

London Covid meeting 11th & 12th June 2020 [Notes]

Thank you to those who were able to join us for the 2nd round of meetings organised for fostering services in partnership with Helen Edwards who kindly chaired the meetings.

Please find below notes from the meetings preceded by action points for your information.

Actions

- Further to the discussion on alleviating anxiety. Dr Woolgar [educational psychologist] will be invited to lead a session on neuro-functioning and its impact on anxiety. We will also look at the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and how services can support fostering households deal with this. Can services please forward any materials/resources they have in relation to managing anxiety and BLM to Joanna for distribution. **HE, JA, All**
- A request was made for anyone willing to share their allegations policies and risk assessments. Thanks to Christine Day [Bexley] for sharing the attached.
- A request was made for information on managing contact within special guardianships.
- A request was made for good practice in dealing with foster carers who are not following Covid guidance appropriately.

Please send any information you are happy to share to Joanna for distribution All

Agenda items

Recruitment, assessment & sufficiency of foster carers

- Foster care fortnight was in May some held successful campaigns with increased interest.
- Many services reported having a good number and quality of enquiries, though this varies from borough to borough. The consensus was that this may be because of a range of factors including increased availability and the emotional drive to help in the crisis
 - One reported embarking on a robust online marketing campaign which resulted in a significant increase in enquiries.

- Another reported being overwhelmed with the level of interest and having to use an expanded pool of inhouse and independent social workers to meet demand for assessments.
 - One service reported more enquiries for March than the rest of the preceding year. Another reported receiving 99 enquiries
 - Many of the new enquiries are from people who are conversant with social media/online platforms.
 - Another reported a significant reduction in the number of asylum-seeking children which has lowered the demand for teenage placements
 - One reported an increased number of babies and large sibling groups coming into care.
- Boroughs are still using virtual assessments in the main, others are introducing a phased return to face to face assessments. Many have run repeat virtual Skills to Foster training.
 - One uses a combination of virtual sessions and visits, applying social distancing criteria. Another conducts virtual assessments but includes 1 face to face visit
 - Social workers are meeting with applicants/fostering households in open spaces including parks where they can observe interactions safely.
- The increased use of social media has had some positive results including –
 - Quicker turnaround on checks, several reported that medicals and DBS's are coming back more quickly.
 - Using Facebook was quoted as having had a positive impact enabling outreach to new audiences. One service will incorporate its use in their recruitment campaigns going forward.
 - Boroughs have been successfully running the new digitalised Skills to Foster pre-approval course
 - Boroughs are not reporting concerns about the sufficiency of new applicants/placements in the immediate future. Though the supply of placements for teenagers is showing signs of decreasing. One borough reported increasing difficulties in finding emergency placements for teenagers. Others are asking non-EDT foster carers to consider emergency placements.

Shielding is having an impact on the availability of at-risk foster carer groups, many foster carers are unsure of the implications of the easing of lockdown on when they can return to fostering and are in need of further guidance.

Placement processes, contact and supervision

- Some boroughs are reporting an increase in baby placements. Others report rising breakdowns in SGO and teenage placements. Some are anticipating a rise in LADO investigations. Concerns have been raised around maintaining

rules and protocols for young people Staying Put. One borough is struggling to place larger sibling groups.

- There are reports of increasing numbers of staff taking early retirement or resigning.
- Some foster carers will not take new placements unless the child has been in self isolation for 14 days.
- Contact remains a challenge – particularly baby placements given the high level of physical contact involved. Many are looking at how to restart face to face contact. Several reported pressure from courts to restart face to face contact.
 - One has opened a temporary dedicated residential unit which can accommodate teenagers, PAC and EDT placements, pending alternative arrangements being put into place.
 - One raised concern about maintaining confidentiality given the increased reliance on foster carers facilitating remote contact
 - Another is looking at how to make contact centres more family friendly e.g. turning social distancing into a fun activity, creating hug bubbles
 - One reported that a placement ended because the foster carer was unwilling to facilitate face to face contact with birth father.
 - One reported that unannounced visits are done virtually, including asking the foster carer to test fire alarms, to give a view of the first aid kit, look in the shed etc.
 - One reported that many contact centre staff are vulnerable/shielding, so they are quite short staffed.
 - One is considering doing 'child friendly' videos about what the contact centre will look like/how it will work.
 - Foster carers are developing their own protocols including- clothes changed straight away and child put into the bath on return. Though these sorts of protective actions need to be managed sensitively.
- Some issue PPE for contact and visits. Some issue to foster carers, birth families as well as staff
 - Several expressed concerns that when PPE is made available, birth families can be reluctant to use it e.g. an incident at a contact centre where PPE was worn by the parent and then removed during contact. This is causing anxiety among foster carers.
 - Some boroughs are suggesting double bagging the PPE and leaving it for 72 hours before disposing of it.
 - The 'bubble' concept is also creating confusion in some instances. One foster carer wanted respite resumed using support network as part of their bubble – the service concerned interpreted the guidance as being aimed at supporting adults, other services have used the bubble concept for respite arrangements that are explicit within the care plan or court directed. Please see link to more government guidelines –

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/meeting-people-from-outside-your-household>

- It was recommended that boroughs seek legal advice in deciding on the balance between the rights of the child and the rights of the foster carer. In legal terms the right to life which maybe a legitimate concern in some circumstances can take precedence over the right to 'family life'. Foster carers should not be pressured to put themselves at risk, they should be enabled to talk through the issues.
- One borough has sort legal advice on the rights of the child to see its parents to guide risk assessments for contact. Another borough has been directed by the court to resume all face to face contact. They are updating their contact centres to facilitate social distancing.
- Impact of shielding foster carers has resulted in the loss of some foster carers in high risk categories.
- Some foster carers are reported to becoming more rigid in sticking to guidelines
- Home visits – several services are taking tentative steps to reintroduce them, Protocols being developed to include new pre-check and risk assessment templates, applied per visit.

Support for foster carers, children and staff

- Many are reporting that supporting foster carers to support each other has been effective. This includes funding social media connections/technology [e.g. supplying mobile phones or sim cards and upgrading Zoom accounts]
- Services must be mindful that support is needed for all those involved in fostering. Community care has published figures that show that social workers are more likely to be impacted by coronavirus than members of the general population. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2020/06/28/21-social-workers-died-covid-19-show-official-figures/>
- Services have also expressed concerns about young people taking risks as evidence by the recent events in South London. Foster carers are still expressing anxiety about accepting new placements especially teenage placements and managing issues with those Staying Put. Boroughs are reporting that offering guidance reassurance and training has been helpful in reducing anxiety.
- Virtual support groups are proving helpful, tips for success include
 - Running smaller more frequent groups – these have encouraged deeper more effective discussion and support
 - Enabling foster carers to support each other by facilitating contact between them
 - Involving senior managers foster carers are feeding back that this has been beneficial.

- Boroughs are continuing to provide financial support/incentives to foster carers
- - One borough pays foster carers an additional £100/week, the average increased payment is between £20-25/week. One has made a one off payment of £500 to all fostering households. The Fostering Network is campaigning for governments to provide financial support for foster carers particularly retainers for those not able to take placements due to the pandemic. More information can be found on our website [#FundFosterCarers]
- Other forms of support include-
 - Bereavement counselling
 - Weekly phone calls
 - Online yoga for foster carers.
 - Panel training
 - HMRC are making grants available for those foster carers signed up to self-assessment (this is calculated automatically, once a foster carer meets the criteria. The first tranche of funds is available up till 21st July 2020. More information can be found at

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-coronavirus-covid-19-self-employment-income-support-scheme#eligible>

- Home-schooling is reported to be particularly challenging for those where English is not their first language and for some older foster carers who find the technology difficult.
- Some discussion around BAME community and the impact of Black Lives Matters messaging. Concerns were raised about managing anxieties the issue was causing children/young people and the need for services to support fostering households and c/yp with this. The North London consortium has provided foster carers with training. A request was made for materials and resources to help services deal with these issues as well as a dedicated focus on this at a future meeting. It was also felt this should be looked at alongside issues arising in cross cultural placements and the impact of stereotyping. Agreed that Joanna would coordinate this and feedback.
- In relation to special guardians some consortia are using the Adoption Support Fund to facilitate the development of new support initiatives. Others have included special guardians in the support offered to foster carers including weekly phone calls. Attention was drawn to the support available from organisations including – Grandparents Plus, Family Rights Group, The National Association of Therapeutic Parents.

- Virtual Schools continue to be praised for the support they are providing during the pandemic,
 - in one instance the VS and HOS jointly participated in an online support group to which foster carers brought their concerns. The session was very successful.
 - Several services described the support from their VS as exceptional. They have ensured that every eligible child/young person has been supplied with a laptop. They have actively liaised with schools to ensure c/yp are given set assignments as appropriate and supported foster carers with guidance on home schooling. They have put on VS surgeries for foster carers. They have supported Education Champions to offer additional support to those in need.

A few VS have been criticised for not being as supportive. Concerns were raised about

- the limited support available to foster carers who have English as a second language
 - limited support in alleviating anxieties about and providing tools to support home schooling
- A request was made for shared practice on LADO processes.
 - Covid testing- now available for non-symptomatic staff and foster carers. An example given of a test organised for a mother and child prior to placements. Others reported some foster carers self-funding anti-body tests

TFN – membership/support

The Fostering Network helpline is open additional hours.

Members of The Fostering Network can call us on 020 7401 9582. We are open as usual from 10 am-3 pm, Monday to Friday and also now from 7:30-9pm on Tuesday.

Ellie mentioned additional online training for foster carers, details here:

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/training-and-events>

Please get in touch with Ellie at The Fostering Network if you are members and would like to arrange a tax session on zoom for your foster carers
 ellie.henderson@fostering.net

Next meeting will be a presentation on Executive Functioning and a discussion around the practice implications of the BLM movement – 30th July 2020 10.30-12.30 via Zoom.

Invite to follow.