

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you so much for participating in the series of remote meetings held to enable you to share practice and support each other during the Covid 19 pandemic.

We held 3 meetings. The meetings were attended by 45 participants representing 20 Boroughs. ?

The agenda was structured around the foster care journey and covered - recruitment and assessment, placement planning, contact and support. The meeting also referred to the Adoption and Children's (Coronavirus)(Amendments) Regulations 2020.

Please find below bullet point summaries of the main issues and discussion points,

Recruitment of foster carers

- Some reported this is carrying on as normal but with virtual information sessions and assessment visits and interviews.
- Some boroughs are seeing a high level of interest from prospective foster carers, some have not been able to progress because enquirers are self-isolating, and others have seen a drop-in enquiries.
- One borough reported having developed a social media plan for Foster care Fortnight and actively deploying their comms team to reduce anxiety among foster carers
- Some are making use of retired foster carers to meet demand
- Some are reporting an increase in PPO and emergency placement orders
- One borough has drafted protocol to fast track applicants.
- One borough has developed a workbook with homework sheets e.g. one section on 'looking after yourself'.
- Some have ISW's completing assessments.
- One borough said they are planning a social media campaign for Foster Care Fortnight.
- One borough is doing virtual visits but also do visits in person using PPE (mask, gown, gloves and hand sanitiser).

Panel:

- Boroughs are continuing with panels and are busy. Many have conducted virtual panels using a range of media including – Zoom, Teams, Skype. Has worked well where panels are already working electronically. Feedback given from a panel chairs forum that some have successfully trialled audio and email panels.
- One panel invites everybody to read and comment on panel papers but only invite a select few to attend the virtual panel. This may not be so much of an issue with Zoom.

- Some have conducted a test virtual panel.
- There seems to be positive feedback about virtual panels.
- Some are using Teams where you can schedule in people to only join for specific points in the meeting.
- Some reported that virtual panel took longer and needed more preparation.
- One borough is holding panel using social distancing of panel members (in a large room).
- There was discussion about security and a comment was made that Teams or Zoom for business are most secure.
- Some panels are getting panel members to send questions to panel beforehand. The chair will then send the questions out in advance to applicants.
- Temporary approvals are being decided on a case by case basis,

Medicals

- Some are inviting a medical nurse to sit at panel.
- Some are using the CoramBAAF AH1 self-assessment health form.
- Many have with the support of the panel medical advisor; written to GPs to ask them to prioritise foster carers applications. They have also asked for GP's to supply any additional information they have available on applicants, a simple printout of dates and medication prescribed can be made readily available. One borough reported that GPs are charging the full amount for medicals (without doing a full assessment with a physical examination).
- One borough has adapted the self-assessment form and added supplementary questions and created space for comments. In addition, they will consult with the medical advisor over any concerns and investigate further with the GP, they are also prepared to arrange face to face contact as appropriately protected if considered necessary.
- Suggestion made for assessing social worker to triangulate medical information and be more robust in assessing health information. They should ask supplementary questions which could include - asking about recent hospital/GP visits, self-medicating etc. Another option is [with relevant permissions] to ask referees to verify health information supplied.
- It was reported that people are not getting GP appointments and generally things are more chaotic in this regard.
- Some boroughs medical advisers will still provide a view on any GP reports even if a full examination has not taken place.
- Advised tracking of cases where medicals are outstanding and get completed before annual review.
- It was advised that applicants should be made aware of the fact that the information supplied via a self-assessment will be subject to corroboration/clarification, and a full medical will be arranged once the situation allows.

DBS

- The Fostering Network brought to the attention of the meeting differing interpretations of the guidance in relation to the relaxation of rules in the amended regulations, they are in consultation with the DfE and will share responses when available. Any info on any challenges in relation to this should be passed on to them
- At this stage in Lockdown boroughs reported that they are getting DBS responses within timescales, but it was acknowledged that this may change and may not be the same for every area.
- Some reported that in general DBS's are most likely to get stuck at Stage 4. It was advised that this could be resolved by asking foster carers to contact the DBS directly because they are entitled to a

response within 10 days. Others use the police check process and LADO's to obtain corroborative evidence to support the process of making recommendations.

Transitions, placement plans, availability and sufficiency

- Photos and videos currently being used. Only essential moves being undertaken.
- One borough has suspended adoption placements during Lockdown. Another has suspended all transition plans for the time being
- One borough is producing a weekly bulletin to update foster carers and encourage them to consider taking placements
- Self-isolation is proving to be testing, one borough is using retired foster carers to offer up to 6 weeks isolation for children.
- When placement breakdowns do occur, some are isolating children before the move and once the transition is made. This is proving challenging.
- Boroughs are putting in place guidance on self-isolation some in relation to prospective long-term matches, or children returning home. This may involve both sides self-isolating during the transition. For instance, agreement is reached that the child socially isolates with their family for 14 days before moving and then isolates with new foster carers for 14 days to accommodate any development of symptoms of Covid 19.
- One borough placed an unaccompanied asylum seeker and the young person agreed to self-isolate in their room.
- Placement visits – some boroughs are still making visits using full PPE to protect all involved
- Most placement plans are still being completed within timescales; remote communications have been beneficial in cutting down travel time.
- Remote communications have also enabled increased supervision frequencies.
- Some reported a reduced list of available foster carers.
- Some boroughs are giving additional payments at this time for taking on placements. Additional allowance for taking those with special needs.
- Some boroughs use a tracker for foster carers available each week and send out a weekly newsletter to foster carers.
- The question was asked about how respite carers can be supported financially at this time when they are not having placements.
- Some staff have offered to help and be approved as temporary carers.
- Some foster carers are taking in additional young people.

Contact

- One borough is using scheduled-in short videos, telephone calls or photos (which are checked by social workers to ensure they do not cause upset). These are not sprung on people but pre-arranged. Not a 'real time' exchange.
- One borough is using its contact workers to arrange contact, with the birth families being the ones to dial in. Others use contact workers as moderators during virtual contact.
- One borough has asked all foster carers to set up a separate Skype name and purchase new sims for contact to maintain confidentiality
- Court cases – judges have not questioned the adequacy of virtual contact.
- Contact is also taking place via facetime/hangouts. Contact officer sets it up (so the foster carer doesn't have to get too involved).
- Some have asked foster carers to set up an activity for contact e.g. - drawing.

- Suggested that foster carers set up a new skype name for contact and/or new sim card. Some have given out cheap phones or lent iPads to birth families for this virtual contact to happen.

Support for foster carers

- Increased telephone contact – weekly calls from social workers, virtual school, CAHMS etc. One service is deploying their comms team to engage with foster carers to reduce their anxiety levels. Some foster carers are almost overwhelmed by the level of support (one reported receiving 9 calls in one day). Need to consider timing of calls? Some reported that they are doing a weekly call to all foster carers and keeping a spreadsheet log, to facilitate monitoring of Covid19 symptoms
- Some have setup enhanced information trackers to identify availability of foster carers. Some have focussed on more regular contact between social workers and access to resources teams to facilitate matching.
- Most visits are conducted virtual, where face to face contact is necessitated some are issuing full or partial PPE.
- Virtual support – groups can be run successfully if they are not too large. One borough invites foster carers to remote meetings with strategic leaders, these are reported as beneficial by all parties.
- One borough is RAG rating each placement – where there may be potential for breakdown e.g. Red – placement gets contact twice weekly.
- Virtual schools are reported to being helpful and proactive in supporting foster carers manage children’s education whilst at home, including virtual tuition on supporting children with homework as well as supply children with educational resources
- Some mentioned that getting children to engage with schoolwork is challenging with some children seeing it as a holiday. Foster carers can request direct access to virtual school support. JA advised that some children in care can continue to attend school and the DfE considers they should do so. Consequently, there is no additional support for boroughs and carers with home learning.
- Many foster carers are using Joe Wicks and other online platforms to support education
- Some foster carers may need support in managing the technical side of remote communications
- Some are reporting that teenagers are not adhering to social distancing rules or requests to stay in and therefore some placements are breaking down.
- Financial support/incentives - some boroughs are providing a lump sum for additional resources, (£100/month is frequently quoted, one borough mentioned £250) or enhanced rates to support the care of children during lockdown. One borough is providing a 40% for foster carers available for placement of children with disabilities
- Government have provided additional monies to support boroughs. Some are using it to support SGO’s/connected persons, others are reporting that they have received government money specifically for foster care, yet other have created a specific Covid 19 budget
- Some are reporting less use of the out of hours borough.
- Foster carers can call therapeutic boroughs for help.
- One borough reported that Mockingbird cluster support groups have moved to virtual monthly and weekly meetings via zoom and is going well.
- More frequent contact – one reported contact now more dynamic.
- Some carers do not want to risk having young people back if they go out (against the rules).
- Sustaining some placements is challenging.
- One borough has a support line so that foster carers (and others) can access help e.g. if struggling to get food or prescriptions.

Training

- Some are delivering pre-approval training online. The Skills to Foster training course has been digitalised; guidance on delivering is being written up and will be available shortly. The Fostering Network has other online courses, available via our website.
- Some consortia are developing remote panel training courses. [South London Partnership Alliance/NLFAC]

Post Covid19

- Once this is over, one borough talked about a discussion with foster carers about what changes have worked for them (and what they would like to keep).

Staff

- Some are having a virtual coffee break for an informal chat. Others are having more regular team meetings, some reporting enhanced supervision occurring.
- Some staff have been asked about redeployment (eg to child protection).

Actions – if any of the items in italics involving sharing of resources apply to you can you please contact Joanna for distribution.

- Request for guidance on WhatsApp use. Does TFN have some? **JA**
- The Fostering Network share joining instructions for members area of website. **JA**
- Skills to Foster digital link to be shared. **JA**
- *One borough mentioned a plethora of online resources and are happy to share.*
- Please share any creative ideas for transition. **ALL**
- One borough has written guidance for applicants attending virtual panel and she will see if she can share with the network.
- Joanna to share the observations that have come in from SE/London panel chairs group. **JA**
- *One borough mentioned resources from the Mental Health Foundation and will share.*
- One foster carer has been told their life and health insurance would be invalid if they take a child with covid19. Joanna to follow up. **JA**

Next meetings

11th June 3.30pm -5pm via Zoom

12th June 2pm-3.30pm via Teams

