

2 June 2020		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Support Provided to Foster Carers During Covid-19		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Dan Jones, Service Manager, Fostering and Adoption		
Accountable Assistant Director: Joe Tynan, Assistant Director, Children's Services		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report is to update Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee on the support that has been provided to foster carers during Covid-19.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That Corporate Parenting Members are informed about the support given to Foster Carers approved by Thurrock Council during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Thurrock Council is a Fostering Agency registered with Ofsted. We approve, monitor and support Foster Carers who in turn support Looked After Children.

2.2 Foster carers usually receive a package of practical and financial support to meet the needs of these children. The non-financial support is as follows:

- Regular Face to Face Supervision with a qualified Social Worker
- Clinical Supervision with a specialist therapist as required
- Training relevant to their role
- Support groups
- An out of hours phone line to provide advice and support at evenings and weekend
- A regular allowance paid per child to meet the costs of care and a fee payment

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 Like many areas of the council, the Fostering Service has needed to review its practice in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the government's guidance to remain at home. Foster families, like many families, have faced the challenges of living together without the usual opportunities to get out, access services and enjoy the usual routines of family life. Our approach has been to seek to provide services as usual to Foster Carers who continue to care for children during the pandemic.

3.2 On the 24th April 2020 the government amended our regulated duties to Looked After Children via The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 and it reduces our obligations in a number of areas. These changes are temporary until 25th September 2020. Key changes that impact on foster carers are:

- Approval of 'Fostering to Adopt' placements by Nominated Officer, no longer required
- Temporary Approval of family and friends now lasts 24 weeks
- Ofsted inspections will be less frequent for children's homes, Independent Fostering Agencies and Voluntary Adoption Agencies.
- Local Authority visits in relation to children who are privately fostered becomes "reasonably practicable"
- Adoption Agencies are no longer required to establish adoption panels, and fostering panels become optional.
- Suitability of foster carers can be assessed in the absence of health information and criminal records checks (these still have to be obtained although it is not clear when)
- Fostering services are no longer required to report infectious disease to Ofsted

The full regulations can be found here:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/445/contents/made>

3.3 Officers have considered the implications of these changes, taken legal advice and consulted regionally and nationally with Local Authorities. The amendments were because of an envisaged depletion in the workforce due to Covid-19 which so far has not been the case in Thurrock. Whilst we have seen some approved Foster Carers withdrawing from accepting new placements, this has not been the norm. The guidance is that only where the normal practice standards are not practicable or enforceable, should we make use of the amendments. In Thurrock there will be no relaxation in timescales without approval at a Strategic level on a case-by-case basis. The changes to our approach to Foster Carers and the expectations upon them is set out below.

3.4 The following amendments have been made to the usual support services:

- Regular supervision is now via telephone/video calls to ensure social distancing is maintained where it is not safe or practical to visit face to face.
- Clinical supervision is provided in a similar way, as required.
- Support groups have moved online and have had speakers such as:
 - The Designated Officer, on allegations
 - The Fostering Network, on finances and tax
 - The Strategic Lead and Service Manager
- Annual reviews of approval and attendance at Fostering Panel is now done remotely via teleconference in line with Coram BAAF guidance
- The social work team continues to provide the out-of-hours support service

3.5 Foster Carers are usually expected to facilitate supervised contact between children and their parents via the contact centre at Oaktree. The expectation of direct contact has been suspended whilst the government continues to recommend children do not attend school. Therefore foster carers are no longer expected to take children to contact at Oaktree. Instead they have been asked to facilitate contact via video/telephone call for the vast majority of children. Foster Carers who are comfortable to do so, are facilitating this themselves and if not, the staff at Oaktree are supervising the calls.

3.6 For very young children aged 2 and under, indirect contact with their parents is largely ineffective. We have sought to provide these children with a direct contact service using appropriate safeguards. This includes social distancing for foster carers who are not required to interact with parents/contact staff as they usually would. Foster Carer are not compelled by the service to undertake this contact if they or the children have specific health issues that means they are shielding as a household. The court does have the power to order such contact but has not done so to date. Some Foster Carers have felt uncomfortable about this and this has not been insisted upon.

3.7 All Looked After Children are entitled to continue their education at school. Foster Carers have been provided with detailed advice from the Virtual School as to whether the school place should be taken up or not. Foster Carers have been afforded a good deal of discretion to manage attendance at school as suits the individual needs of the child. Local School and the Virtual School are providing on-line tuition as required.

3.8 Health appointments fall within the description of essential travel provided by the Government. Foster Carers have been expected to attend these appointments and where needed, alternative forms of transport instead of public transport, have been offered. Again for some Foster Carers, this has provoked some anxiety. Our position remains that children should have their health needs met and attend appointments in line with medical advice.

- 3.9 During the Covid-19 pandemic we have issued regular emails to update Foster Carers and keep in touch. This has included relevant advice.
- 3.10 In terms of accepting new placements, this decision is made in consultation with each Fostering Family and approved Foster Carers for Thurrock are not obliged to take a placement at any time without their consent. This is no different during this outbreak and Foster Carers can elect to go on hold if taking additional placements at this time is of concern. The Government's digital portal enables individuals, including Foster Carers, to book a Covid-19 test themselves.
- 3.11 The majority of our Foster Carers continue to open their homes to children needing placements during the lockdown and support the children they have in placement already. We are grateful to them for their continued services.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Members of the Committee are aware of the support provided to Foster Carers approved by Thurrock Council.
- 4.2 Members of the Committee are invited to join Officers in thanking all our Foster Carers for their continued commitment during Covid-19.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 None.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 None

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance - Children's, DSG and Schools, Corporate Finance

Additional funding has been made available to support vulnerable children and people and families during Covid-19. Each are considered on an individual basis. There is a potential for strain on the budget for Children's social care should services be further impacted upon by the virus.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

Thurrock Council is a Fostering Agency regulated by a number of acts and fostering regulations, as well as statutory guidance which provides the legal and statutory framework for our organisation and its activities including;

- Children Act 1989
- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010

On 24th April 2020 the government amended duties to Looked After Children via *The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020* and it permits a relaxation in the Council's obligations in a number of areas. These changes are temporary until 25th September 2020.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Community Development Officer

The Service is committed to practice, which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

- If a significant number of staff were to be affected by Covid-19 the way services are delivered will be reviewed in line with Government guidance to ensure services are continuous with minimum disruption.
- Staff are provided with PPE where required and have received advice on safeguarding their own health.

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

9. Appendices to the report

- None

Report Author:

Dan Jones

Fostering and Adoption Service Manager