

<b>2 March 2021</b>		<b>ITEM: 7</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Support Provided to Foster Carers during Covid-19</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non-Key	
<b>Report of:</b> Dan Jones, Service Manager, Fostering and Adoption		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Joe Tynan, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		
<b>This report is Public</b>		

## Executive Summary

This report is to update Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee on Thurrock's support services provided to Foster Carers. In order to maintain services through the pandemic, much of our offer has moved to an online provision.

### 1. Recommendation(s)

**1.1 That Corporate Parenting Members are informed about the support provided 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 Children Looked After.

2.2 Foster carers 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.
- Foster Carer support groups.
- An out of hour's phone line to provide advice and support at evenings and weekend.

In terms of financial support Foster Carers receive a regular allowance paid

for each child in placement; this is to meet the costs of care and, depending on the carers' status, a fee payment.

### 3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 The Fostering Service has reviewed its practice in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and Government Guidance. Fostering families, like many families, have faced the challenges of living together without the usual options to socialise, access services and activities that form part of normal life. Our approach has been to provide services so far as possible to Foster Carers who continue to care for children during the outbreak.

3.2 We last updated members of this Committee in June 2020 and advised of the following amendments that have been made to the usual support services:

- Regular supervision of Foster Carers was via telephone/video calls to ensure social distancing is maintained.
- Clinical supervision was provided in a similar way and this has been utilised.
- Support groups were provided online.
- Annual reviews of approval and attendance at Fostering Panel has been completed remotely.
- The social work team continued to provide the out of hours support service.

3.3 Since June 2020, there has been much variation in the levels of restriction in place which means that the service has had to adapt frequently. The following is a summary of our practice and support to carers:

- **Regular supervision in person with an allocated Social Worker:** this has continued although the format of supervision has varied according to the relevant restrictions at the time. The service has made use of social distancing guidance to continue direct visits when possible. When this is not possible, video and telephone calls have replaced direct visits. This has been generally well received by carers who find the mixed medium more flexible.
- **Carer Support Groups:** This has operated on Friday mornings and on occasions in the evenings or, as and when necessary. This has been taking place virtually since Covid-19 began. When the group is held within working hours, a member of the team will attend if possible. The Assistant Director, Strategic Leads and the Service Manager have all attended the group at various points to update carers. Video calling is a safe and effective interim measure, until face-to-face groups can resume.
- **Access to a clinical supervisor:** Thurrock has maintained access to a clinical supervisor for foster carers. Like support groups, this has transferred to being online and the uptake here is variable. Foster Carers

are encouraged to use this service and they are able to book in meetings via video call. Some carers are making good use of this service.

- **Training programme for carers:** As a registered fostering agency, Thurrock Council is required to provide training to its carers. Direct training has not been possible so the Council has provided carers with a specialist suite of online learning which has both mandatory and optional training. This has allowed carers to progress their training at their own pace.
- **Access to the Fostering Network:** The Fostering Network is a national organisation for Foster Carers and Thurrock Council provides our approved Foster Carers with membership. During the pandemic the Fostering Network has issued guidance for carers via their [website](#).
- **Financial Package:** The financial offer to Foster Carers was updated in June 2020. This improved the initial fees for those new to fostering and better recognised those carers who are able to offer sibling placements. In the Autumn of 2020 Thurrock Council was proud to announce that from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 Foster Carers approved by Thurrock who have provided placements to children will be exempted from paying council tax in recognition of their service to Thurrock children. The service offers an excellent package that reflects the hard work our Foster Carers do and our gratitude to them.

- 3.4 Foster Carers are usually expected to facilitate supervised contact between children and their parents via the contact centre at Oaktree. There has been considerable change in this area, as the Covid-19 restrictions have varied. Oaktree is open and operating a reduced direct service with an agreed Covid-19 Safe environment. Foster carers are also taking part in supervised indirect contact. The means that children in our care are still able to see family members but the risk to carers is reduced.
- 3.5 All Children Looked After are entitled to continuing 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. Thurrock Council supports the children in our care continuing to attend their school. Foster Carers are able to consult with the Virtual School and allocated Social Worker for a child and agree working at home in specific circumstances. Foster Carers are able to seek advice regarding IT equipment from the child's school.
- 3.6 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 to public transport have been offered. Children continue have their health needs met and attend their appointments.
- 3.7 Sadly the annual fostering awards scheduled for January had to be cancelled along with other social events. We hope to plan something for the summer of 2021 but as it is unclear whether restrictions will be in place, we will offer a 'Spring Fling', via a video call where the work of Foster Carers will be

recognised and thanks given. An in-person event will subsequently be arranged.

3.8 Thurrock Council recognises that Foster Carers provide a vital caring role to local children. This is both the ongoing care they provide and emergency placements. Following initial guidance from the Department of Health and Social Care with regard to vaccinations against Covid 19, Thurrock Council in partnership with local NHS services, took the decision to offer vaccinations to front line carers and staff who are critical to maintaining effective care and support for children. All Thurrock-approved Foster Carers were offered the opportunity to be vaccinated and most accepted that offer. This protects Foster Carers and the children they support.

3.9 It is notable that many 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. We received the following comment from the Foster Carer who co-ordinates the support group:

*"I know we are all used to you thanking us for the job that we do but this time we would like to thank you, so from myself and all us carers I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you! Thank you for listening to us and acting as fast as you did to help us all receive the vaccine; it really has put a lot of minds at rest. Thank you for all your support at this difficult time."*

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

4.1 Members of the Committee are aware of 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**

There are no financial implications to this report.

### **7.2 Legal**

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

There are no legal implications to this report.

### **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)**

- None

## **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

Service Manager – Fostering and Adoption