's but markedly different in others. The numbers that are significantly different from the previous year is the increase in Kinship Carers with 5 in 2023/2024 and 24 approved in 2024/2025 with another 6 coming to panel and either being deferred or not agreed. Resignations were 12, (which is two more than the previous year) however many of these were older carers coming toward the end of their career, several of whom were in their 80's at point of retirement. There were 22 (plus 2 approved outside of panel due to pressing timescales) coming to a total of 24.

In the period 2023 – 2024, there were 33 panels amounting to 125 cases. In 2024 -2025 there were 29 panels and 119 cases, so despite there being 4 fewer panels than the previous year there were only 6 less cases heard. Eight panels were cancelled due to a variety of reasons, however overall, the panel has been very effective, managing high volumes of work.

Themes and Areas for Improvement

Panel continued 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. To support the department, these issues are included in the minutes as actions and are 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. Croydon continues to work to ensure the voice of the child is being thoroughly captured within assessments, reviews and matches.

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 outside of the borough and face additional barriers to access support and training, which contributes to family members

being unclear about their roles as foster carers and everything it entails. Often, they see themselves as grandmother's, grandfather's aunts, uncles and close family friends first and foremost and it can be hard for them to recognise that as foster carers there are additional requirements they need to meet. However, with positive support from SSW's and others they are enabled to make these changes.

It has been a journey for panel to recognise that there may be some difference in the NMS for the kinship carers including understanding that standards such as having your own bedroom may not always be reached within a family placement and it should be more about them having space for themselves within the family's home and the children being supported to live within a family setting that works for them. Croydon continue to work with agencies to ensure the children's needs are met.

It appears that the retention of foster carers could be improved. There have been examples of some foster carers having resigned within 18-24 months of approval. It could be a lack of appropriate matching of children to carers or a need to improve the induction and support of new carers, particularly if they are to be considered to care for children with additional complex trauma related behaviours.

Paperwork being received late remained an issue last year, with the panel advisor consistently having to chase paperwork. However fewer dates are having to be re-arranged which is positive and there does appear to be some positive shift forwards in this area.

There have been some changes in staff over the year; however, Croydon have worked hard to recruit more permanent staff, and as of April this year the Friends and Family Team have recruited permanently, and they should all be in place from June 2025. The changing of staff does have an impact on communication, continuity and ability to build relationship and progressive and collaborative working, therefore the permanent teams coming into place should make a difference in the coming year.

We have seen a reduction in the number of matching cases coming to panel and this is an issue that is a priority going forward, and we hope to see this increase in the coming year.

Having new panel members is exciting and does bring its own challenge; however, this is starting to settle, and the future looks very positive.

Communication with Service

The Panel Advisor attends regular meetings with Fostering Management Team, Panel Chair and ADM. Meetings are held with the SSWs 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 been attending service days and linking with the independent services. There is positive evidence this is working as we are now seeing CSWs and their managers attending panel as standard which is different from previous years.

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.

Feedback from Applicants/Carers March 2024 to date

I quite enjoy the experience and being told the positives was a confidence boost. Panel members all seemed smiley throughout which helped too

In the main felt independent before felt like it wasn't.

The Chairperson spoke rather than a free for all and everybody had information before the meeting

It was definitely a positive experience from the onset as I was made to feel welcome and comfortable.

This was because all details were explained and provided.

Language clear to understand, ambience was receptive, and we felt heard at panel. We felt confident articulating and communicating

We felt we were respected, valued, listen to and appreciated.

Social Worker Feedback

This was a review panel because there were concerns expressed by panel when we first went last year because of the information provided by the FRO. It is this information in the FRO which F/c did not agree with. Although panel were sympathetic to her, they have still asked for her to return to panel after her next FRO. I have slight reservations that panel put more weight in the FRO report rather than the SSW report.

It was on the whole a positive experience – just a few times I wasn't expecting some questions to be asked as this wasn't mentioned on the feedback form received prior to panel.

My experience of fostering panel was positive. The panel members were well prepared, and the chair asked all relevant questions. The couple appeared comfortable and at ease attending panel with their assessing social worker. I attended to observe the couple, as I will be their SSW if the couple are approved by the ADM.

I believe it would be positive and inclusive if there were more panel members from diverse cultural background to reflect our children and the community we serve. It also gives applicants confidence that they are represented, and they are understood from a cultural perspective.

It would also be more interactive if allocated panel members ask one question each rather than one person reading out the question, as it makes one wonder why the other panel members are present.

It would also be very welcoming for all panel members to be present when the applicant is informed of the outcome, and they cheer with a clap of hands.

It would be nice experience for applicants if the panel was face to face as it makes it more personal

rather than on Teams.

Positive, I think Croydon's panel chair does a good job of causing those who attend to feel welcomed and at ease.

If after reading the paperwork submitted – if there are some questions the carers may find difficult to answer – SSW could let them know so they are prepared.

The following comment is not about the panel as such, there was confusion around the required panel paperwork i.e. new pieces of documents being requested on the list i.e. support package, medical advisors report, foster carers report. the matching report includes the foster carers questionnaire as well as support for the placement already from the SSW and SW assessment. the request implies that these are separate documents. Apart from the first panel F/c only have an GP AH2 unless there are changes in their health.

The Panel is doing a good job at acknowledging the good work of all involved and the experience of the applicants have been positive as they felt supported

This was a difficult experience because it was a negative recommendation and very sad for the carer and child. However, I felt that the chair was sensitive to the carer's emotions, but clear about the role of panel and the rationale for their recommendation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Guidance 5.2 states that; *Fostering panels are intended as multi-disciplinary bodies with 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.

The Panel Advisor has worked hard to ensure that gate keeping and chasing continues to ensure cases are compliant and suitable for panel. 11

With the Reg 25 cases being monitored, kinship reports (form C and K) being closely checked, workers being offered support and advice to make changes and to develop positive habits by ensuring they come to panel within timescales, the number of illegal placements continues to decrease. Panel currently do not have the figures of how many illegal placements there are at any given time.

The quality of Foster Carer reviews is mostly good and there is now an audit process in place (from the quality assurance team). And whilst there are some instances where the NMS standards have not been met, this is an improving picture.

Sections 7 and 8 (Health and Safety/Safer Caring Policy) are now routinely completed which is a positive improvement from previous years.

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)