

London Covid 19 Forum: 29/30th September 2020

Attendees - Abigail Adieze [LBWF], Natalie Bugeja [Achieving for Children], Carol Balfe [LBBD] Monica Timariu [Greenwich], Rita Adjei [Havering] Chris Christophides [NLFPC], Sally [Ealing] Julie Fedak [Ealing] Sharon Vickers [LBTH], Ana Calderau [Greenwich], Mussarat Gul, Sharon Vickers [LBTH], Olaitan Aregbesola [Lewisham], Gloria Samuels[Redbridge] Suzette Durand [Newham].

Helen Edwards[chair] Joanna Adande [notes]

Apologies – Gifty Green, Jonathan Williams, Pinaki Ghoshal, Ana Parr, Caroline Cutts, Hannah Wyard, Heather Flinders, Jacinta Kane, James Thomas, Janet Bailey, Jenny Rowlands, Karen Gibbings, Kelly Henry, Kokila Chauhan, Monique Lindsay, Nancy Pinthieve, Peter Tolley, Richard Baldwin,

Request made for the Public Law Working Group recommendations on best practice re SGO's to be included on the agenda.

Joanna went through The Fostering Network September [report attached].

Update on report

The Fostering Network have been in discussion with the DfE and are anticipating further guidance on Covid 19 amendments extensions and the Rule of 6. It is important to stress that the situation is very fluid, and information shared today may be overtaken by events. Our website remains a useful source of the most current developments. [See attached for instructions on member access].

Ofsted are continuing to engage with services, and it was brought to our attentions that some London boroughs been invited to take part in pre inspection conversations, further details will be shared as things progress.

In the light of the government's responses to the pandemic concern was expressed about the lack of understanding/responsiveness to the social demographics and the specifics and peculiarities of foster care.

For instance, the Test and Trace app requires ownership of more modern phones, which not all may have access to. It was also felt the government was not fully taking into consideration the impact of children being sent home from school etc.

Impact of Covid 19

- Rule of 6 and its interpretation generally and in specific circumstances is causing concern
- An example given was in relation to a transition within an SG arrangement in which the SG is retiring from the role. It was felt important to organise a proper introduction to the new placement, but to do so 8 individuals will need to be involved [including the foster carers existing household] Decision reached to go ahead because of the good match and it being in the best interest of the children involved. A thorough risk assessment was undertaken to ensure none of those in the intended bubble were showing symptoms. However, the borough concerned is still not sure whether this is permissible under the Rule of 6.
- Another borough running the Mockingbird model, is looking at concerns raised in relation to the application of the Rule of 6 and impact on fidelity requirements and the central principle of community-based fostering provision
- The Fostering Network's position is that each situation should be dealt with on a case by case basis with a thorough assessment of risk alongside a best interest justification, proper recording and signoff from the senior management team. We are aware of one local authority, that has taken a policy position which excludes children placed from the rule of 6.
- It is also important to keep within the PHE guidelines and balance the emotional and physical health needs of affected parties
- The Fostering Network has been advised that foster carer support groups fall into the support group exemption and can thus meet in groups of up to 15, subject to appropriate safeguards being put into place. This may help those foster carers not able or willing to attend virtual groups. It is not specified that information or training events fall under this exemption
- Agreed that it would be helpful for fostering services to identify key principles that justify why foster carers should be given particular attention in government considerations. Please send any ideas you may have to Joanna for collation and onward transmission to the DfE. **All**

Recruitment and sufficiency

- In terms of sufficiency, though national statistics are indicative of a fall in demand for placements, there is much variation in London. Some boroughs are experiencing increased demand and are actively seeking to expand their pool of foster carers. One borough in consultation with their comms team conducted a 'call out' campaign' using their intranet and council website and alternative social media platforms to target new markets/communities. They are in the process of successful recruiting several new foster carers as a result. Effective remote working/IT systems increase the success rate of recruitment campaigns. Working in partnership across services is also noted as increasing success rates.
- In the light of continuing dependence on virtual assessment processes, panel members are stressing the importance of assessors triangulating and corroborating information gathered.
- Doorstep visits during the virtual tour are also recommended as a means of verification
- Some boroughs are continuing with at least one face to face visit during the assessment process to physically examine the environment particularly in relation to health and safety. PPE and other safety precautions are put into place.
- Walthamforest have a pre-visit assessment template which they have kindly offer to share with colleagues. **Abigail**

Education

- The return to school process is variable among differing educational establishments. Most are risk averse and sending children home at the earliest signs of risk in some cases this involves individual classes, in others whole year groups.

- Feedback suggests that overall foster carers are supporting children in returning to school. Foster carers of younger children who may be less able to comply with PHE guidance are being urged to be more vigilant. Many foster carers using the guidelines themselves e.g. one was able to determine that when a child is sent home by school – the individual child can be isolated rather than the whole household.
- There are concerns about difficulties in accessing tests, children not being able to bring books home and increased reliance on virtual learning/resources

Diversity focus – gender identity discussion

Gender identity increasingly topical issue- the gender identification bill laid before Parliament was not successful, but raised the profile of and focussed debate in this area.

Gender identity encompasses a wide range of people including those identifying as – transgender, gender neutral, non-binary, agender, pangender, third gender etc. The BBC created a series of nine films in which they claimed there are at least 100 genders and there is evidence that children are seeking in record numbers to change their gender.

The Equality Act 2010 – requires organisations not to discriminate based on gender reassignment.

Questions for consideration

- How is your organisation compliant with the Act?
- Have your documents been modified to reflect gender identity and enable people to select how they wish to self-identify?
- Have policies been put in place for staff and foster carers to enable them to comply with gender identity issues?
- What training has your service got in relation to gender identity?
- What support are you able to provide to a child/young person who is questioning their gender?

Responses [good practice]

- Form F assessments- suggestion to use the term ‘any gender’ which is more inclusive
- Include gender identity on the agenda for interactions with existing and prospective foster carers.
- Be sensitive to and develop strategies to shift thinking within local communities that may be more unwilling to positively engage with the concept of gender identity on cultural or religious grounds
- Important to put on the agenda in team meetings at all levels, encourage the use of appropriate and inclusive language, support FIRO’s to explore these issues in reviews
- More needs to be done in terms of supporting foster carers and young people
- Some have already begun to embed the use of inclusive terminology such as ‘any gender’ in documents and processes [assessment, panel, training, supervision] One borough includes it in the description of terms of approval for foster carers by stating – ‘any children not either gender’
- Need to ensure application forms in the recruitment process are also gender identity inclusive. Pre-approval training materials need to be amended to acknowledge gender identity **Joanna to note**
- Need for sensitivity in how information is shared about individual children experiencing identity issues or transitioning in meetings; to respect confidentiality and protect them. A specialist support group for foster carers looking after children in these situations was requested. **Joanna to share with her team**
- Need for a focus on the problems around automatic medicalisation of children/young people exploring their identity: without recourse to alternative solutions for them.

- Training on gender identity
- Request made to share knowledge of training available on gender identity **All**
- TACT make use of a specialist trainer on gender identity and supporting children
- New Family Social provide training on transgender issues, they have usual resources on their website.
- Helen has some useful links/resources that she will share Helen
- Ana will also share a useful link Ana
- Helen and Joanna to explore possibility of a virtual workshop on transgender issues for members of this forum.

Public Law working group recommendations on SGOs

How can services best implement the recommendations in relation to assessment frameworks, support plans and preparation/training?

Suggestion made for -

- Joint work with NLFPC and the East London Consortium post pandemic and collaborative work between individual authorities in the meantime
- Helen and Joanna to explore the possibility of a workshop to be set up for forum members

Next meeting - November & December date tbc.

Suggested agenda items

- Feedback on Covid
- Christmas holidays and planned breaks
- Diversity [standing item]
- Other practice issues arising

If you have any other agenda items or suggestion for focused sessions please forward to Joanna. **All**