

Corporate Parenting Committee

Wednesday 25 February 2026

2.00 pm

Ground floor meeting rooms G02 A, B and C, 160 Tooley Street, London
SE1 2QH

Membership

Councillor Jasmine Ali (Chair)
Councillor Charlie Smith (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Mohamed Deen
Councillor Natasha Ennin
Councillor Emily Hickson
Councillor Sarah King
Councillor Maria Linforth-Hall

Reserves

Councillor Sunil Chopra
Councillor Sabina Emmanuel
Councillor Sunny Lambe
Councillor Bethan Roberts
Councillor Kath Whittam
Councillor Irina Von Wiese

Non-voting co-opted members

Dr Mark Kerr and Rosamond Marshall

INFORMATION FOR MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Access to information

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Contact

Beverley Olamijulo on 020 7525 7234 or email: paula.thornton@southwark.gov.uk or beverley.olamijulo@southwark.gov.uk

Members of the committee are summoned to attend this meeting

Althea Loderick

Chief Executive

Date: 17 February 2026



Corporate Parenting Committee

Wednesday 25 February 2026

2.00 pm

Ground floor meeting rooms GO2B and C, 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

Order of Business

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MOBILE PHONES

Mobile phones should be turned off or put on silent during the course of the meeting.

PART A - OPEN BUSINESS

1. APOLOGIES

To receive any apologies for absence.

2. CONFIRMATION OF VOTING MEMBERS

A representative of each political group will confirm the voting members of the committee.

3. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

In special circumstances, an item of business may be added to an agenda within five clear days of the meeting.

4. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Members to declare any interests and dispensation in respect of any item of business to be considered at this meeting.

5. MINUTES

1 - 8

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the open section of the meeting held on 22 October 2025.

Item No.	Title	Page No.
6.	SPEAKERBOX VERBAL UPDATE AND REPORT ON ACTIONS (2.10PM - 2.40PM)	
	Career and education mentoring, young people's vision and standards of care within the fostering service.	
7.	CORPORATE PARENTING SUBSTANCE MISUSE REPORT (2.40PM - 2.55PM)	9 - 14
8.	CORPORATE PARENTING ANNUAL REPORT (2.55PM - 3.10PM)	15 - 48
9.	SOUTHWARK HOMES FOR SOUTHWARK CHILDREN UPDATE / FOSTER CARE REPORT - RECRUITMENT AND RETIREMENT (3.10PM - 3.25PM)	
10.	ADOPTION ANNUAL REPORT (3.25PM - 3.40PM)	49 - 122
11.	INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25 (3.40PM - 3.55PM)	123 - 148
12.	CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE WORKPLAN 2025-26 (3.55PM - 4.00PM)	149 - 152
13.	CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY 2026 - 2030 - NOTE FROM PREVIOUS MEETING	153 - 157

**ANY OTHER OPEN BUSINESS AS NOTIFIED AT THE START OF
THE MEETING AND ACCEPTED BY THE CHAIR AS URGENT.**

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

The following motion should be moved, seconded and approved if the sub-committee wishes to exclude the press and public to deal with reports revealing exempt information:

“That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1-7, Access to Information Procedure rules of the Constitution.”



CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on Wednesday 22 October 2025 at 2.00 pm at the Council Offices, 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Jasmine Ali (Chair)
Councillor Natasha Ennin
Councillor Emily Hickson
Councillor Maria Linforth-Hall

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor John Batteson
Dr Mark Kerr (subject matter expert)

OFFICER SUPPORT: Helen Woolgar, Assistant Director, Safeguarding and Care
Elaine Reid, Head of Service: Permanence and Resources
Daisy May-James, Permanence Lead Service Manager
Joy Edwards, Designated Nurse for Looked after Children
Joy Hopkinson, Head of Safeguarding & Community Services, Governance and Assurance (legal)
Usha Singh, Virtual Head Teacher
Sophie James, Team Manager Fostering and colleagues from team
Poppy Laurens, Service Development Officer
Jackie Young, Social Worker
Ekta Gupta, Children Rights and Participation
Representatives of Speakerbox
Kenny and Rosamund, Foster Carers
Paula Thornton, Constitutional Officer

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Charlie Smith and Mohamed Deen.

Dr Jenny Taylor, consultant clinical psychologist and Dr Stacey Legere-

Smith, designated doctor for looked after children also submitted their apologies.

2. CONFIRMATION OF VOTING MEMBERS

The members listed as present were confirmed as the voting members for the meeting.

3. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

The chair gave notice of the following late item:

- Item 9. Fostering annual report 2024-25.

Reasons for urgency and lateness will be specified in the relevant minutes.

4. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were none.

5. MINUTES

Actions arising:

Southwark Homes for Children. Noted the request that the council would write formally to central government, detailing the points that were raised at the committee meeting on 16 July 2025 to be actioned.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2025 were approved as a correct record and signed by the chair.

6. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR FOR THE CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE 2025-26

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Charlie Smith be elected vice-chair for the corporate parenting committee for 2025-26.

7. **SPEAKERBOX VERBAL UPDATE AND REPORT BACK ON ACTIONS**

Speakerbox provided an update to the corporate parenting committee on key activities and priorities.

The focus was to empower young people and give them a voice and identify barriers in the system to this happening.

Education

The challenges of secondary school for young people and pressures of academic demands, against the possible instability in a home and care situation which may impact consistency and guidance throughout the various stages of education.

Quote from one of the young people “We don’t get a built-in map to help navigate these challenges.”

Mentorship

The importance of having someone within the school environment for the young person to understand their challenges and have their best interests at heart and to also support their wellbeing. The importance of consistent and positive role models that young people can relate to was emphasised.

One of the representatives of Speakerbox was able to outline the support that she had received from a mentor from the Kings Trust who helped her navigate her path towards university, also providing support and help for her brother. Their support was invaluable by having someone to regularly check in on progress and provide helpful guidance.

Speakerbox proposal

Speakerbox presented an outline of their proposal to the committee which addresses:

- Progress and review
- Outcomes and reflection and
- Feedback on success of project.

Moving forward

- Meetings accessibility

- Agreed plan of actions
- Comments and reflection

Comments arising from presentation:

- Noted different types of mentors and the need for them at the different stages of the child and young person's life
- Reference to peer mentorship and how effective this can be
- Acknowledged key that a young person has someone they confide in and talk which may be a combination of professional and peer support mentors.
- Query on PEP (personal education plan) form and if addresses mentorship/support. Confirmed that there is a section within the form on careers, but officers can work with Speakerbox to ensure collaborate with the relevant support / mentorship needed. Comment made that this is needed before 16.

The committee were also able to give feedback of the transformational impact of mentors within their life and how this directed and shaped their paths and opportunities in life. Also commented, about the importance to give safe spaces for young people to talk.

8. ANNUAL VIRTUAL HEADTEACHER'S REPORT 2024-2025

Usha Singh, virtual headteacher outlined the main points and issues arising from the annual report 2024-25.

Usha explained the training and support that was being given to teachers to ensure that the correct coding for recording absence was used, so that the figures were accurate and provided a true reflection of the absenteeism.

The intense and focused work undertaken the virtual school on absenteeism and exclusions / suspensions was explained to the committee and examples given to provide context.

Examples of activities outside the school environment were give including a trip Sadler Wells theatre to see "Luna" and the Unicorn Theatre to see "There is a bear in my chair".

An impressive number (68) students also attended summer tuition.

Summary of issues / questions raised:

- A councillor raised a query relating to the exclusion of a young person due to non-attendance that was attributable to ill health. Details of the case to be passed to the relevant officer / cabinet member
- Query to reason for increase in lack of attendance of girls, which was partly explained in the context of a national trend and use of social media quoted as an example of a possible factor
- Reference to the impending “Staying Close” legislation and impact on key stage 5 placements out of borough
- Absenteeism in exam period and question relating to support for the children/young people to help with the anxiety and stress arising. It was explained that support is provided including officers within the team that are trained to provide this support.

RESOLVED:

1. That virtual headteacher’s report for Southwark Looked After Children be noted.
2. That the next committee receive a report back on exclusions.

9. FOSTER ANNUAL REPORT

It was not possible to circulate this report five clear days in advance of the meeting as the content required finalisation to ensure accuracy and completeness. The fostering annual report included detailed performance data, service developments, and strategic updates which needed to be reviewed and amended prior to publication. The delay was necessary to ensure the report reflected the most current and correct information for consideration by the corporate parenting committee and the chair agreed to accept the item as urgent on this basis.

The fostering team were present to present the annual report to committee members.

Additionally, foster carers were also present to provide details of their work with children and the support provided to enable them to undertake their role.

In terms of recruitment, the team talked about the efforts and initiatives being undertaken on all levels to promote recruitment including attending the Lambeth country show, working with and

building relationships with the community. It was explained that social media does not always convert to numbers of foster carers coming forward and various initiatives have been undertaken including the use of respite foster carers which helps to provide an avenue into foster care. Such initiatives can provide diversity for the cohort and a means for carers to become foster carers on a long-term basis.

Summary of points raised by the foster carers who attended the meeting:

- Great experience of support provided by the foster carers team and the provision of in-depth training
- Experience of dealing with fostering children in crisis and also being provided with support from the team to deal with any trauma / difficulties arising.

Queries / issues arising from presentation:

- Life story books use and providing guidance for carers to complete
- Concern about the recruitment levels, set against the likely retirement figures of current group of foster parents
- Query about whether increased money for foster parents would make a difference on recruitment but it was explained that the 24/7 support provided for carers was shown to be an invaluable resource and helps retain carers
- Reference to 'connected carers' and use of other settings like the school to connect young people with carers in this setting. Joy Edwards also referred to the use of the resource of hospitals (use of doctors and other health professionals who may be interested in providing care).
- Officers explained that the primary focus always should be to maintain relationships with the families and foster care is not seen as a permanent care solution.

RESOLVED:

1. That the annual report of Southwark Fostering Service for 2024-25 be noted.
2. That the committee receives a report to the next meeting on foster care recruitment (including communication strategy) including retirement of foster carers from the current cohort.

10. CORPORATE PARENTING STRATEGY UPDATE 2026 - 2030 UPDATE

This item was deferred until the next meeting of the corporate parenting committee.

11. CORPORATE PARENTING SUBSTANCE MISUSE REPORT

This item was deferred until the next meeting of the corporate parenting committee.

12. EMPLOYABILITY PATHWAY UPDATE

Poppy Laurens, service development officer presented this update report to committee to provide progress since July 2025.

Councillor John Batteson (cabinet member for climate emergency, jobs and business) was also present for this item and was able to confirm a commitment of funding and to advise that the priorities had increased the numbers of young people working. Personalised support can be provided to young people, and success had been achieved in opening up opportunities in the council and civil service.

The issue of some care leavers not securing an automatic interview as part of the council's recruitment was raised. However, it was explained that the automatic interview was only granted when essential criteria were met. The idea was raised that in the case of an interview not being granted it would be useful to give the care leaver feedback and support to move forward / support to get the necessary qualification or experience needed.

RESOLVED:

1. That the contents of the report be noted.
2. That officers investigate the points raised and follow-up action for the care leaver if not granted an interview as part of the council's recruitment (suggested action to provide feedback and support to gain necessary qualification/experience).

13. CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE - WORKPLAN

RESOLVED:

1. That the work plan be noted.
2. That the draft agenda for the February be noted as follows:
 - Substance misuse report (deferred from 22 October meeting)
 - Corporate parenting strategy (deferred from 22 October meeting)
 - Report on exclusions and suspensions data and addressing concern raised about the increased absenteeism of girls arising from the annual headteacher report to committee 22 October 2025
 - Fostering recruitment and invite communications team (arising from 22 October meeting)
 - Annual independent reviewing officer report
 - Adoption annual report and
 - Southwark homes for Southwark children update.

The meeting ended at 4.45pm.

CHAIR:

DATED:

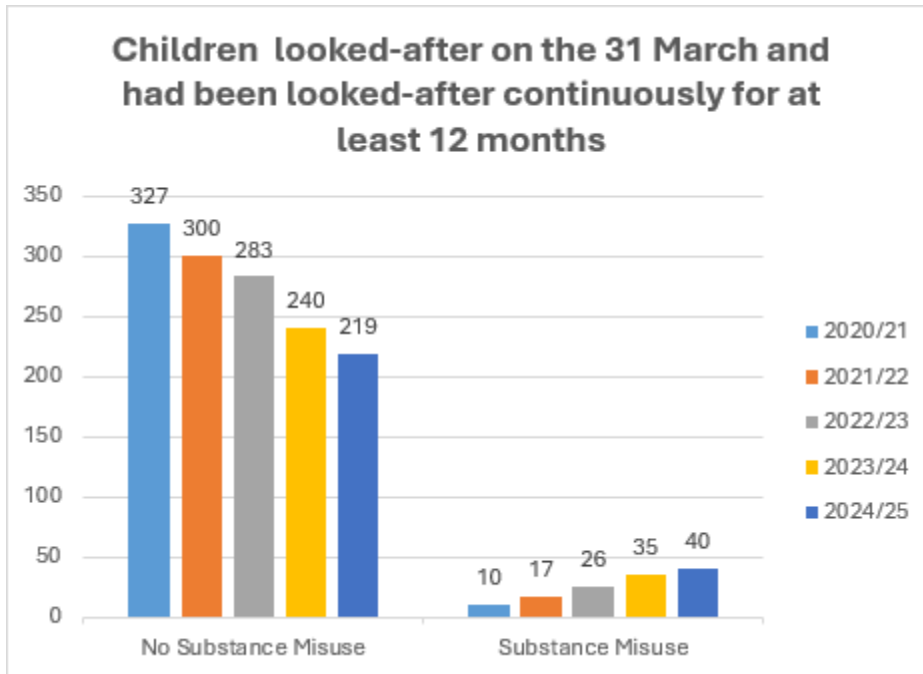
Meeting Name:	Corporate Parenting Committee
Date:	25 February 2026
Report title:	Short report – Substance misuse
Ward(s) or groups affected:	Children Looked After Southwark
Classification:	Open
Reason for lateness (if applicable):	N/A
From:	Dr Stacy John-Legere Designated Dr for Looked after Children, Southwark Joy Edwards Designated Nurse for Looked After Children and Careleavers, Southwark

RECOMMENDATION(S)

1. Review parity of offer for Southwark CLA placed outside of the borough boundaries
2. In partnership with Public Health: Monitor emerging substance trends and adapt responses accordingly including acceptance of intervention
3. Improve data quality and validation across health and social care systems with benchmarking of Southwark's data against statistical neighbours and SEL boroughs
4. Further report on this item at a future Corporate Parenting Committee

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

5. This is a focused look at substance misuse reported for Southwark children in care requested following review of the trend noted below.
6. Over the last three years Southwark's percentage has increased from 8%, to 13%, and then most recently 15.4%. This is in comparison to 3% for England, 6% for statistical neighbours, and 5% for London.



7. 100% of those identified were offered an intervention; 30% received an intervention for 2024/25. This underpins the relative high percentage of CLA refuse intervention at point of offer.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

8. **SSD903 Definition of Substance Misuse:** The SSDA903 return defines substance misuse in looked-after children as the use of drugs, alcohol, or other substances in a way that is harmful or hazardous to health. This includes both legal substances (e.g., alcohol, tobacco) and illegal or psychoactive substances. The data collection focuses on identifying children who are known to misuse substances during their time in care.
9. Use vs Misuse in Adolescents: **Use** refers to any consumption of substances, including legal (e.g., alcohol, tobacco) or prescribed drugs. It may be experimental or recreational. **Misuse** occurs when substance use negatively impacts health, education, relationships, or safety. It includes regular use despite harm, polydrug use, and dependency.
10. Stages of misuse:
- Experimentation – infrequent, peer-influenced use
 - Regular use – predictable patterns
 - Risky use – physical, psychological, or social harm
 - Dependence – compulsive use with withdrawal symptoms
11. Use of substances in children and young people aged below 18 years is recorded in the SSD903 return for Southwark as per the definition above.

National Picture (Ref: [Children and young people's substance misuse treatment statistics 2023 to 2024: report - GOV.UK](#))

General Population (England)

12. In 2023–2024, 14,352 children under 18 were in treatment for substance misuse. 87% reported cannabis use; 39% alcohol; 9% ecstasy; 8% powder cocaine. 80% began using substances before age 15. 49% had a mental health treatment need

Looked-After Children (England)

13. Significantly more likely to misuse substances than peers. Contributing factors include trauma, instability, poor mental health, and exposure to environments where substance use is normalized. Girls in care report higher rates of self-harm and sexual exploitation linked to substance misuse

Local Picture (Southwark)

14. Caution is required in interpreting data as absolute numbers of young people is relatively small, with small variations in number causing large percentage swings.
15. Summary information provided: main substance misuse in adolescents is cannabis. The overall numbers of adolescents accessing services have increased over the last 3 years with investment in the young person's offer as below.

Local Picture (Southwark CLA)

16. Case note review of the cohort included in the SSD903 return for 2024/2025 determined that cannabis was the most commonly used substance. An increasing proportion disclosed vaping; whilst use of nitrous oxide and cocaine were noted in a minority. The majority of young people reporting substance misuse were older teenagers 17 years old.
17. The commissioned offer from CGL is provided to young people resident within the borough boundary. A large proportion of Southwark CLA are placed outside of this; therefore, those requiring substance misuse services need to be referred onto their local service based on address.
18. Data quality issues were identified in the deep dive. The deep dive also demonstrated positively that the IHA and RHA assessments are holistic and young people are honest in the assessment – and it provides a good opportunity for discussion, signposting even though referrals not always accepted

Southwark Substance Use Local Offer provided by Change Grow Live - [Young People - Southwark | Change Grow Live](#)

19. **Universal offer** – provision of early intervention/prevention assemblies and workshops in schools and other services to increase CYP awareness of substance use and its harms and provide strategies for reducing risk and keeping safe
20. **CYP aged 10 – 17 years with drugs and / or alcohol support need** – confidential, non-judgmental support including advice and information about

substance use to help CYP to reduce risk and keep safe as well as tailored support to enable CYP to make changes to substance use and improve wellbeing.

21. **CYP aged 17 years and under affected by the substance use of another person (including family members / friends)** - confidential, non-judgmental support including advice and information about substance use to help CYP to reduce risk and keep safe as well as tailored support to enable CYP to manage the impact of someone else's substance use.
22. **Parents and families affected by someone else's substance use including the substance use of a child** – confidential support to help parents and families understand their child's substance use and how best to support them. The offer also includes support for the individual in their own right as a person affected by someone else's substance use.
23. **Professionals offer** – The service provides training and workshops on request from partner agencies to upskill staff on CYP substance use including how to refer to treatment. A service is also available for professionals seeking advice and guidance about a CYP's substance use that they are working with.

Southwark Substance Use Local Offer provided by CLA Health Service

24. Southwark CLA Health Service complete the IHAs and RHAs for the vast majority of Southwark CLA wherever they are placed, allowing for consistency in exploration of any substance use and offer of intervention.
25. Clinicians are routinely asking about substance use, and most young people disclosed use openly. Those identified were generally signposted to support services. The statutory health assessment process remains a key opportunity for early intervention.

Southwark Substance Use Local Offer provided by Southwark Children's Services

26. Embedded experienced substance misuse worker in social work care teams and co-ordination with CGL. They are supported by a dedicated CGL parent and family lead. Referral pathways in place to CAMHS and specialist services
27. Review at looked after children reviews – monitored by Independent Reviewing officer

Next Steps – update to be shared at future Corporate parenting

28. Uptake of intervention to be specifically reviewed and linked with harm reduction strategy. Consideration of transitional offer provided to Southwark Careleavers since majority identified are aged 17 years.
29. Developing and strengthening partnership working between CLA services and CGL for in borough CLA to improve rates of treatment uptake and to reduce harm and risk for CLA that do not wish to engage at the point of offer (eg.

provision of harm reduction information etc.

30. Specific review of offer provided to Southwark CLA resident outside of the borough boundaries
31. Additional data analysis to be presented with 2025/2026 Southwark CLA Health Annual Report – to include whole cohort deep-dive and case note analysis.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts

Community impact statement:

Substance misuse among CLA has significant implications for community safety, cohesion, and long-term wellbeing. Young people affected by substance misuse are at increased risk of criminal exploitation, poor educational outcomes, and unstable housing. Addressing this issue through early intervention and integrated services is pertinent to improving outcomes.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

CLA are disproportionately affected by substance misuse due to socio-economic disadvantage, trauma, and systemic inequalities. Girls in care face heightened risks of self-harm and exploitation. A targeted response must consider intersectionality — including race, gender, disability, and economic status — to ensure equitable access to support. Improving data quality and service engagement will help reduce disparities and promote inclusion

Health impact statement

Substance misuse poses direct risks to physical and mental health, including dependency, injury, and long-term illness. The low intervention rate (30%) among identified Southwark CLA suggests missed opportunities for prevention and treatment. Strengthening health assessments, referral pathways, and trauma-informed care will improve outcomes. Enhanced collaboration between health and social care is essential to address unmet needs and reduce harm.

General guidance

32. NICE Quality Standard QS165
33. “From Harm to Hope” national drug strategy
34. Youth Offending Services screening and support

Climate change implications

35. None.

Resource implications

36. None.

Legal/Financial implications

37. None.

Consultation

38. Craig Benning, Head of Performance and Systems, Quality Assurance and Practice Development | Children and Families
39. Southwark Public Health: Donna Timms, Unit Manager – Drug & Alcohol Action Team, Integrated Commissioning | Integrated Health and Care | Southwark Council and Arrthi Pangayatselvan Consultant in Public Health Southwark Council
40. Southwark Health, Social Care and Education Forum

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

41. None.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

42. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-young-people-2023-to-2024/children-and-young-peoples-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2023-to-2024-report>

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Health of CLA Annual Report	Southwark SELICB	Dr John-Legere

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Alasdair Smith, Director of Children and Families	
Report Author	Dr Stacy John-Legere, Designated doctor for Looked After Children	
Version	Final	
Dated	2 October 2025	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance	No	No
Strategic Director, Resources	No	No
Cabinet Member	No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team		2 October 2025

Meeting Name:	Cabinet/ Corporate Parenting Committee
Date:	16 March/ 25 February 2026
Report title:	Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Jasmine Ali - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees
Ward(s) or groups affected:	All
Classification:	Open
Reason for lateness (if applicable):	Not applicable

FOREWORD – COUNCILLOR JASMINE ALI, DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

It gives me great pride to introduce the Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025, which highlights the progress, partnership and promise at the heart of our work for children and young people who are looked after and care leavers in Southwark.

This year, we have seen what can be achieved when we act together as one community that truly cares to care. Being a corporate parent is not a responsibility that rests with a single service, it belongs to all of us. Every councillor, every professional, every neighbour, every school and business in Southwark shares a duty to ensure that our children in care are loved, supported and given the same opportunities that any parent would want for their own child.

Over the past year, we have continued to build on firm foundations. We've welcomed residents into Southwark's first children's home in more than a decade, ensuring that more young people can stay close to their friends, schools and communities. Our renewed foster carer recruitment campaign has reached new audiences, bringing in dedicated people who can offer stability, compassion and care. We have strengthened our support for care leavers, helping them to move confidently into adulthood - with better access to housing, education, training and employment.

At the heart of everything we do are the voices of young people themselves. Through SpeakerBox, our Children in Care Council, we have listened to and acted on what matters most to them - from emotional wellbeing and belonging, to safety, identity and independence. Their insight, honesty and creativity continue to drive improvements across our services, and I want to thank every young person who has contributed their ideas and energy over the past year.

We have much to celebrate, but we also know there is still more to do. Some of our biggest challenges - such as ensuring consistent educational outcomes, widening access to apprenticeships and employment, and providing secure, affordable homes - require ongoing partnership and ambition. These are not just policy goals; they are the building blocks of a good life, and our young people deserve nothing less.

As we look ahead to 2026 and the launch of our new Corporate Parenting Strategy 2026–2030, we do so with optimism and determination. We will continue to champion every child and young person in our care - their dreams, their rights, and their futures.

FOREWORD – SPEAKERBOX, SOUTHWARK CHILDREN IN CARE COUNCIL

We are SpeakerBox - Southwark's Children in Care Council - and we're proud to say we've just celebrated our 22nd birthday! Over the years, we've grown into a strong, diverse and determined community of care-experienced children and young people who are passionate about making a difference. Our aim is simple but powerful: to support one another, to raise our voices to make change and ensure better outcomes for children and young people in care.

This Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025 highlights the progress made over the past year, as well as the priorities that will shape the next. For us, it's more than a report - it's a reflection of our voices, our ideas, and our experiences shaping better services.

At SpeakerBox, we believe in the power of participation. In line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), we make sure children and young people can share their wishes and feelings in a safe, supportive space - and know that what they say really matters. This year, we created eight pillars of priorities that represent the issues most important to care-experienced children and young people in Southwark:

- Education and Employment
- Non-Discrimination
- Safety and Support Services
- Freedom of Expression
- Standards and Treatment in Care
- Voice of the Child
- Knowledge of Rights
- Health Services

These pillars guide everything we do and help us hold our corporate parents to account. Over the past year, we've been involved in a range of activities that bring our community together and give us the chance to celebrate who we are. Highlights include our annual Winter Ball and creative projects like recording an album, photography and cookery courses. These events aren't just fun - they build skills, confidence and connection. We've also taken part in consultations on housing, education, and wellbeing, ensuring that young people's experiences directly shape how services are designed and delivered.

Our mission and purpose remain the same:

1. **Engage** – To build a community of confident, passionate and empowered children and young people who actively use their voice.
2. **Explore** – To identify and highlight issues in the system, advocate for meaningful change, and play an active role in creating the solutions.
3. **Embed** – To ensure care experience is recognised, valued and integrated across the system – within Children's Services, the wider council and the community – to drive lasting impact.

We're proud of how far we've come, but we know there's still more to do. Together, with our corporate parents and supporters, we'll keep working to make Southwark a borough where every care-experienced child and young person feels safe, valued and inspired for the future.

CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE TO NOTE RECOMMENDATIONS TO CABINET AS SET OUT BELOW:

RECOMMENDATIONS

That cabinet:

1. Note the report including progress of Corporate Parenting Strategy, areas of focus for 2025 and work of the Corporate Parenting Committee.
2. Note a child and young person friendly easy read version of the report that will be shared widely with children in care and care leavers and made publicly available and easily accessible on the council's website.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

3. The purpose of this report is to provide cabinet with a report in accordance with para 9 of Part 3J of the council's constitution relating to the Corporate Parenting Committee, describing one of its roles and functions to report to the council's cabinet on an annual basis.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

4. This report provides an overview of the council delivery of its corporate parenting duties during 2025. It sets out our achievements in delivering our Corporate Parenting Strategy as well as what more we need to do. It describes the work of the Corporate Parenting Committee in delivering its role, as set out in the constitution, to *secure real and sustained improvements in the life chances of looked after children.*

What is a corporate parent?

5. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 says that when a child comes into the care of the local authority or is under 25 and was in the care of the local authority for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday, the authority becomes their corporate parent. This means that they should follow the core principles enshrined in the 2017 legislation to:
 - act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people
 - encourage them to express their views, wishes and feelings, and take them into account
 - make sure they have access to services

- make sure children and young people are safe, with stable home lives, relationships and education or work
 - promote high aspirations and try to secure the best outcomes for them
 - prepare them for adulthood and independent living.
6. As corporate parents, it's every councillor's responsibility to make sure that the council is meeting these duties towards children in care and care leavers.
 7. Corporate parenting means the whole council, its public and private sector partners, taking collective responsibility to achieve the outcomes for our children in care and those who have left our care that we would want for our own children.
 8. Being an excellent corporate parent means we should be tirelessly ambitious for our children and unashamed at using every tool at our disposal to provide for our children, giving them access to opportunities, offering every ounce of support we can to ensure they grow up to live their best lives.
 9. The Lead Member for Children's Services and Director of Children's Services share a statutory responsibility to ensure that all officers and members of the local authority act as effective and caring corporate parents for looked after children, with key roles in improving their educational attainment, providing stable and high-quality placements and proper planning for when they leave care.

Southwark as a borough

Who are the children in our care?

10. As of 31 March 2025 there were 387 children in our care, a decrease of 2.5% from the same time last year (397 children). In March 2025 we had a higher rate of children in care (70 per 10,000) than nationally (67 per 10,000), which is higher than London (48 per 10,000). At March 2025, 54 (14%) of the children in our care were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, which is higher than the national average (8%) and London (12%).
11. The numbers of children in our care continued to reduce during the year, with 367 children in our care at the end of 2025. This is a new rate of 65 per 10,000, now slightly below the national average, and in line with our statistical neighbours, but still above our broader regional peers. The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children remained relatively stable at the end of the year, with a small reduction to 50. In October 2025, the Home Office National Transfer Scheme (NTS) team reviewed the Local Authorities NTS threshold figures based on the updated

population data from ONS and Southwark's threshold changed from 56 to 55 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

12. Looking at the **gender** of children who were in care as of 31 March 2025, male children are overrepresented at 57%, compared to 42% female and 1% of children identifying as trans or non-binary. Our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were 96% male and 4% female.
13. At the end of the year there is no change in gender percentage for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. However, the percentage of male children in care at the end of 2025 was 59.7%, with female children decreasing to 39.8% and non-binary at 0.3%.
14. The majority of the children in our care as of 31 March 2025 were from Black or Black British (40%) **ethnicity**, followed by White (23%) and Mixed (25%) ethnicity. This reflects a disproportionate representation of Black, Black British, Caribbean and African residents compared to Southwark's overall population¹.
15. The gap is widest for children in our care aged 10-15, with 49% of this group being from a Black or Black British ethnicity, against 27% from White or White British and 19% from Mixed or multiple ethnic groups. Conversely for children in our care aged under 10 years old, 34% are from a Black or Black British ethnicity, 25% White or White British and 38% from Mixed or multiple ethnic groups. In Southwark, the percentage of children in care with Mixed ethnicity has been steadily increasing since 2022. Further breakdown for this group evidences that the number of children of Mixed White and Black Caribbean have increased from 34 in 2022 to 42 in 2025.

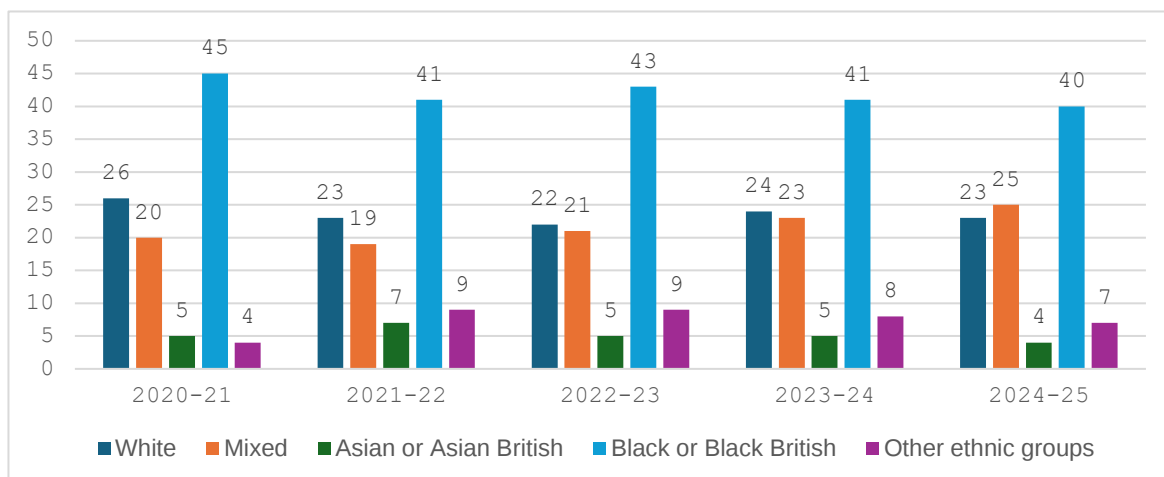


Figure 1: Percentage of looked after children and young people by ethnicity on 31 March 2020-2025

16. There is no major change based on ethnicity for children in care as of December 2025 compared to those in March 25. The only variations are a slight increase of one percentage point for those of an Asian ethnicity (now

¹ [Census 2021: Population, demography and health \(October 2023\)](#)

5%), an increase of 2 percentage points for those of a Black ethnicity (now 42%), and a decrease of 2 percentage points for those of a White ethnicity (now 21%).

17. Of the 194 children who entered care in the year, the majority (71%) were also **adolescents** over the age of ten, this reduces to 63% when we exclude the new unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who came into care. Overall, 36% of the new entrants into our care this year were over 16. Of the 142 children who entered care between April and December 2025, the majority (65%) were entering adolescence. Aged 10 to 15 reflect 32% (45 children) and 33% for those age 16+ (47 children).

Who are the young people we support as care leavers?

18. Between April 2024 and March 2025, 208 children left our care, the majority (41%) moved into adulthood and became our care leavers, approximately 38% returned to the care of their parents or another person with no parental responsibility. From April to December 2025, a further 159 children ceased to be looked after, 50% of these ceased at age 18.
19. At the end of March 2025 our services were actively supporting 682 care leavers aged 16-25 years old. Our rate being 163 care leavers per 10,000 of the population at the time, compared to a London rate of 156 per 10,000. Former - unaccompanied asylum-seeking children made up 29% of our 17–25 year old care leaver population, compared to 32% for London. As of December 2025, we were supporting 665 relevant, qualifying and former relevant care leavers aged 17 to 25. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children now make up 28% of our care leaver population up to the age of 25, which is 187 young people.
20. The majority of the care leavers as of 31 March 2025 (other than former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) were from Black or Black British **ethnicity** making up 53% of our care leaver population, with those from a white background making up 23% and those from mixed backgrounds making up 17%. At December 2025, young people from Black or Black British backgrounds (excluding former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) had fallen to 51%, compared with 23% from White or White British backgrounds and 20% from Mixed or multiple ethnic groups.
21. In March 2025, 95% of our 17 to 21 year old care leavers were considered to be in **suitable accommodation**, with 14 young people in living arrangements that we do not feel fully meet their needs. This includes 13 young people who were reported to be in custody. By December 2025 this has reduced slightly to 94%, which in large part relates to the concurrent increase to 15 children in custody.
22. 78% of our 17 and 18 year old and 75% of our 19 to 21 year old care leavers were in **education, employment, or training** in March 2025.

This continues to exceed statistical neighbours, London and England average. We monitor this closely through the year and at the end of December the percentage of 17-21 year olds engaged in education, employment, or training education has fallen slightly to 72%.

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy (2021-2025)

23. In July 2021 the Corporate Parenting Committee agreed Caring to Care: Achieving Excellence for Our Children - Southwark's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2025.
24. The strategy sets out how the council intends to deliver the Corporate Parenting Principles set within The Children and Social Work Act 2017. The principles in relation to children and young people in the council's care are to:
 - Act in their best interests, and promote their physical and mental health and wellbeing
 - Encourage them to express their views, wishes and feelings
 - Take into account their views, wishes and feelings
 - Help them gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners
 - Promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes
 - Be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work
 - Prepare them for adulthood and independent living
25. The strategy delivers on the principles through 6 priorities which are:
 - supporting more families to safely stay together
 - growing up safe and independent in society
 - health, wellbeing, education & opportunity
 - happy, safe and stable
 - identity & belonging
 - a whole borough that 'cares to care'
26. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy is in the process of being refreshed and we are looking to be bold and ambitious in our plans to develop services for children in care and care leavers for our 2026 to 2030 strategy. In line with the Southwark 2030 strategy, launched in

September 2024, we will continue to focus on delivering the best start in life for children in care.

27. The development of our new Strategy is being driven and delivered in full partnership with our care experienced young people, and will be centered on the 8 Pillars for future deliver defined by our Children in Care Council and presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee in July 2025 (Appendix A). These are:

- Education & Employment
- Non-Discrimination
- Safety & Support Services
- Freedom of Expression
- Standards & Treatment in Care
- Voice of the Child
- Knowledge of Rights
- Health Services

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Strategy Priority 1: Supporting More Families to Safely Stay Together

Our commitment

28. Ensuring all our children & families get the right help at the right time, and at the earliest possible opportunity.
29. To make sure that every child is supported to safely thrive at home.
30. What **we said we would** do:
- continue to invest in evidence-based edge of care services and provision
 - further increase the rate of children in connected care arrangements, through investment in our family group conferencing and support offers
 - further develop our re-unification support offer to ensure when children return home, they are able to do so sustainably and that more children are supported to return home

How we have delivered

31. This year we continued to see more children supported to remain in the care of their parents with the number of children looked after by the council reduced to 367 at the end of 2025.
32. Decisions for children to enter care are made by Heads of Service, chairing our Legal Panel, or by the Deputy Director – Children's Social

Care, at our Resource Panel, which is specifically for adolescents. These panels provide strong leadership and oversight of decisions for children to enter care and support a multi-disciplinary approach to decision making, which benefits from qualified clinical input to consider any additional support that would help children to remain in their families.

33. In 2024/25 194 children came into the care of the council, an increase from 177 in 2023/24. Similarly, the rate of children coming into care also rose from 31 per 10,000 in 2023/24 to 35 in 2024/25. Across all of 2025 142 children have become looked after.
34. Our robust approach to decision making ensures that we explore all options for the best care arrangements for our children. This has seen a continued upward trend in the percentage of children who we support to live with friends and family, when their parents are no longer able to safely care for them.

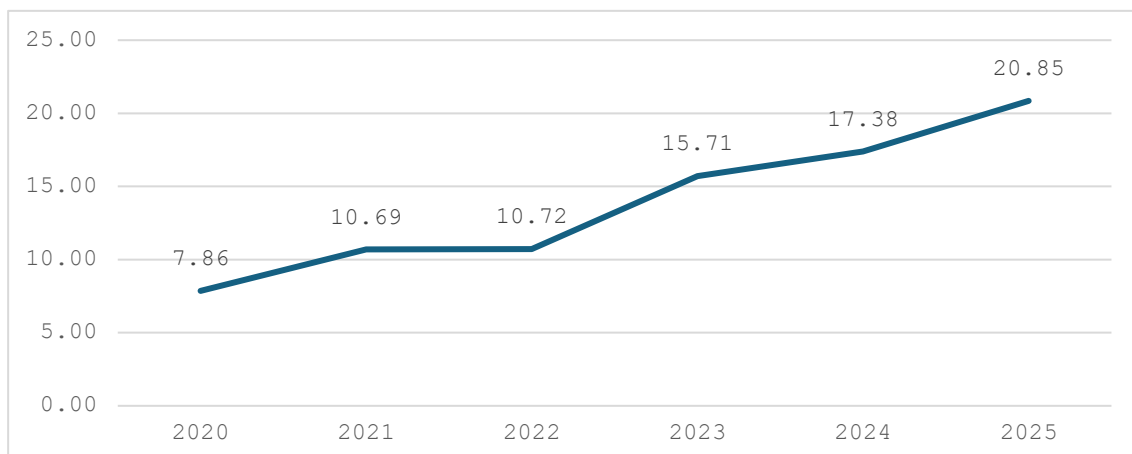


Figure 4: Percentage of children in care who are in family and friend placements 2020-2025

35. Successive years of investment in specialist services have supported a continuous reduction in the number of children in care. Whenever there is consideration of an 11–17-year-old entering care due to a breakdown of family relationships, the **Keeping Families Together** team is considered first – this team provides intensive (multiple contacts a week) in-home support to families from a multi-disciplinary team.
36. In 2025, for 70% of the families that the KFT team worked with, the young people were at home rather than entering care at the end of the intervention.
37. Whenever we are considering entering pre-proceedings, usually due to concerns regarding abuse or neglect within a family, our **SWIFT Team** (Southwark Works Intensively with Families, Together) is considered. The SWIFT Team is a local innovation project designed collaboratively with parents, our Clinical Service and Safeguarding Teams.

38. The SWIFT team offer bespoke and collaboratively agreed practical and therapeutic interventions, within the pre-proceedings time frames, and in doing so continuously assess whether the family can make positive sustainable changes that would prevent an escalation into legal proceedings.
39. In 2025, the SWIFT project exceeded their target of stepping down 36% of their worked families; they successfully helped 90% of families they worked with to step down from legal proceedings.
40. The team also received 100% positive feedback from families who collaborated with the project – *“You have been the only professional that has listened to me and helped me to feel heard. To hear how much you have learnt from me is enough and I hope it will help other families and professionals. I am surviving but knowing you have listened puts a smile on my face.”*
41. In addition, we invest in a comprehensive clinical service with mental health clinicians embedded in each social work team, a specialist **Family Group Conferencing** service to ensure that families are supported to come together to consider solutions other than care, and the **Pause service** that works with women who have already had children removed, to help reduce the likelihood of them experiencing further child removals.

What we still need to achieve

42. Whilst the success of our services and partners in supporting more children to remain at home is positive, we know there is still more we need to do to ensure that families get the right help at the right time. The reduction in the rate of children in our care remains in line with statutory neighbours but we are ambitious to move closer to our broader regional peers. We currently have the seventh highest rate across the capital with the all London average being 51 per 10,000, compared to our 68.
43. The trend in older children making up the majority of those coming into care is continuing (figure 5). Research conducted by the Children’s Commissioner in 2021 found that most children entering care from thirteen had significant vulnerabilities including issues with school such as fixed-term or permanent exclusions and a large proportion had an education, health and care plan. This is also applicable for those becoming looked after between April 2025 and December 2025, with 42% aged 16 or 17 and 27% aged 10 to 15.

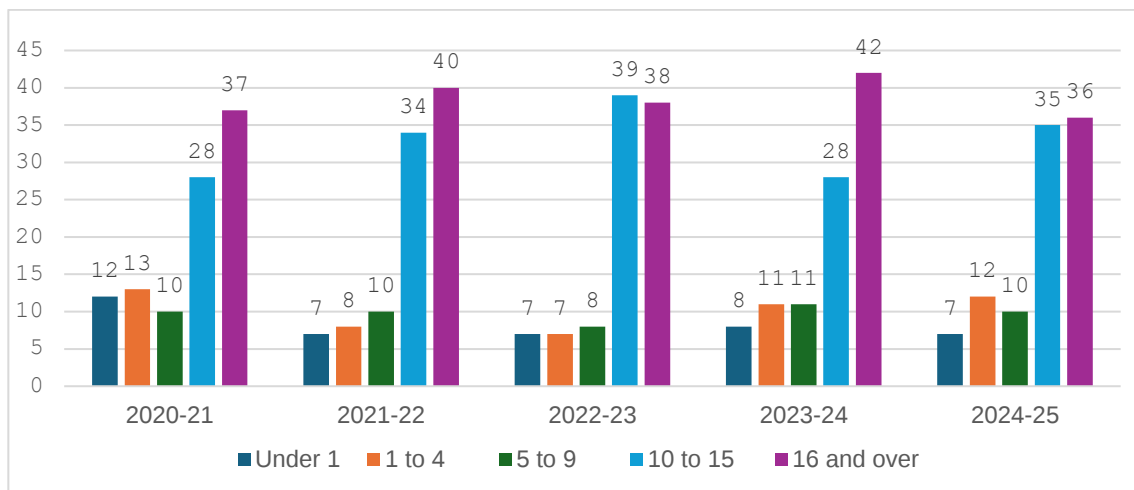


Figure 5: Percentage of children entering care by age band during year ending 31 March (2021-2025)

44. The research emphasises the need for continued investment into **earlier intervention and prevention** activity across an increasingly joined up partnership system. This means ensuring families are supported to provide the right foundation for their children from the earliest days through to adulthood. The opportunity will be delivered under the Southwark 2030 commitments and principles to improve outcomes for our children and young people in the care of the council.
45. We know there is more for us to do to support children who do go home from care to stay with their parents and carers. In 2024/25, 26 children entered care for a second or subsequent time within the preceding 12 months, representing 13% of all children who came into care during the year. London-wide data suggests that around 7% of children entering care have experienced a previous care episode within the preceding 12 months. Between April and December 2025, 10.5% of children who became looked after had a second or subsequent care episode within the last 12 months. Our goal is to strengthen and expand evidence-based approaches to sustainable **reunification** and to exceed national performance benchmarks. In 2026 we will pilot a dedicated Reunification Team who will provide enhanced support to sustain family care.

Social Care Reforms - Families First Partnership Programme

46. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25² introduced in December 2024 aims to 'write children's best interests into law and make child-centred government a reality'. The Bill proposes legislative changes to improve the safeguarding of children and to raise educational standards. The social care provisions within the Bill and the government's policy paper and guidance are a broad if accelerated continuation of those previously set out in 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' (February 2023) and the overall case for reform.

² [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024: policy summary \(December 2024\)](#)

47. The Families First for Children pathfinder was announced in February 2023, with 10 local authorities (known as 'pathfinders') being announced in two waves in July 2023 and April 2024. Pathfinders have tested the delivery of new models of working and key strategic commitments. The intention is for a new end-to-end children's social care system that provides a structure for integrated working and the removal of barriers and hand-offs within the system, with a focus on prevention and early intervention. The four key elements of the reforms are:
- Family Help
 - Multi-agency child protection
 - Family group decision-making
 - Safeguarding partnership structures
48. In March 2025, the DfE published a **Families First Partnership (FFP) programme**³ guide which accelerated the implementation of the Families First approach by initiating a nationwide roll out, in advance of the completion and reporting of the pilot programmes, alongside legislative changes under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. It is expected that 2025/26 will be a 'transformation year' with councils expected to design and move into arrangements which meet the new expectations within 12 months.
49. We are co-designing the reforms in collaboration with frontline staff, safeguarding partners, children, young people and families to ensure their voices are at the heart of new service design and are grounded in Southwark's local context. We are keen to take the opportunity to collaborate and learn from feedback as we go, and we therefore believe that adopting a test and learn approach is the right one for Southwark.

Strategy Priority 2: Growing Up Safe and Independent in Society

Our commitment

50. Giving all our children the tools, skills, resources and support that they need to grow towards independence and be protected from the threats and risks to them from an increasingly complex world. Giving all our children the tools, skills, resources, and support that they need to grow towards independence and be protected from the threats and risks to them from an increasingly complex world.
51. What **we said we would** do:
- embed transitional safeguarding practice so that care leavers are safeguarded from exploitation and abuse when they turn 18 years old

³ [Families First Partnership Programme \(March 2025\)](#)

- continue to invest in support for our children to 'stay put' with their carer's when they wish to do so
- work with Housing to ensure care leavers are given as much help as possible to find not just suitable housing, fit for their futures.
- invest in enhanced life skills programmes for all of children in care
- develop deposit support schemes and savings accounts for our children

How we have delivered

52. Our young people continue to be much more likely than their national peers to be supported to stay living with their foster carers after they turn 18, known as '**staying put**'.
 - The percentage of care leavers aged 17-18 in Southwark who are living with the former foster carers increased this year, now at 26%, up from 22% in the previous year, and compared to the national average of 17%.
 - Throughout 2025, we had 78 children in Staying Put arrangements, a slight increase from 75 last year and 6 in **Supported Lodgings** arrangements, a slight decrease from 7 in 2023-2024.
53. The council's Children's Services and Housing Services are still working closely to continuously improve access to **suitable accommodation** for our care leavers.
 - Joint work by the specialist Experienced Practitioner with Housing Services to develop a pre-tenancy accommodation pathway for young people awaiting social housing was recognised as best practice by MHLCG. This included housing independence workshops focusing on tenancy sustainment, as well as in-person drop-in sessions for any housing related issues.
 - Delivery of training for new Housing staff in processes and policies related to care-experienced young people.
 - Monthly Housing Panel in which 20 care leaver applications for bidding numbers for social housing are fast-tracked.
54. The percentage of our 19 to 21 year old care leavers living in suitable accommodation remains high at 94% as at December 2025. This compares to an average of 88% across London and 89% to England.
55. This year both the look and use of the **Talfourd Place Care Leavers' Hub** has been transformed. Staff from the Leaving Care service are present Monday through Friday and young people come to the building more often for pre-arranged activities, workshops and one-to-one sessions. Re-decoration of the rooms has been co-designed with young people, and they are now warm and welcoming. There are comfortable sofas, a chalkboard

wall, ambient lighting and brightly coloured storage. Young people's artwork has also been displayed on the walls. A Smart TV, interactive whiteboard and state-of-the-art computers give young people even more of a reason to spend time at The Hub.

56. The Experienced Practitioner for Youth Work runs regular activities at the Care Leaver's Hub. This offer also includes bespoke support through the Children's Rights Officers on inclusivity for care leavers with SEND and disability through the SEND cook club. In October 2025 the service launched the care leaver **independence skills** programme. This included sessions on cooking, finance, essential home skills and housing.

What we still need to achieve

57. In 2025, a new **Housing, Health and Care Board** has been established with senior leaders from across the system meeting routinely to coordinate activity and improve outcomes for care leavers. The Board will oversee targeted joined up working with Housing and Social Care to ensure a timelier transition to independence for care leavers and increased access to suitable independent living housing stock.
58. We are continuing to strengthen the working relationship between Children's Services and Housing, including a stronger **joint working protocol** to ensure we are meeting our obligations as set out in the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DHLUC) and Department for Education (DfE) good practice guidance for joint housing protocols for care leavers and incorporate the new Pan London Care Leaver Compact pledges on housing. A new cross-council working group has been established to finalise and implement the protocol by April 2026.
59. We know we can mobilise more assets to develop local provision for our young adults and will continue to campaign for more affordable independent housing opportunities for our care leavers. We have begun recommissioning our contracted **supported accommodation** provision to improve contract management, shorten admission processes, and improve robustness of outcome measurement. The service undertook a consultation with Speakerbox on care leavers' views on supported accommodation which will be central to the recommissioning process.
60. The council's Strategic Director for Resources is leading a whole council approach to innovative use of council assets to improve outcomes for our residents. Under the One Corporate Real Estate programme a comprehensive review of void housing, former school care taker lodges, and other housing assets is being completed to understand the opportunities to create new dedicated independent housing stock for care leavers, supported accommodation, and potential expansion properties for internal foster carers. This is a positive example of the whole council approach to meeting the corporate parenting duties and innovating to improve outcomes. With a cross-sectional programme team including

Children's Services, Housing Services, Regeneration Services, Property, Legal and Capital Teams working together to find new solutions for our young people.

Strategy Priority 3: Health, Wellbeing, Education & Opportunity

Our commitment

61. Marshalling the unique resources of the borough to ensure that every one of our children and young adults gets the support and advocacy they deserve and expect from an excellent parent.
62. What **we said we would** do:
 - set high aspirations, listen and develop every possible opportunity for new experiences matching aspirations and harnessing enthusiasm
 - commit to providing the right digital devices and connections so there is no disadvantage
 - guarantee access to high quality mental health support
 - strengthen the sporting, leisure and cultural offer
 - deliver a comprehensive educational catch-up offer to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

How we have delivered

63. Making sure our children and young people are heard and are driving the development of our local offer is the at the heart of all the work of our services. In 2025, we maintained investment in our **Children's Rights and Participation Team** to make sure that we have the right capacity in place to deliver every opportunity to bring our children and young people together to have their voices heard, but also to ensure that the right one-to-one support is available when our it's needed.
64. Our Virtual School and Social Care teams have worked hard to reduce the number of **suspensions** of looked after children from school from 95 in 2023/24 to 82 in the 2024/25 academic year.
 - Boys remain around twice as likely to be suspended as girls.
 - No children looked after were permanently excluded in the 2024/25 academic year.
65. Through regular consultation with providers, the Virtual School has helped increase **ESOL** (English for Speakers of Other Languages) capacity in FE (Further Education) Colleges - enabling most new unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people (UASC) to be placed in education

within 14 days of completing a Personal Education Plan (PEP).

66. The percentage of our care leavers in **higher education** continued to increase in 2025, with 10% of our care leavers now entered in higher education compared to 6% across England and 8% across statistical neighbours. This included a record number of students progressing to university or degree level apprenticeships this year. We have 35 care leavers in higher education as of the end of December 2025.
67. In March 2025, Children's Services secured funding as part of the DWP **Youth Guarantee 'Trailblazer' programme** to deliver enhanced employability support for care-experienced young people who are NEET.
 - An Employability Pathway was co-designed with care-experienced young people, alongside colleagues from Children's Services, Local Economy and HR/OD, which describes an enhanced offer to our care-experienced residents with access to council work experience, internships, apprenticeships and entry-level roles.
 - Delivery began in August 2025 with council teams hosting young people for insight sessions and work experience placements.
68. We have qualified **mental health clinicians** attached to every looked after children and care leaver team, to work with the social workers and personal advisors to better understand our children and young people's needs, and to make sure that they can access specialist mental health and neuropsychological assessments and interventions where and when they need them.
 - This includes dedicated pathways for expedited ASD assessments for our looked after children and care leavers to make sure their needs are well-understood, and dedicated clinicians for our 18+ young people who are struggling with their mental health.
 - According to our Annual Health Report 2024-25⁴, 90% of our looked after children whose SDQ screening questionnaire suggested they might be in need of mental health support were receiving mental health services.
69. Our Care Leavers Hub has continued to work with our partners at the **NEST** Open Access service to bring high-quality emotional well-being support to our children and young people when they need it, through a drop-in clinic and a regular presence in the Hub. This means more children and young people can get direct access to advice and guidance, as well as therapeutic support where they need it to support their mental wellbeing.
70. 121 young people have signed up and are benefitting from the **free gym**

⁴ [Annual Health Report for Looked After Children, Young People and Care Leavers \(July 2025\)](#)

and swim access to all children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25 at the council's in-house leisure centres. Services work closely together to better promote the uptake of the leisure offer and ensure all our children and young people can keep physically active.

What we still need to achieve

71. **Attendance** remains a key priority for Southwark Virtual School and Social Care teams. We continue to work in partnership to drive improvements through targeted casework, data analysis, early intervention and regular multi-agency panels to agree priority actions.
 - In the 2024/25 academic year, persistent absence rates amongst girls have risen with girls at 49% and boys at 51%. This compared to 2023/24, where boys were almost two times as likely to be persistent absentees than girls.
 - Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11) is overrepresented with 34 children recorded as Persistent Absentees. Persistent Absence in this group is largely due to school refusal, change of care placement and SEN sufficiency issues, which is a current concern across many Local Authorities. Intensive work is taking place to turn this around and improve access to education for these groups.
72. The Virtual School are working to make all Southwark schools attachment aware schools. They will support the **CPD** (Continuing Professional Development) of our Designated Teachers, social workers and school leaders by delivering a flexible and diverse training programme with an aim of improving inclusive practice, building capacity and reducing suspensions and/or permanent exclusions.
73. From December 2025, a vacant Education Advisor post will be repurposed as a pilot role focused on Residential Care. This dedicated advisor will address the education needs of children placed in Southwark's new residential home, providing on-site support and tracking the impact of care placement changes on education continuity. This role will strengthen the education offer and promote stability for children in residential settings, reflecting Southwark's commitment to improving outcomes for its most vulnerable learners.
74. Ongoing consultation and engagement with care-experienced young people is driving the design of the Youth Guarantee 'Trailblazer' programme as we approach the second year of funding in 2026/27.
 - We will continue to work across the council and with our commissioned and anchor partners to develop more routes into employment for our care-experienced young people, including paid work placements, ring-fenced apprenticeships, and access to entry-level roles.
 - We will also bolster our wraparound support offer, including access

to mentoring.

- We will create more opportunities for young people, particularly those aged 17-18, to obtain key qualifications through an online functional skills course delivered by our Adult Learning Service from January 2026.

75. The key priorities for the **Integrated Care System** for 2026 will be ensuring that care-experienced children and young people are considered a priority for neurodiversity, SEND, and gender identity services, as well as providing support in Southwark's Children's Homes, improving general mental health access and outcomes, and a continued focus on safeguarding and child protection.
76. One of the most important parts of supporting our young people to move into adulthood and independence is ensuring they fully understand their health and wellbeing history when they reach 18 and receive continuing support to understand what this means for their health as they grow into adulthood. 77 (78%) Care Leaver Health Summaries were completed this year. This is a considerable improvement from 2024 and continues as a focus for 2026.

Strategy Priority 4: Happy, Safe and Stable

Our commitment

77. Making sure that every one of our children has a say in where they live and who they live with. That they are safe and in permanent homes earlier, closer to home, and supported to remain there as long as they need to.
78. What **we said we would** do:
 - increase the sufficiency, range and quality of opportunities for our children and our young adults, to ensure more are able to live within and close to the borough
 - listen more to our children and change how we all speak and think about them
 - continue to invest in the support offer for our children and carers, through our clinical services and other partners
 - provide an enhanced training offer to our carers and increase the availability of therapeutic carers

How we have delivered

79. Having completed the capital programme to develop and open the first council-run Children's Home in Southwark for over 20 years, we are

pleased that Olive House has welcomed three young people into their new home in the summer of 2025.

- A full staff team has been recruited and inducted, including waking night staff and a specialist Senior Clinical Practitioner dedicated to working within our new children's homes and providing valuable support for children who live there and the staff supporting them.
 - We are working towards welcoming two further residents at the beginning of 2026 meaning more children will be supported to remain living in the borough, close to their networks, communities and the people who mean the most to them.
 - Families have been welcomed into Olive House, enhancing family time arrangements, and enabled closer contact with the local community and multi-agency safeguarding partners.
 - Some of the children in Olive House have worked with the DfE and Family Rights Group funded Lifelong Links project to connect with people who are important to them in their family and including former foster carers.
80. Having implemented the learnings from Olive House, the capital programme on our **second Children's Home** – Evergreen – is due for completion in the spring of 2026, with an anticipated opening by the end of 2026.
- Evergreen will be home to children and young people with more complex needs with staffing ratios reflecting such.
 - The team are working closely with safeguarding partners to begin to identify children and young people for the new home.
81. We have maintained investment in our **Permanence Service Lead** role to provide support and challenge on achieving permanence for every child in the timescale that is right for each child. At the end of the year 94% of eligible children had an agreed permanence plan.
82. An enhanced process has been introduced to tackle the underlying reasons for home breakdown and strengthen stability and resilience. Multi-agency **home support** meetings are convened at any point of stress to understand the feelings of the child/young person and what can be done to stabilise their home with additional resources. This could include respite care, support worker guidance, direct support or advice from the Clinical Service, and Virtual School.
83. In light of national challenges on the increasing cost of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) placements, supported accommodation and residential homes, this year the Access to Resources Team (ART) have embedded quality **assurance** functionality within the service to strengthen oversight and stability.
- Regular visits to supported accommodation and residential homes are

undertaken, including additional visits when there has been a complaint or downgrade in registration status.

- The team supports the development of positive relationships with providers, identifying strengths, and responding quickly to possible issues. In November 2025, the team launched the first provider's forum to support relationship building, address shared challenges, and provide training.
- Working alongside the team are our **Young Inspectors** who have completed training and are paid to accompany ART officers on monitoring visits. This ensures the voice and experience of children and young people is central to provision. Training of 10 young people aged 16+ began in October, with inspections commencing from November 2025. Young Inspectors will feedback to the Corporate Parenting Committee on an annual basis.

84. With the increasing cost of living pressures and demographic changes in Southwark, the traditional pipeline of foster carers and carer accommodation is increasingly squeezed. A **fostering recruitment** improvement programme and renewed recruitment campaign was launched in 2024. As of 31 July 2025, we have 17 prospective carers in assessment. This is a significant increase as in 2023/2024 we recruited 4 new sets of foster families.
85. We have been exploring innovation in foster care to offer new pathways into caring, including our partnership with the **NowFoster Weekenders** programme to increase the number of carers who can offer monthly respite support for allocated children and increase approvals of younger cohorts of carers who may consider career changes in the future.
86. We have strengthened **carer support** through training, wellbeing initiatives, and a dedicated Senior Clinician for Foster Carers and Connected carers, alongside more robust and regular placement support meetings. We have also expanded support for Special Guardianship and Connected Carers, including a new Local Offer and training programme in place starting from assessment stage.
87. We know how important it is for children and young people to remain connected to their friends and family network. We're pleased to have increased the number of children matched to foster carers as part of a **sibling group** from 2 in 2024 to 7 in 25. We have also continued to increase the number and proportion of our friends and family foster placements (from 63 in March 2024, to 71 by March 2025) giving more children the opportunity to live with family members closer to their family home.

What we still need to achieve

88. Proactively seeking permanence for children in care remains a council priority. We will continue to develop the system to provide

strategic oversight of permanence and the timeliness of matching. There are many good examples of support offered to families for children to be successfully rehabilitated home from care. We plan to further develop our approach to delivering effective and sustainable rehabilitation, with a particular focus on adolescents. We will utilise existing specialist intervention and evidence of what works to develop further training for all staff to embed effective rehabilitation practice across services.

89. Southwark's fostering service continues to evolve to meet the needs of children and carers. A programme of service development is in place to support the recruitment, retention and development of foster carers in Southwark. Boosting recruitment, improving sufficiency, and ensuring timely assessments are key priorities for 2026.
90. We have begun work with our existing carers to explore new opportunities to maximise their capacity to care for more children. This includes expanding the ability of our carers to care for more complex children by providing dedicated and out-of-hours therapeutic support. This also includes working collaboratively with the council's property team to identify opportunities to utilise capital investment and capital assets to increase the number of available care places and/or provide permanence for children and young people.

Strategy Priority 5: Identity & Belonging

Our commitment

91. Giving all our children and young people the chance to learn about themselves, their history and identity, and to live with carers who understand and reflect their cultural identity. Providing every chance for our children to appropriately engage with their own families and personal history.
92. What **we said we would** do:
 - provide enhanced opportunities for children to 're-connect' with their families, family networks and important people in their lives
 - review our assessment, learning and development for foster carers about the needs of black young people in care.
 - address disproportionality in our carer population, and bring more young people back to live in our Borough, and with their communities
 - deliver a mandatory education program for workers and managers about racism, anti-discriminatory practice, black history and inequality
 - improve our equality data collection and monitoring, address the gaps

and understand why certain groups are overrepresented in care

- ensure life story work is completed with our children and young people

How we have delivered

93. As part of our work to embed identity and belonging into our work, we delivered a weeklong learning and development programme - 'LearningFest' – on *Belonging: Permanence, Stability and Sustainability* for all Children's Services staff.
94. We have maintained our focus on embedding good practice in **Life Story Work** to enable children in care to understand more about their journeys into and in care, where they have lived and who with and to understand their families and who they are at the earliest opportunity.
 - A Life Story Work page on our internal Intranet has been developed with key resources for professionals, as well as integration into Mosaic processes, have contributed to building a whole system approach to the practice.
 - The Caring Life App is well embedded for internal foster carers storing key memories on an app for children in care which creates a digital archive of key memories.
95. Our dedicated Life Story Lead in the Permanence Service delivers regular training on **therapeutic Life Story work** for social workers and foster carers.
 - *"I feel [Life Story practitioner] did really well to support me to be a part of therapeutic work. She didn't just work with [young person], she worked with me and my emotions, helped me to be there for [young person] and left us wanting more. We felt included, it was about us."* – Foster Carer
 - *"The way that [Life Story practitioner] and [Lifelong Links practitioner] worked was similar, so it felt familiar and trustworthy. That helped a lot because trusting someone is a hard thing."* – Young person
96. 35 care leavers are also actively supported by the **Lifelong Links** programme to connect with important people in their lives, build stronger community connections, reduce loneliness and support them to better understand themselves, their culture and identity. 8 young people have completed the process, undertaking a Family Group Conference and celebration event.
 - Before working with Lifelong Links, a young person said *"I thought it was going to take ages, like years. I thought it was impossible, I was in denial. I wanted to still try."*
 - Similarly, his foster carer said *"I thought it was impossible, with all the family members we know about, how is this going to work? I had hopes that it would, but there was doubt. To me it is a*

miracle.”

- *“I met my mum, maternal grandmother, my dad, paternal grandmother, and half-brothers. It’s the best thing, the best feeling ever. It’s filled a void in my heart, I was missing a piece and I’m just happy now, even just seeing them once. It’s life changing.” – Young person.*

97. In October 2025 we launched the **Giving HOPE** boxes given to babies entering care. The boxes help maintain the bond between mothers and babies when a child is removed at birth, recognising the grief and trauma of separation and prioritising both their needs. They ensure shared memories at the very beginning of a child’s journey in care.
98. Since we became one of the first councils to sign the **immigration support pledge** for children in care and care leavers in March 2024, we have been working to build knowledge and understanding of the pledge and its expectations of the council.
 - In collaboration with the South London Refugee Association, we have delivered training to ensure that staff across Children’s Services are supported to take a proactive and informed role in supporting children in care and care leavers to enable them to resolve these issues.
 - We are on track to meet the four aspects of the pledge by the deadline of December 2026.
99. As part of our work to tackle racism, discrimination and inequality within the organisation and broader community, our **Southwark Stands Together Against Racism (SSTAR)** programme has overseen significant progress and engagement across the division.
 - The SSTAR programme have delivered a programme of training for senior leadership and meet quarterly with the Director of Children’s Services to directly raise issues relating to racism and discrimination.
 - In October 2025, the Brave Spaces initiative was launched for colleagues across Children’s Services to foster open, respectful and courageous conversations about race.
 - Children in care, care leavers and foster carers are considered as part of our departmental action plan for the council wide programme Southwark Stands Together tackling discrimination.

What we still need to achieve

100. We see outstanding examples of work to help children in care and care leavers to understand their life story, with many of our staff using innovative and collaborative approaches to helping children understand their personal history in a meaningful way that is individual to them. We know that the consistency of this work is not yet what it needs to be, and through our Life Story workflow we will further embed and track the completion of Life Story

work to ensure that every young person has a detailed history from the first contact onwards.

101. The SSTAR programme is working to co-design **Anti-Racist Practice Standards** with colleagues across Children's Services setting out the basic expectations of guide how we work together and with families in ways that actively oppose racism and promote equity. They will set out clear expectations for practice, help us challenge discrimination, and support a more inclusive culture across our division.

Strategy Priority 6: A Whole Borough That 'Cares to Care'

Our commitment

102. Placing delivering for our children and young adults at the heart of everything the Council and its partners do. Broadening the voice and experience of our children across all decision making and making Southwark a truly Corporate Parenting Borough.
103. What **we said we would** do:
 - review the council's commissioning, planning and licensing arrangements to leverage Social Capital for our children and young adults
 - establish a shadow Children & Young People's Cabinet to hold the whole council to account to include young people with experience of care
 - work with our children and young people to develop their own version of this strategy and develop a new pledge
 - develop a corporate parenting champions network across the Council and our key partners
 - challenge all the major organisations in the Borough to adopt the corporate parenting principles and deliver on a promise to our children
 - improve how we listen to our children and young adults and embed them and their views in our service improvement activity at every stage

How we have delivered

104. Speakerbox members attend the Corporate Parenting Committee and provide direct insight and challenge to officers and elected members on all aspects of delivery for children in care and care leavers. Every Corporate Parenting Committee begins with a presentation from children

and young people in Speakerbox. In 2026, we plan to move the meeting to the early evening so that more children and young people who are in school or working can attend.

105. Leaders across the council are working hard to improve the one council Corporate Parenting offer, particularly around access to employment opportunities.
 - In July 2025, the Employability Pathway for care-experienced young people was presented at Southwark Council's Leadership Network. Leaders committed to the minimum expectations for participation from each department and over 60 employability opportunities have been submitted by colleagues across the organisation.
 - Teams across the council – including Leisure, Electoral Services, Public Health, Housing and Sustainable Growth – have supported our young people with work experience placements and mock interviews.
106. In July 2025, the council launched a new **Social Value Framework** setting out a refreshed and ambitious approach to delivering real, lasting benefits for our residents through the way we spend public money.
 - The framework encourages the council's contractors to support care-experienced young people by becoming signatories of the Care Leavers Covenant, offering mentoring opportunities, work experience placements, internships, traineeships, apprenticeships or job opportunities, and access to extracurricular activities.
 - We will continue to engage with contracted partners to levy these social value commitments and increase the availability of opportunities for care leavers within the borough and across London.
107. The Experienced Practitioner for Social Capital in the 16+ service works with local businesses to ensure young people have devices and the equipment they need to remain connected. In the last year they have obtained refurbished phones, data cards, refurbished laptops and dongles/routers which have been shared with care leavers.
108. Speakerbox and Southwark's Family Council are working in partnership on the '**Innovation Group**' bringing together children, young people, parents and carers, in collaboration with practitioners, to explore ideas big and small that can help improve our system and offer to our care-experienced community.

What we still need to achieve

109. We have begun development of our new **Corporate Parenting Strategy (2026-2030)** through delivery of the Bright Spots survey, engagement with our care experienced children and young people, and evaluation of the

previous strategy. The strategy will be developed in full collaboration with our children and young people, ensuring their voice, lived experience and ambitions are at the heart of the next phase of our whole partnership corporate parenting delivery.

110. We want to mobilise more support across the council to expand the corporate parenting offer and create more awareness of the opportunities to support our children and young people at all levels of the organisation.

- We will further develop our network of Corporate Parenting Champions across council departments and develop a new training offer for staff.
- We will provide more opportunities for staff who would like to volunteer their time, experience and expertise, for example through mentoring.
- We will continue to broaden cross-council awareness and understanding of the needs of our children and young people.

The work of the Corporate Parenting Committee

111. The council's Corporate Parenting Committee is a cross-party committee, chaired by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees. The committee meets on a quarterly basis to fulfil its role to secure real and sustained improvements in lives of care-experienced children and young people.

112. The committee champions the voice and experience of children in care and care leavers who attended every committee meeting in 2025. Children and young people are active participants in driving the agenda and discussions of the committee. They have raised topics which are important to them and directly influenced plans and services for young people.

113. The items discussed in meetings in 2025 are as follows:

Meeting date	Items
February 2025	• Update on Mental Health Provision for Care Leavers • Southwark Adoption Performance (2023-24) and Adopt London South Annual Report (2023-24) • Attendance, Children Missing Education and Exclusion Report
April 2025	• Workshop on Employability Support for Care Leavers

July 2025	• Care Leavers Employability Pathway • Annual Health Report for Children Looked After (2024-25)
October 2025	• Virtual Headteacher's Annual Report (2024-25) • Fostering Annual Report (2024-25) • Update on Employability Support for Care Leavers

Health

114. The committee regularly scrutinises the provision of health and wellbeing support for our children and young people. Young people and committee members hold providers to account to ensure they recognise the unique challenges for children in care and care leavers.
115. The Designated Doctor for Looked After Children, the Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and the Virtual Mental Health Lead for Looked After Children report regularly to the committee and provide an annual report of the Integrated Care System's delivery of services to children in care and care leavers.
116. Young people have spoken to the committee about particular issues that they wanted to see greater emphasis from health services in supporting them. Young people were keen to learn more about the mental health support for neurodivergent young people and unaccompanied asylum-seeking Children (UASC).
117. The committee continues to focus on mental health as a priority, as well as ensuring children and young people are being supported to maintain a healthy lifestyle with opportunities to take part in physical activity. The committee has challenged health services on the reported rise in substance misuse among children looked after, increasing over the past three years from 8% to 15.4%. A detailed report and action plan to address this have been developed.
118. The key priorities for the Integrated Care System for 2026 will be ensuring that care-experienced children and young people are considered a priority for neurodiversity, SEND, and gender identity services, as well as providing support in Southwark's Children's Homes, improving general mental health access and outcomes, and a continued focus on safeguarding and child protection.

Education and employment

119. The committee monitors the education and employment outcomes for children in care and care leavers through the work of the Virtual School and the 16+ service.

120. The committee receives the annual report of the Virtual School Headteacher which gives oversight of the educational achievement of all children in care and care leavers, including the barriers to success in education for them.
121. The committee has continued to focus on challenging persistent absenteeism for children in care and exploring opportunities to better support our children to access and remain in education. The committee has placed a particular focus on the rise in Persistent Absence rates amongst girls, noting that persistent absentees are 49% girls and 51% boys, where previously boys had been twice as likely to be persistently absent than girls. The committee challenged services to address this in more detail.
122. The committee has had a strong focus on employment support for care-experienced young people this year. The committee has received reports from the Leaving Care service and Service Development teams on initiatives to ensure young people are better prepared for employment and are being supported to access opportunities both within and outside of the council. The committee have advocated for the voices of care-experienced young people to be at the centre of design.

Fostering and placement sufficiency

123. The committee has responsibility for oversight of the council's placement sufficiency strategy to ensure that all our children have the opportunity to live in homes that meet their needs and allow them to maintain links with their families, friends, education and wider societal connections. This includes taking a broader view on whether services are sufficiently championing alternative routes to permanent and stable care for all our children.
124. Young people have spoken to the committee about their experiences of where they have lived and shared their key priorities being fewer moves/changes in placement and ensuring children and young people remain in the borough/local area where it is safe to do so.
125. The committee receives the annual report on the Fostering, Special Guardianship and Connected Carers Service which gives oversight of the quality of care, placement choice and stability, as well as recruitment and retention of carers.
126. The committee has had a particular focus on the recruitment of foster carers as this year saw a reduction in the number of recruited foster carers from 6 in 2023/24 to 2 in 2024/25. The service highlighted the renewed recruitment campaign launched in 2024 which has resulted in 631 enquiries (during Q3 and Q4 2024/25) and 17 prospective carers in assessment (as of 31 July 2025).

Quality of practice and services

127. As well as scrutinising the main themes and issues of care-experienced children and young people, the committee plays a vital role in overseeing the effectiveness of service delivery to our children and young people.
128. The committee has responsibility for reviewing the outcome of regulatory inspections of Children's Services and monitoring the delivery of action planning in response to inspection. An inspection of Children's Services is anticipated in early 2026.

Listening and bringing our care experienced children together

129. The council and the committee have always been proud of championing the voice of children and young people and celebrating their achievements.
130. Our two Children's Rights Officers have continued to support care-experienced children and young people through **Speakerbox** to engage, participate and share their views with senior leaders and the committee to ensure that their voices contribute to senior leadership strategic activity and decision making.
131. We continue to be proud of how we purposefully and meaningfully engage with children and young people. We ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard individually in their care plans and strategically with our senior leaders. We prioritise participation in all aspects of service improvement work ensuring that our priorities for development meet the needs of our children and young people.
132. As part of this ongoing engagement with children and young people, Speakerbox have developed eight pillars which set out the priorities for children and young people. These will be integral to the development of the new Corporate Parenting Strategy:
 - Education and Employment
 - Non-discrimination
 - Safety and Support Services
 - Freedom of Expression
 - Standards and Treatment in Care
 - Voice of the Child
 - Knowledge of Rights
 - Health Services
133. Between August and December 2025, the views of 240 children in care and care leavers were obtained through the **Bright Spots Surveys**. Once independently analysed, these views will be the foundation for co-developing a new Corporate Parenting Strategy. Feedback sessions will be held with care-experienced young people to share the results of the survey, listen to feedback and ideas and then report back on the actions we will take as part of the ongoing drive to improve.

134. Hosting a **Young People's Panel** for recruitment in Children's Services is now a well-embedded practice within the division, with young people supporting recruitment having been encouraged to share their views on candidate's suitability to ensure a good breadth of successful candidates.
135. In December 2025, we held our annual **Winter Ball** for our children in care and care leavers. Organised by the Care Service, Children's Rights Officers and 16+ Service - and supported by a large number of volunteers from across the department - this was an amazing night attended by all ages of children and young people. Feedback from our children shows how much they enjoy these events and opportunities to meet and socialise with other children and young people.

Our priorities for 2026

136. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy is in the process of being refreshed and we are looking to be bold and ambitious in our plans to develop services for children in care and care leavers for our 2026 to 2030 strategy. In line with the Southwark 2030 strategy, launched in September 2024, we will continue to focus on delivering the best start in life for children in care.
137. In addition to the priorities for our refreshed strategy that will be driven in partnership with our children and young people, our immediate priorities for 2026 include:
- improving the sufficiency of homes in Southwark to ensure there is a broad range of options available for children and young people of all ages
 - embedding the use of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment (CANS)
 - ensuring permanence planning and opportunities for reunification are considered at the earliest opportunity in a child's journey
 - focus on tackling the underlying reasons for home breakdown and instability for children with the aim of improving resilience and the experiences of children.
 - making sure our children and young people in care and who have care experience have every opportunity for the best start in life.
138. These will be achieved by:
- increasing the number of residential children's homes in the borough by opening a second children's home
 - undertaking an in-depth needs and demand analysis of children and young people living in semi-independent supported accommodation to better understand if placement demand meets need in the local area
 - going further to embed our Corporate Parenting responsibilities across the borough, public and private sector partners

- increasing the support available to children and their families who are on the edge of care to prevent any further escalation that may require the children to be accommodated in-line with the pledge to invest in prevention in the Southwark 2030 strategy
- equipping our foster carers to care for our children and young people by investing in services and recruitment to both provide high levels of support and increase the number of fostering households available to foster
- making sure our care-experienced children and young people are able to succeed in their chosen careers by increasing opportunities for mentoring, work-based training, work skills and routes into employment.

Key / Non-Key decisions

139. The report does not relate to a key-decision.

Policy implications

140. There are no policy implications arising from this report.

Financial implications

141. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts Community impact statement

142. The decision to note this report has been judged to have a small but important impact on local people and communities. The work relating to children in care and care leavers is intended to improve the outcomes for them.
143. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, lays out the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires public bodies to consider all individuals when carrying out their day to day work – in shaping policy, in delivering services and in relation to their own employees. It requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. The council's approach to equality commits the council to ensuring that equality is an integral part of our day to day business.
144. The council's Children's Services involves working closely with all relevant stakeholders and partners across the sector and collectively we are committed to upholding the responsibilities towards advocating the Public Sector Equality Duty and complying with the Equalities Act 2010. 13. The PSED enables public bodies to consider the diverse needs of groups and have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between

different people when carrying out their activities. Due regard is about considering the different needs of protected characteristics in relation to the three parts of the duty.

145. The Equalities Act 2010 define the following as protected characteristics; age; disability, gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement 15. The report takes account of the ethnicity, age and disabilities of children in care, as well as their racial ethnic background and considers these areas in light of commitments set out by Southwark Stands Together.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

146. A number of research studies and analyses have identified a clear social gradient in relation to social care statutory intervention to promote the protection and the welfare of children. We know that the greater the levels of deprivation and disadvantage faced by families the higher the likelihood that they will become involved with children's services nationally. This trend is consistent in Southwark with the level of deprivation in the home wards of the children in care being strongly correlated with the numbers of children in care.
147. Children from black/black British and mixed/multiple global majority groups are overrepresented in our children in care population when we compare them against the overall population of children in Southwark. This reflects national research around such intersectionality in relation to deprivation as described above. Overrepresentation of global majority communities is compounded when we account for unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
148. Overall there are more males (58%) in our care than females (42%). This trend is exacerbated again by age with more males entering care in later adolescence and slightly more females entering care in early adolescence.
149. Research suggests that when children in care are compared with children who have not been in care, they tend to have poorer outcomes in a number of areas including their and mental and physical health. Corporate parenting work seeks to address these inequalities.

Climate change implications

150. There are no relevant climate change implications

Social Value considerations

151. There are no relevant social value considerations

Economic considerations

152. There are no relevant economic considerations

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2024 (July 2021)	Link below	
Southwark Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2024		
Research conducted by the Children's Commissioner (February 2021)	Link below	
The Characteristics of children entering care for the first time as teenagers		
Joint working protocol (May 2024)	Link below	
Joint housing protocols for care leavers: good practice advice - GOV.UK		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025

AUDIT TRAIL

Cabinet Member	Councillor Jasmine Ali - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees	
Lead Officer	Helen Woolgar, Deputy Director – Safeguarding and Care	
Report Author	Poppy Laurens, Service Development Officer	
Version	Final	
Dated	27 January 2025	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments Included
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance	No	No
Strategic Director, Finance	No	No
Cabinet Member	Yes	Yes
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team		13 February 2026

Meeting Name:	Corporate Parenting Committee
Date:	25 February 2026
Report title:	Southwark Adoption Performance in 2024-2025
Ward(s) or groups affected:	All
Classification:	Open
Reason for lateness (if applicable)	N/A
From:	Alasdair Smith, Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the committee note the progress of the children with a care plan of adoption in Southwark during the period of 1 April 2024 till 31 March 2025.
2. That the committee note the activity of the local authority working in partnership with Adopt London South (ALS) during 2024-25.
3. That the committee note the Adopt London South Annual Report for 2024 – 2025.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

4. This report outlines the progress made by Southwark children in care with a permanence plan for adoption during 2024–25. It provides an overview of the key performance measures that support achieving timely and appropriate permanence for every child.
5. Southwark Council is the host of Adopt London South (ALS), one of the largest regional adoption agencies in the country. ALS provides adoption services across ten South London boroughs and forms part of Adopt London, partnership of four regional adoption agencies covering 24 London local authorities. This collaboration brings together extensive expertise to match children with permanent families and offer consistent support throughout the adoption journey, including assessment, placement, and post-adoption support.
6. Permanence refers to developing a long-term, stable plan for a child's care that supports them throughout their childhood. There are several routes to achieving permanence, both within the care system and through arrangements outside of it.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Southwark Data- Children's Activity

Activity Overview - children	24-25	23-24	22-23	21-22	20-21
Decision that a plan for adoption is in child's best interests (called Best Interests Decision or Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decision)	7	6	7	15	11
Children with a Placement Order made (plan for adoption agreed by Court)	7	5	8	13	8
Children matched with adopters at panel and agreed by Agency Decision Maker (ADM)	4	6	14	10	11
Children with an Adoption Order granted	5	10	9	9	4

7. There was a decline in the number of children matched with adoptive carers to 4 children in 2024-2025.
8. This decline in matching in Southwark has been impacted by more foster carers expressing an interest in adopting the babies and children they are already caring for. While this is positive for children in terms of their experience and continuity there has been some delays due to the need to agree with foster carers bespoke support packages and for them to have independent advice on this before adoption assessments can commence. To improve timeliness and consistency, we have reviewed our assessment processes with ALS. As a result, the procedures for viability assessments in both Stage One and Stage Two have been strengthened to ensure they are robust, timely, and aligned with the needs and timescales of our children.
9. There has been a very small increase in the number of best Interest ADM decisions and the number of Placement Orders granted in 2024-25 as compared to the previous year.

Early Permanence Planning

Update about early permanence planning

10. During 2024–2025 we have continued to prioritise achieving permanence for

every child within the timescale that best meets their needs. Legal panels and pre-proceedings meetings maintain a strong focus on early and proactive permanence planning, ensuring that delays are identified and addressed and we are making the right decisions. The Permanency Taskforce meets quarterly to closely track all children progressing through the adoption pathway, with a clear mandate to challenge barriers, drive improvements, and strengthen practice. We remain firmly committed to improving outcomes so that every child can achieve a stable, permanent home without unnecessary delay. Work is ongoing to strengthen and shorten our timescales for achieving permanence.

11. Early permanence allows children to be placed with prospective adopters who are also approved as foster carers, enabling them to care for the children initially and, should the court approve an adoption plan, proceed to adopt those they have been fostering. Southwark continues to consider all family options for children and to ensure early permanence placements are explored promptly through initial consultation with ALS when appropriate. While no children were placed in early permanence placements, there was a significant increase in referrals for consultations during the 2024 -2025 there were 13 referrals made to ALS and 8 were referred to Early permanence. Although none of these went on to be placed with Early Permanence Carers, this shows that there is a marked improvement from our service considering Early Permanence as an option.
12. This year, working with ALS has strengthened even further. We have also moved toward even more integrated and collaborative meetings between the assessment and family finder at ALS. This shift aims to streamline processes, reduce duplication, and address the delays previously identified in progressing adoption assessments. By bringing teams together earlier and more consistently, we are developing more time-efficient pathways that support timely decision-making and improved outcomes for children.
13. The increasing interest shown by foster carers wanting to provide permanent homes in the form of adoption is positive in terms of continuity for children, especially as many of these children have complex needs. This development supports the objective of achieving permanence for children ensuring that those with additional needs are given the opportunity to remain in stable, loving environments. Foster carers, already familiar with the children's needs and circumstances, are well-placed to offer continuity and security, helping to mitigate disruptions and promote positive outcomes for children whose situations are often more challenging.
14. Although foster carers seeking to adopt have many strengths in terms of their experience and knowledge of children, many of the assessments have been complex and required robust and intensive support plans.

Matches of children in Care with adopters

15. Four children were matched with prospective adopters at Adoption Panels during 2024-25 and all four were then agreed by the agency decision maker.
16. The age range of children matched at panel in 2024-25 ranges is from the eldest at six years and youngest are ten months. None of these children were part of sibling group.
17. Of the four children who were matched at panel in 2024-25, one child was of a Mixed any other background (MOTH), one was of Mixed White and Black Caribbean (MWBC), and two children of White British (WBRI) ethnicity.

Adoption Scorecard and Timescales for Southwark Children Scorecard complete

18. Adoption scorecards have been published by the Department for Education annually since 2012. They measure local authority performance against many adoption indicators but two measure below are regarded as key indicators and these are set out in the table below.

Measure	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
A10: Average time (days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions	340	362	428	644	762
A2: Average time (days) between Placement Order and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family	111	206	223	214	131

19. The chart above shows a decline in performance for A10 measure. The significant decline in performance of the A10 from 2023- 2024 can be attributed to one child. While the timescales in this case were prolonged, the child experienced a very positive outcome. He had been placed with his foster carers from around six weeks old, providing him with stability throughout the process and initially the LA discharged the Placement Order and they were matched as

long term foster carers. The carers were fully committed to meeting his complex needs and understood the level of long-term support he would require in terms of his disability. Their dedication ultimately led to permanence, as they went on to adopt him later in his childhood at around seven years old, so the LA reapplied for a Placement Order and they were assessed as adopters and have provided a secure, loving home for him. If we deduct the timescales for this child, the A10 would have been 435 in comparison to 762 recorded above.

20. The A2 figures measures from when the Court grant a Placement Order to when a match is agreed. For 2024-25 the A2 figure is 131 days. For this measure the quickest match was within 59 days from the Placement Order being granted.

Change of Plan from Adoption to Reunification to the Care of Parent/s

21. In 2024-2025 the Council did not apply to the Court to seek to change the care plan from Adoption to long-term fostering for any children.

Children Adopted

22. In 2024-25 there were five children adopted. This is a decline from ten in the previous year, and the number is impacted by the number of foster carers seeking to adopt the children in their care and using robust support and assessments were in place to support these arrangements.
23. The age range of the children adopted was from aged one year to aged six years old. Two children adopted were of Mixed any other background (MOTH), one child of Black any other Black background (BOTH) and two of White British (WBRI) ethnicity.

Reflections and Plans for 2024-2025

24. We have continued to identify and address barriers affecting our adoption timescales. To tackle these challenges, we have developed and are currently trialling a new workflow. This workflow enables real-time adjustments and incorporates practice guidance to drive ongoing improvement. It has been shared with ALS and Care Service for feedback. In addition, we have launched a dedicated Permanence Section within our Practice Learning hub, offering resources, training, and all necessary documentation for the adoption assessment process. By distributing adoption cases across our services, we are seeking to develop greater expertise within our teams.
25. It is recognised that our adoption timescales have lengthened, partly due to a significant rise in foster carers seeking to adopt children in their care. It is crucial that foster carers fully understand both the adoption process and their responsibilities within it, including their potential impact on timescales. To

support them, we are expanding training within the Fostering Service to ensure foster carers are well-informed and supported throughout both the practical and emotional aspects of the transition to adoption and the workflow will also be shared to ask if any other resources are needed.

26. Southwark is also introducing a protocol for foster carers to ensure that each stage from viability assessment to support and transfer to ALS is completed within a timely framework. The Permanence Lead will work closely with managers to oversee every element, ensuring thorough consideration of post-adoption family time arrangements with birth families and maintaining a child-focused approach to reports and assessments.
27. Post-adoption family time was previously coordinated by Adopt London South (ALS). This included arranging meaningful contact between children and their birth families, completing risk assessments, and communicating with both adoptive parents and birth relatives to ensure contact was safe, purposeful, and child-centred. As of April 2025, Southwark has successfully brought post-adoption family time in-house. The service now coordinates and delivers all post-adoption contact directly, allowing the local authority to provide a more consistent and responsive approach for children, adopters, and birth families. We anticipate that this area of work will continue to grow, particularly as adoption practice evolves towards greater openness and increased opportunities for direct family time. The service continues to develop so that Southwark can better meet these emerging needs, ensuring that children have more opportunities for safe, meaningful, and well-supported interactions with their birth families following adoption.
28. The LA provides generous and support packages for foster carers adopting who are caring for children with additional or complex needs. This approach ensures that no family faces financial barriers when considering adoption.
29. To improve timescales and reduce delay, the process for assessing and agreeing financial support has been strengthened and is now delivered more efficiently. Adopters and foster carers receive clearer, more detailed explanations of how financial decisions are made, including what is considered for instance unknown needs and how support levels are determined. This, empowers carers to ask informed questions of the local authority and to understand what to raise when obtaining legal advice.
30. Foster carers are now given more guidance about the overall adoption process particularly the importance of timely responses and how their decision-making links to the child's timescales. This ensures they have the information needed to make decisions confidently while keeping the child's timeline central.
31. Alongside working with the Black Adoption project formed in ALS in 2000, we recognise the disparity in adoptive placements for Black children and those from the global majority, and this is carefully considered in our viability assessments. We remain firmly committed to ensuring that, when children are not placed with families who share their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, we make every effort to ensure that their needs are fully met in all possible ways,

by assuring that foster carers are equipped and supported to meet these cultural and identity needs. This commitment will be clearly reflected in our updated viability assessment process.

32. The council's legal department continues to provide outstanding support, enabling the service to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding adoption. Their advice has been instrumental in shaping our practice guidelines. This has now been embedded within our Practice Learning Hub, ensuring that best practice is consistently maintained across the service.

Key / Non-Key decisions

33. The report does not relate to a key-decision.

Policy implications

34. There are no policy implications arising from this report.

Financial implications

35. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts **Community impact statement**

36. The decision to note this report has been judged to have a small but important impact on local people and communities. The work relating to adoption is government by decisions made by the Court.
37. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, lays out the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires public bodies to consider all individuals when carrying out their day to day work – in shaping policy, in delivering services and in relation to their own employees. It requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. The council's approach to equality commits the council to ensuring that equality is an integral part of our day-to-day business.
38. The council's Children's Services involves working closely with all relevant stakeholders and partners across the sector and collectively we are committed to upholding the responsibilities towards advocating the Public Sector Equality Duty and complying with the Equalities Act 2010. 13. The PSED enables public bodies to consider the diverse needs of groups and have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. Due regard is about considering the different needs of protected characteristics in relation to the three parts of the duty.

39. The Equalities Act 2010 define the following as protected characteristics; age; disability, gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement 15. The report takes account of the ethnicity, age and disabilities of children in care, as well as their racial ethnic background and considers these areas in light of commitments set out by Southwark Stands Together.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

40. A number of research studies and analyses have identified a clear social gradient in relation to social care statutory intervention to promote the protection and the welfare of children. We know that the greater the levels of deprivation and disadvantage faced by families the higher the likelihood that they will become involved with children's services nationally. This trend is consistent in Southwark with the level of deprivation in the home wards of the children in care being strongly correlated with the numbers of children in care.
41. Children from black/black British and mixed/multiple global majority groups are overrepresented in our children in care population when we compare them against the overall population of children in Southwark. This reflects national research around such intersectionality in relation to deprivation as described above. Overrepresentation of global majority communities is compounded when we account for unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

Climate change implications

42. There are no relevant climate change implications.

Social Value considerations

43. There are no relevant social value considerations.

Economic considerations

44. There are no relevant economic considerations.

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Adopt London South Annual Report 2024-2024

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Alasdair Smith, Director Children’s Services		
Version	Final		
Dated	16 February 2026		
Key Decision?	No		
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER			
Officer Title		Comments Sought	Comments Included
Assistant Chief Executive – Governance and Assurance		No	No
Strategic Director, Resources		No	No
Cabinet Member		No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team			16 February 2026

Annual Report

April 2024 – March 2025



**ADOPT
LONDON
SOUTH**

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Key

 **Link to page within this report**

 **Link to an external web page.**

About Adopt London South

Introduction and Context

This is the 6th annual report from Adopt London South. Adopt London South is a Regionalised Adoption Agency and is responsible for the recruitment, preparation and approval of adopters, for finding adoptive homes for children for whom adoption is the plan and for supporting adoptive households, adopted people and birth families on behalf of 10 London South London Boroughs.

Adopt London South formed on 1st July 2019 following the legislative changes to the Education and Children Act (2016) which mandated local authorities to provide adoption services through Regionalised Adoption Arrangements with a view to improving adoption services by developing the local service offer for timely and swift outcomes for children, adopters, adoptees and birth families.

Adopt London South provides adoption services for 10 of the 12 South London Local Authorities in London. The partners in Adopt London South are LB Croydon, LB Greenwich, LB Kingston & LB Richmond (operating as Achieving for Children),

LB Lambeth, LB Lewisham, LB Merton, LB Southwark, LB Sutton and LB Wandsworth.

9 of the 10 partners have been working together since July 2019. Royal Borough of Greenwich joined the partnership on the 1st April 2022.

Adopt London South has the largest number of partners in an RAA in the country and the partnership is underpinned by the Partnership Agreement and updated schedules to allow others to join the partnership. This agreement supports this delivery model and is in effect until March 2029.

Governance Arrangements

Adopt London South is overseen by the **Governance Board** which meets quarterly to consider performance and takes a high challenge, high support approach to focus on driving best practice. The Governance Board is chaired by the Director of Children's Services of the host Authority (LB Southwark). The membership to the Board includes the Directors of each of the partner Local Authorities. The Board is a strategic Board which is focused on

CROYDON
www.croydon.gov.uk

ROYAL borough of
GREENWICH

THE ROYAL BOROUGH OF
KINGSTON
UPON THAMES

Lambeth

Lewisham

merton

R LONDON BOROUGH OF
RICHMOND UPON THAMES

Southwark
Council
southwark.gov.uk

Sutton

THE BRIGHTER BOROUGH
Wandsworth



meeting key objectives in all service delivery areas that Adopt London South are responsible for, including:

📁 Finding Prospective Adopters

- Recruiting and preparing prospective adopters to meet the needs of the children who are waiting for adoption.

📁 Planning for Children

- Close liaison across the partnership to provide information advice and guidance around adoption matters and Early Permanence arrangements as appropriate as part of the care planning process.

📁 Placing children with adoptive parents

- Linking meetings, panel processes and progressing plans for arrangements to place children in adoptive homes in line with their care plans in a well-supported and thoughtful manner.

📁 Supporting the Adoption Community

- Supporting all members of the adoption community including children, adopted adults, adoptive families, and birth relatives.

- Timely access to adoption support to equip families to manage presenting needs through signposting to appropriate services or providing the right intervention as identified by an assessment of support needs.

ALS have monthly meetings with their **Quality Assurance Group** (QA Group). Membership comprises of permanence leads (who are senior managers across the partnership) and ALS management team with a view of developing effective consistent operational practices across the partnership.

The QA Group review performance on a quarterly basis and contribute to improving practice across the partnership including in the area of policy and practice development to ensure good outcomes for children and families in their adoption journey.

There is good evidence of sharing good practice across the partnership which strengthens the adoption practice across 10 boroughs.

Key areas of focus over the past year have included:

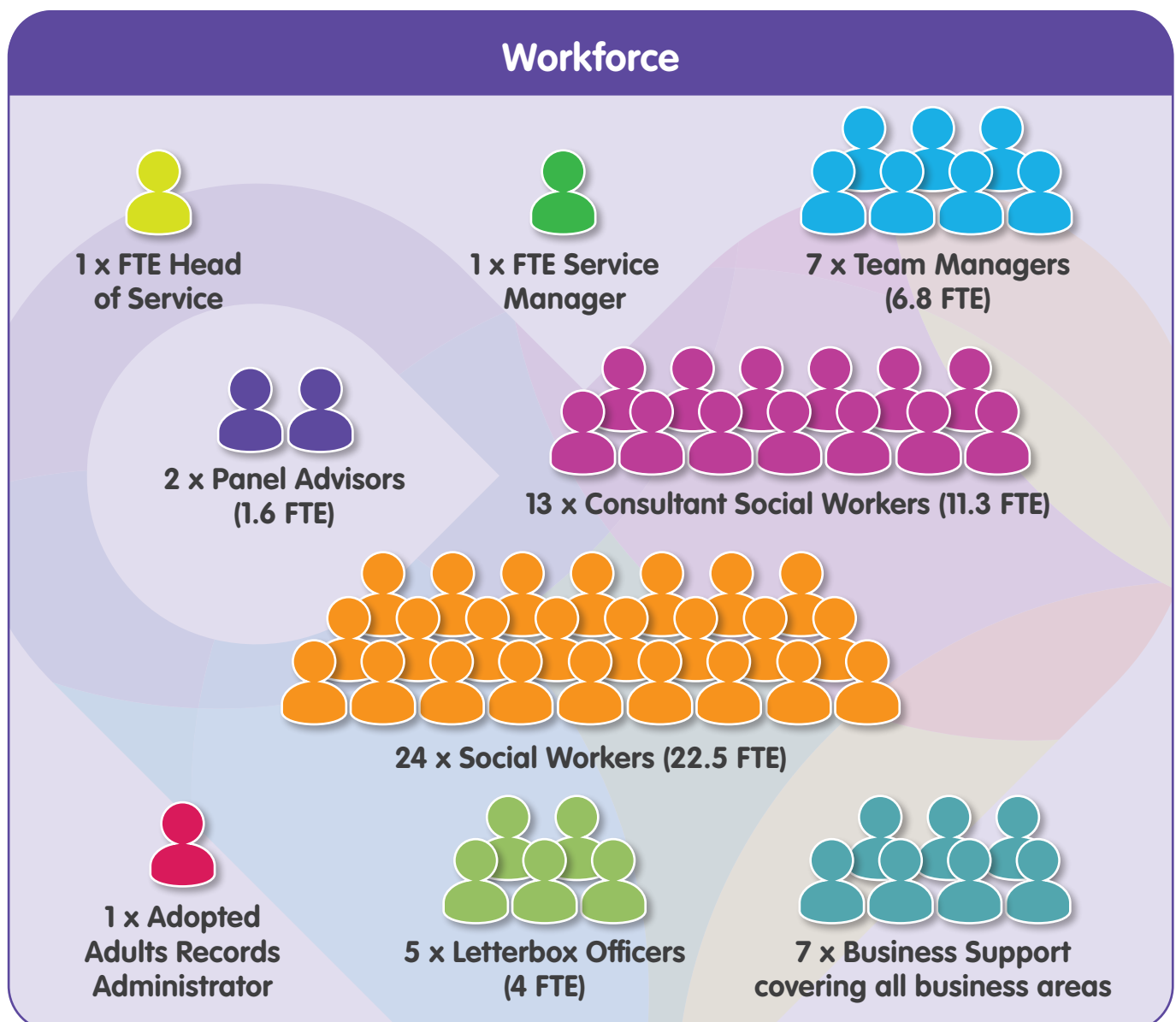
- Quarterly Performance Reporting
- Adopter Sufficiency
- Early Permanence
- Practice Models for Assessing Direct Keeping in Touch Arrangements
- Consented Adoption.

London is home to 5 Regionalised Adoption Agencies. There is a close working relationship under the banner of Adopt London between Adopt London South and 3 other London-based Regionalised Adoption Agencies. This mature partnership has enabled Adopt London to mobilise quickly to access grant funding to develop and support work that could not be undertaken individually and to drive good practice with the benefits of the pan-regional economies of scale. Shared projects have driven good practice, developed policies and upskilled the workforce across 24 London Boroughs to

benefit the Adoption Community and contribute to sector-wide improvements.

The Executive Advisory Board is made up of the 4 Governance Board Chairs of Adopt London South, North, East and West and is chaired independently by a DCS within the London region. The group oversees the work of Adopt London. You can read about [Adopt London](#) and the [governance of Adopt London](#) further on in the report.

Adopt London South's staffing arrangements include business support, specialist officers, social workers, team managers and senior managers. Adopt London South benefits from workforce stability which enables the retention of organisational and sector-wide knowledge, solid working relationships across the partnership and the ability to embed development across all practice areas within the adoption service.



The permanent staff team are complemented by the use of independent social workers who undertake discrete pieces of work. This includes prospective adopters assessments, non-agency adoption assessments and adoption support to adopted adults and those seeking their records. This enables flexibility and agility throughout the service to meet areas of increased demand in a responsive way and within the boundaries of the budget.

Ofsted Inspections

Adopt London South support all partners with adoption information in their Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspections and; if appropriate in focused visits. During 2024/2025, Adopt London South have supported 3 of the 10 partners throughout their ILACS inspection with the provision of data and facilitating meetings with Ofsted inspectors with service users and key people in the organisation. The boroughs who have been inspected during this year are:

🔗 [Royal Borough of Greenwich](https://bit.ly/4hNadw8) (bit.ly/4hNadw8)

🔗 [London Borough of Croydon](https://bit.ly/4hSIMIH) (bit.ly/4hSIMIH)

🔗 [Royal Borough of Kingston](https://bit.ly/47ySqWf) (bit.ly/47ySqWf)

Inspection of Regionalised Adoption Agencies

Between October and December 2023, Ofsted undertook the first set of inspections for the Regionalised Adoption Agency. There is currently no legislative requirement to inspect RAA's but at the invitation of the Secretary of State, Ofsted were invited to undertake a thematic inspection and provide a composite inspection report based on the findings.

These inspections took place as planned in 2023 and the thematic report was published in March 2026. Since this time, there have been no further plans announced for ongoing inspections of Regionalised Adoption Agencies and no inspection framework has been devised. Adoption remains inspected through the lens

of the ILACS process of the boroughs to capture children's adoption journeys and the ILACS framework has been broadened to include details of families who have asked for support in the 6 months preceding an inspection.

Commissioned Partnerships

Adopt London South continue to benefit from partnerships through commissioned services with expertise in key areas of adoption.

Coram Intercountry Adoption Centre provide expertise on matters of international adoption.

Peer Support is partially provided by We Are Family through the provision of a grant from Adopt London.

Adopted Adults and Birth Parent support is provided by PAC-UK. These service offers are discussed further in this report.



Outcomes

There are 5 key service delivery areas driving the work of Adopt London South with a focus and further details can be found by following the links below or reading further along in this report.

The key areas are

1. [Finding prospective adoptive parents](#)

2. [Preparing and approving adoptive parents](#)

3. [Planning for children](#)

4. [Placing children with adoptive parents](#)

5. [Providing support to adoptive families and to birth parents](#)

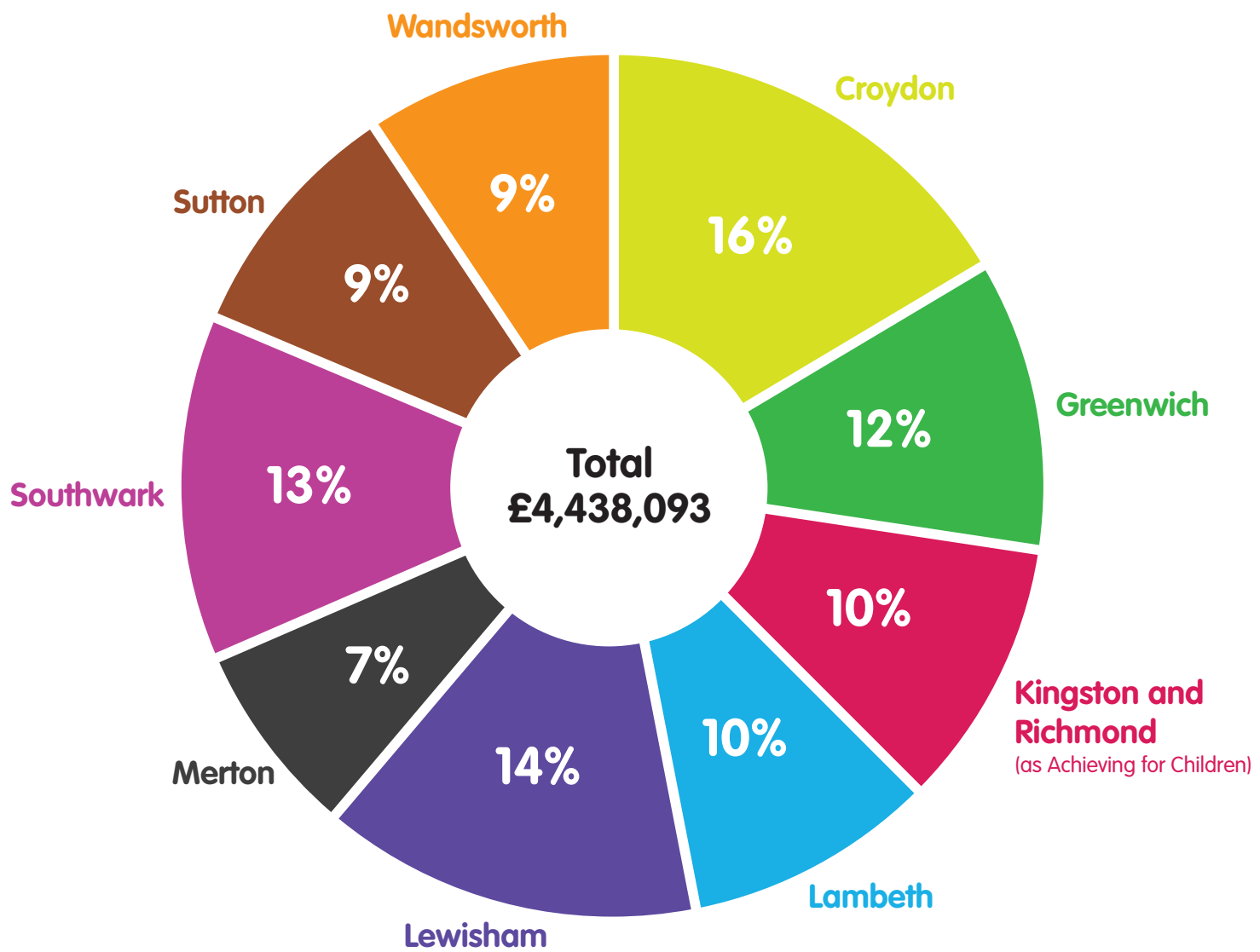
Financial spend 2024/25

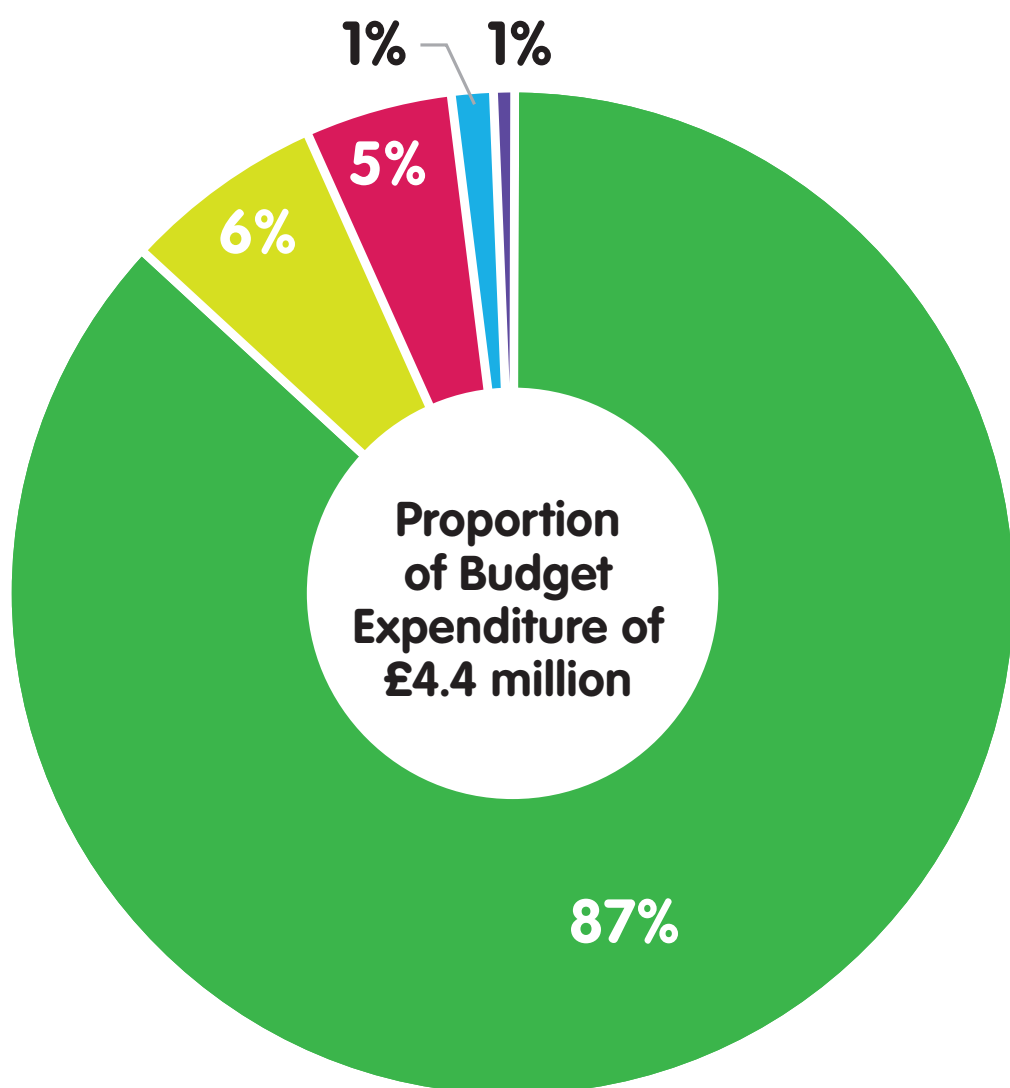
Adopt London South is funded by contributions from each of the boroughs in the partnership. There is a demand-led financial model that determines the contributions based on two KPI's of the number of children matched per borough and the number of families requesting adoption support by borough.

The cost to each borough reflects the running cost of ALS and includes the cost for staffing, commissioned services, facilities and adoption-related expenses and the total 2024/25 budget for ALS was £4.4million slightly up from the budget the previous year of £4.3million

The percentage 2024-2025 partner contributions as per the model described above are reflected below:







- Staffing including agency
- Professional fees and subscriptions
- Building and Facilities
- Adopt London Shared Costs, Marketing and Publicity
- Sundry Adoption Costs

Expenditure category	amount in '000s
Staffing including agency	3,850
Professional fees and subscriptions	241
Building and Facilities	324
Adopt London Shared Costs, Marketing and Publicity	64
Sundry Adoption Costs	19
Total	4,494

National adoption landscape

Adoption England

Adoption England leads on the modernisation of adoption agenda by coordinating and overseeing the combined efforts of 33 Regional Adoption Agencies in England who are working together to design and implement sector-wide developments and improvements.

The focus of the RAA's work is to deliver the 5 strategic priorities of the [Adoption England Adoption Strategy \(bit.ly/3LuLdOm\)](https://bit.ly/3LuLdOm) which will be launched in April 2024.

The Department for Education provides funding for Adoption England through a centrally funded staff team and grants available to Regional Adoption Agencies collaborating in pan-regional partnerships:

1. Recruitment of Adopters with a specific view to ensure adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and well supported to meet children's needs.

2. Adopted people maintain relationships with the important people throughout their lives and have a clear understanding about why they were adopted.

3. Children and young people, adopted adults and birth families and adopters are listened to and shape the delivery of services locally and nationally.

4. Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. The needs of the children are well understood and all efforts are made to understand their needs, and



their feelings are respected and attended to with sensitivity.

5. Adopted people and their families get help and support when they need it.

In recent years, following rigorous bidding processes, the Adopt London partnership has successfully obtained grant funding to provide pump prime support for the overall aims and strategies of Adoption England through joint practice development across areas including the matching of children with adoptive families,



Image credit: Adoption England 2024

early permanency practice, the Black Adoption Project, and the development of new models for adoption support. The grant funding has been made available to Adopt London as a pan-region which brings quality and consistency across 24 London Boroughs.

This section of the report highlights key areas of national practice development which are supported by the work of Adoption England. You can read more about the work of Adoption England in their [annual report](https://shorturl.at/MNIWY). (shorturl.at/MNIWY)

Modernising Contact – Public Law Working Outline Consultation

On 7 November 2024, the Public Law Working Group (Adoption) Report was published following a consultation period across the wider sector.

The Public Law Working Group Report focuses on 5 key areas of adoption, looking at existing practice and making recommendations for improvements to the adoption system in the following areas of adoption:

- Adoption and Contact
- Access to Records
- Practice and Procedure
- Adoption with an International Element
- Adoption by Consent

Whilst the recommendations have not been legislated, there is a sector-wide acceptance that the themes that have been looked at, and the recommendations that have been made reflect an improvement in adoption practice.

This has had a significant impact on service delivery across key areas of adoption practice. It is also commonly understood that there will be a journey to improvement and some areas will need the additional benefit and focus of targeted resources to deliver the wholesale reform that is being recommended. In addition, it is accepted that current legislation is not fully reflective of the developments in adoption practice and this is a barrier that will need further scrutiny.

The report makes a range of detailed recommendations about adoption practice and court procedures, particularly in relation



to the use of direct contact in adoption. These recommendations have significant implications for local authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies if implemented by courts, however the Department for Education has to date not committed to making any changes to the law or statutory guidance to support the court's agenda.

Research and insights from lived experience support the need for adoption plans to more frequently recommend direct contact between adopted children and their birth families, and for this to be more robustly supported on a long-term basis. However, due to models of adoption contact being historically based on indirect communication, most Regional Adoption Agencies (including Adopt London South) have not been set up with the capacity to provide the type of contact service that this change in practice would require. Whilst further national support and / or statutory guidance is awaited, ALS are monitoring contact recommendations and plans, and the costs related to these, to inform future decisions.

The full report can be read here [Wholesale reform to adoption process is needed, says Public Law Working Group – Courts and Tribunals Judiciary](https://shorturl.at/GTDpz) (shorturl.at/GTDpz)

PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT

Maintaining relationships: learning from research & lived experience

■ Everyone's experience is unique – there can be no single model for maintaining relationships that fits for every adopted person, and different forms of contact may be best for different children

■ When adopted people do have some kind of contact, it can help them:

- Understand why they were adopted
- Provide information about their birth family
- Reassure them that they have not been forgotten
- Let them know that their birth family accepts their dual connection to two families

■ Contact needs change over time based on the views of the adopted person and the situation in the birth family – even if it is not right at the beginning, it might be later on

■ Being involved in decisions about contact provides young people with a sense of control over their lives

■ Having safe and supported contact reduces the likelihood of risky unplanned online contact

■ Contact can support adoptive families to feel closer to their adopted child through learning more about their history together

■ Even when contact cannot happen consistently or directly, conversations about contact within the adoptive family support wider discussions which help young people make sense of their story

Learn more about this topic and hear directly from those with lived experience by following these links:



vimeo.com/825775170



shorturl.at/LGLBH

'Becoming a Family' Framework

Adoption England have led work to develop a national framework to support the early stages of adoptive parenthood. The framework is designed to provide a consistent level of good practice in early placement support across England and support parents to build confidence and begin to put into practice what they have learnt in their preparation training. The framework is built around five key principles:

- Be preventative and support foundational building blocks of parenting in adoption
- Enable adoptive parents to begin developing confidence as therapeutic parents
- Build resilience through strong social networks and peer support

- Respond to individual needs with access to a wide range of multi-agency services
- Offer consistency in support across England, particularly for families adopting a child from another region.

The framework is currently being piloted until April 2026 before being rolled out to RAAs nationally.

National Adopter Sufficiency

Over the last 18 months there has been a significant drop in adoptive parent sufficiency across England. Starting in the north of England but spreading across most regions, RAAs and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) have seen the impact of economic conditions play

a particularly prominent role in preventing people coming forward for adoption, alongside housing difficulties and a broader sense of global insecurity. Adoption England are supporting some regions to pilot various approaches for providing economic support to prospective adoptive parents, with learning shared nationally.

In Adopt London South, we have started to feel the effects of the challenges with the recruitment of adoptive parents however we continue to monitor this closely and observe changes. The national picture does have an impact on London RAAs through a shortage of available inter-agency placements for London children.

London Region

Regional Alliances

Adopt London South works in a close partnership with three other Regionalised Adoption Agencies across London. Additionally, Adopt London are currently working on a shared project with the other London RAA (Coram Ambitious for Adoption) with a view to delivering the London Early Permanence project which has been grant funded by Adoption England.

There are also close links with regional-based Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA's) and the work in this area is focused on improving the service offer and providing choice and flexibility in finding the right adoptive homes for children. The work around sufficiency has been ongoing as part of this partnership work across VAA's and RAA's with a view to enhancing the knowledge of the workforce with a view to improving and strengthening service delivery for anyone who comes into contact with adoption services.

There is an established Lunch and Learn Programme which is often led by experts-by-experience and key professionals within adoption specialisms, for example, Agency Medical Advisors. These sessions bring together panel members and staff across the VAA's and RAA's and share pertinent insights for consideration in developing a pool of adopters who are ready for the modern adoption experience and are ready and able to care for children who are likely to be placed for adoption.

- Supporting Prospective Adopters with Mental Health
- Education, Health and Care Plans and Education
- Non-Violent Resistant training

These bitesize learning sessions have been instrumental in supporting those who are preparing and supporting prospective and approved adopters and have routinely reached 70+ staff and panel members each time they have been delivered. The impact of these Lunch and Learn sessions has been invaluable.



“Education is an area which impacts greatly on our families if we don’t get it right. It was helpful to get the links to more resources to read and share.”

“I think they work well, good to have perspectives from professionals and people with lived experience – and interesting in particular when those two can overlap!”

“Helpful information shared that we can share with adopters and to support adopted children.”

“Useful to hear from professional and parent.”

Early Permanence Project

The London Early Permanence project focuses on improving understanding of



Early Permanence practice and arrangements with a view to increasing the pool of potential Early Permanence carers and ensuring that Early Permanence arrangements are used or considered for each child for whom this is appropriate through strengthening the understanding of this niche area of adoption work across the Local Authority partners and the RAA workforce.

The project covers all London Boroughs with the exception of LB Bexley as they are in a partnership with a non-London based RAA.

The London Early Permanence project is led by a Project Manager who has been seconded from within Adopt London. Deliverables against the project include:

- Improving the preparation of Early Permanence carers
- Streamlining the Early Permanence Preparation training offer
- Developing the workforce across the boroughs through the provision of workshops to improve social workers, IRO's Team Managers and other key stakeholders understanding about Early Permanence arrangements.
- Embedding First Aid training
- Delivery of Early Permanence Support Groups
- Mapping Improvements in Early Permanence Carer Pool
- Wider engagement with the Judiciary and Cafcass to develop understanding of Early Permanence

Early Permanence Conference

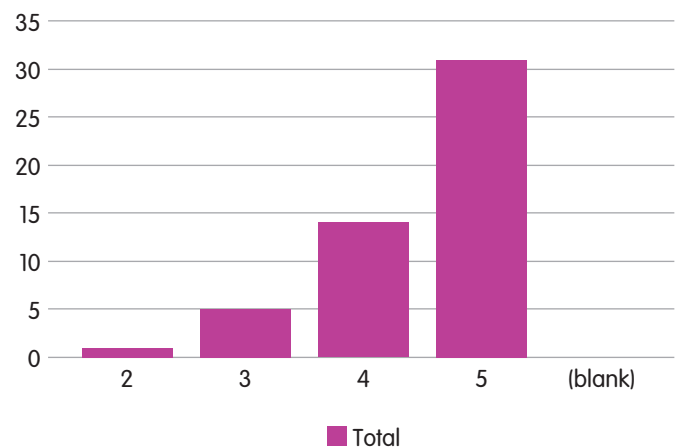
An Early Permanence Conference was delivered in July 2024 which brought together members of the Judiciary, Strategic Leads and Legal representation from across the 32 London Boroughs

The conference benefitted from the voices of lived experiences of Early Permanence carers who have supported reunification plans for children and those who went on to adopt their children. Key messages around support, improving systems and space for Early Permanence carers to express their feelings were resonant.

The legal framework was captured by keynote speaker, Alexandra Conroy-Harris and afternoon workshops enabled the sector to share knowledge and best practice.

Just under half the attendees provided feedback but the feedback from the event was overwhelmingly positive with most people rating the conference 5/5. (Please See table below for ratings)

Early Permanence Conference Feedback



The London Early Permanence Project has had an extension to complete the work set out in the workplan by September 2025 and the area of focus will be around sustainability of the newly embedded practice around equipping the workforce and preparing EP carers and also delivering clarity about the roles and expectations under the Fostering Regulations as this is currently a grey area nationally as the EP Regulations and Adoption Regulations are not always aligned in expectations.

Some other planned highlights for the final phase of this project include:

- Filming a video about the perspectives of birth parents in Early Permanence
- Working with stakeholders to develop guidance on supporting final contact meetings between children and their birth parents prior to adoption
- Delivering Paediatric First Aid training for all Adopt London prospective adoptive parent
- Commissioning safeguarding training and making this available to all prospective EP carers and adopters.

Once the project comes to an end, some of the work developed within the project will transition back to RAAs so that these new services continue to be offered into the future.

Adopt London



Structure of Adopt London

Adopt London operates regionally through four distinct Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), each covering key areas across North, South, East, and West London. Collectively, these agencies support 24 London Boroughs, showcasing a strong track record in collaborative working that enhances outcomes for adopted children, adoptive families, birth parents, and adopted adults.

The organisation unites best practices across the region, fostering consistent approaches to service delivery, policy development, and recruitment. A shared website and coordinated marketing strategy are being developed to build a unified London-wide presence for attracting prospective adopters.

Each RAA is hosted by a lead borough:

- Adopt London South – hosted by the London Borough of Southwark
- Adopt London North – hosted by the London Borough of Islington
- Adopt London East – hosted by the London Borough of Havering
- Adopt London West – hosted by the London Borough of Ealing

Strong collaboration among Heads of Service, Service Managers, Team Managers, Panel Advisors, and Marketing and Communications leads underpins the development of shared standards and joint service delivery across the region.

Adopt London Governance Arrangements

Quarterly meetings with the four Adopt London Heads of Service and the four host Boroughs Board Chairs are chaired by a non-host partner DCS to form the Executive Advisory Board. This Board oversees the strategic joint working of Adopt London and provides advisory capacity to support with problem-solving or to improve traction in moving projects forward by mobilising support of other senior leaders when their input is necessary to draw attention to and promote key areas of work or to provide strategic considerations and expertise to resolve particular challenges.

The Executive Advisory Board has sought to assure the governance of Adopt London projects, shared assets, branding and social media through an Adopt London Legal Partnership which is being coordinated and led by Adopt London West. Upon securing this agreement the responsibilities of the Executive Advisory Board will be formalised for Adopt London.

Adopt London Activity

Adopt London's work is coordinated by the four Heads of Service, who collaborate to implement a strategic plan endorsed and supported by the Executive Advisory Board. A shared budget,

drawn from the broader budgets of the four individual Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), funds joint initiatives.

The strategic plan prioritises:

- Governance and commissioning structures
- Development of operational practices in key focus areas
- Marketing and communication strategies
- Ensuring the voices and perspectives of key stakeholders in the adoption community, including birth relatives, are heard and valued.

Key Areas from Adopt London's collaborations in 2024/25 include:

- ▢ **Black Adoption Project**
- ▢ **Matching project**
- ▢ **Adopt London staff conference**
- ▢ **Adult adoptee support**
- ▢ **We Are Family peer support**
- ▢ **Adopt London choir**
- ▢ **Adoption support commissioning**
- ▢ **Early permanence project**

Black Adoption Project

The Black Adoption Project is a long-term project which is delivered in partnership with Laurelle Brown Training and Consultancy. The project's aim is to address and reduce the stark disparity of adoption outcomes for children of black and black mixed heritage children, when compared with other groups. The project began in 2020 with a view to looking at adoption as a system, identifying barriers and understanding how these barriers disproportionately affect black people as a result of wider systemic inequity and inequality with a longer term aim to create sustainable systems change with a view to dismantling these barriers whilst maintaining fidelity to the adoption process and see better outcomes for black children and black families. More detail can be found [further on in this report](#).



Matching Project

The Matching Project is an Adopt London project which focuses on improving and strengthening the matching process for children so that they can go on to be placed with their permanent families as quickly as possible in line with the Adoption England strategic vision. This project was funded following a successful bid to Adoption England for a grant to support this work. Whilst the funding was finite in nature, creating short term capacity to drive key areas of this project, there have been features of the project which have become embedded in daily practice which has been a valuable and incalculable return on the initial investment.

The project ended in March 2025 and during its span it has:

- Delivered training to staff across the 24 London Boroughs within Adopt London
- Reshaped profiles for adopters and children
- Delivered several successful Stay and Plays at a venue in central London

In the final period of the project, we benefited from a multidisciplinary approach with the expertise of a clinical psychologist, Dr Megan Hollett, who was available to support more complex matching decisions and transitions planning. Social work teams working with many children placed for adoption through ALS benefited from this additional reflective support, and Adopt London now aim to build on this learning to develop an ongoing clinical support offer focused on the transitions and early placement period.



PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT

The needs of neurodivergent children in adoption transitions

Our clinical psychologist, Dr Megan Hollett, worked with family finding teams and Professor Beth Neil at the University of East Anglia to develop her work on transitions planning for children ([Moving to Adoption](https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk) www.movingtoadoption.co.uk) and consider how plans could be adapted for neurodivergent children. She produced a guide which supports practitioners' understanding of the relationship between neurodivergence and trauma, including the impact on the 'window of tolerance' a child may have to manage significant changes and stress – such as during adoption transitions.

Key areas identified for practitioners to focus on providing additional support include:

- Increasing predictability in the transition. This includes the use of visual support such as visual timetables and photographs, and the use of routine, ritual and familiarity to help children feel safe and secure.
- Supporting social interactions for the child such as providing additional 'scaffolding', reducing demands, and allowing for extended introductory periods.
- Supporting regulation including emotional and behavioural presentation but also sensory needs and special interests.

You can find out more about the Moving to Adoption model at this link:



Adopt London Staff Conference

The Annual Adopt London Staff Conference was held in February 2025 bringing together 160 staff in an event that helps develop ownership of partnership working within Adopt London and also offers our staff the opportunity to learn about new areas and developments within our work and understand the visions and ambitions for the future,

This year, the first half the conference focused on the AFDiT model (Antiracist Framework for Decision-making in transitioning children from minoritised racial and ethnic groups into Transracial adoptive Families). This is a new research model designed to support decision making about the placement of global majority children in placements where their parents won't reflect their ethnic origin. This was delivered by the author of the AFDiT Research and model, Dr Tam Cane (University of West Sussex). This provided staff an opportunity to hear first-hand about the research and the model and also

hear from a young person who was adopted transracially and was able to share their experiences of their parents input to support their identity development in a powerful way.

The afternoon session was focused on the voices of experts-by-experience from the Black Adoption Project and was led by one of the co-chairs of the Steering Committee and a member of the Steering Committee. They provided updates around developments in the project and they; along with two Black Adoptive parents spoke powerfully about their personal journeys, the impact of the Black Adoption Project and ended with a call to action from staff highlighting how they can be a meaningful part of this project.

We were honoured to be joined for part of the day by Janet Daby MP, Minister for Children & Families, who held a roundtable discussion with Black Adoption Project representatives during the lunch break and gave a speech to the conference about the work of the project and stating her

ongoing commitment to supporting the valuable work around adoption.

At the end of the day staff expressed how inspired they had been by the lived experience speakers and renewed their commitment to supporting these practice areas in their own work.



Minister Daby

Adult Adoptee Support

Adopt London continue to support the Transracial Adult Adoptee Network (TAAN) which provides support to transracial adoptees to reflect on their unique adoption experience of growing up in a family that didn't reflect their cultural or racial heritage. The group has continued to grow and strengthen, hearing from a range of interesting speakers and building their relationships with one another. This group is peer-led with some support from Adopt London to manage the coordination of this group and it is offered to any transracial adoptee willing to travel to London for meetings and has members who regularly travel from other parts of the country to attend, ranging

**Transracial
Adult
Adoptee
Network**

PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT

The AFDiT model for decision-making in transracial adoption

- Supports social work decision making around moving children to placements which do not reflect their heritage or ethnicity
- Highlights the lived experiences of those who have been transracially adopted
- Provides firm examples of the types of support transracially adopting parents can offer their children to mitigate the challenges they face
- Encourages the assessment of both the 'racial and cultural consciousness' and the 'race intentionality' of prospective carers – emphasising that carers need to have a strong commitment to support their child's heritage, as well as a strong understanding and awareness of their likely needs
- Provides guidance on applying the principles of the model to the decision-making period, during transitions to a new carer, and within the support period after a child has moved.



"Sometimes I hated my skin. I wanted to peel it off... The risk of racialised trauma, as I now know it, really needs to fully be considered."

– Adoptee, page 52 AFDiT framework

"Don't expect them to be mini 'mes'; let them pursue what they want and who they want to be, even if it means challenging white-dominant environments to let your child fit in."

– Adoptive parent, page 60 AFDiT framework

Learn more about this topic and hear directly from those with lived experience by following these links:



shorturl.at/XNbSz



tinyurl.com/5d6p4yrb

in age from 20s to 70s. The opportunity to meet in person with other transracially adopted adults often has a profound, life-changing impact on adoptees who attend meetings and the attendance rate and distance that Adult Adoptees travel from are testament to the need for this type of support. This year facilitators from the group led a workshop at the national Adoption England conference, encouraging other Regional Adoption Agencies to initiate their own peer support groups for adult adoptees and sharing their blueprint for doing this in partnership with adopted adults.

We Are Family Peer Support

We Are Family (WAF) is an independent peer-to-peer support charity that was founded by adoptive parents for adoptive parents. Adopt London support We Are Family through an annual grant, to provide formal peer support to adopters along with access to a range of expert resources. All prospective adopters are encouraged to join We Are Family for free during stage 1 of their assessment, and the range of support available



“I felt very alone dealing with the challenges of adopting children that experienced so much trauma, meeting experienced adopters gave me more confidence and helped me feel I was not a rubbish parent. The support provided by other adopters was inspiring.”

– We Are Family member

“I was lucky that I found We Are Family early into our placement, my husband & I were struggling with no family or support close by and being part of We Are Family changed that. I don’t believe we would have the relationship with our children that we have now if it were not for the help, support and understanding that other WAF members gave to me.”

– We Are Family member

83%

of members agree or strongly agree that since joining WAF, they have access to more resources, information and support to manage the challenges of adoptive parenting.

increases as they progress through to approval and have their adopted child/ren move in with them. Currently over 1500 adoptive parents are members of We Are Family through Adopt London.



In addition to locality-based support groups and specialist groups for single adopters, early permanence carers, and parents of teens, We Are Family regularly support family meet ups, summer picnics, and access to London-based cultural events. This year WAF delivered 63 events in Adopt London areas including 27 parent support meet-ups, 13 playgroups, and 15 family meet-ups.

In partnership with Adopt London, We Are Family also provide a range of accessible digital support through ‘WAF Talks’, a programme which has now delivered over 100 webinars available for adoptive parents to join live or watch back on demand, and through ‘Adoption Shared’, a specialist podcast designed to deepen understanding of the lived experience of adoption.



Adopt London Choir

The Adopt London Choir was established during the pandemic as a way of increasing well-being and connecting adoptive families together. The choir continues to grow in membership and choir members share how positive and supportive the choir is to them as the singing is uplifting and the informal peer support is invaluable. The choir is open to adopted children, adopters and staff members.

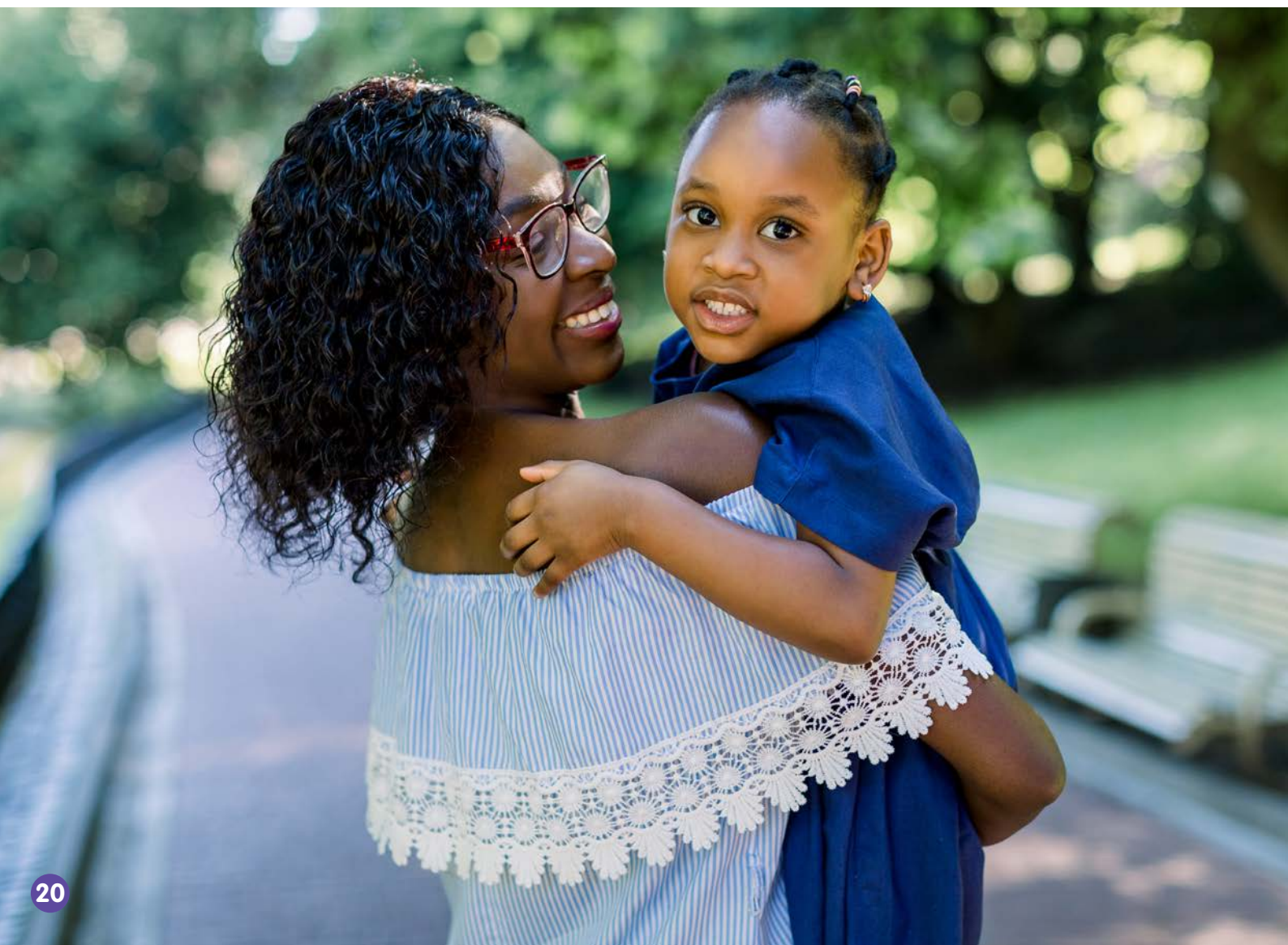


“I have been happier due to the love of singing and having something to look forward to, and bond with my son more as we listen and sing songs together, it has helped me with my emotions and self-doubt.”

– Choir survey, member feedback

Adoption Support Commissioning

Adopt London have been awarded funds to explore opportunities around joint commissioning of services pan-regionally. This project has been funded through a grant from the Department for Education via Adoption England to test out the provision of an Adopt London clinical hub to bring some commissioned services in-house. This is a phased project and it is currently in phase one which is undertaking a needs assessment to get an understanding of the providers that are used across the region and the services that they offer. The scoping activities can begin in earnest to explore regional commissioning arrangements, which; if successful aspires to transform the delivery of services as part of the longer-term goals and reduce reliance on the current spot-purchasing arrangements from providers with limited capacity as well as reducing the current administrative burden of hundreds of individual arrangements with providers.



The Black Adoption Project



Adopt London, in partnership with **Laurelle Brown Training and Consultancy**, is leading the **Black Adoption Project**. This initiative was developed in response to the disparities affecting Black children in the adoption system, as well as the experiences of Black families considering or going through adoption.

The project explores various stages of the adoption process to understand how these disparities impact outcomes. Its goal is to drive meaningful, lasting change in how adoption services are delivered – ensuring that Black African, Black Caribbean, and mixed-heritage children do not face poorer outcomes due to institutional bias. It also aims to prevent the marginalisation of Black families through Eurocentric adoption criteria or culturally insensitive assessment processes.

- Black children who have a plan for adoption agreed by the court are around 20% less likely than other children to go on to be adopted, often because suitable adoptive families cannot be identified.
- Black children who are adopted wait an average of 6½ to 8 months longer than other children to move into their adoptive family.
- Black prospective adopters are 5–6 times more likely to drop out during the adoption assessment process and not go on to adopt a child.

The **Phase One Report** – available [here](https://tinyurl.com/mvphekr6) (tinyurl.com/mvphekr6) – highlights key findings and insights from stakeholder-led **Theory of Change** (tinyurl.com/5ynx64zj) workshops. These findings have shaped the development of pilot initiatives designed to:

- Support prospective adopters and improve retention through to successful assessment.
- Create social and educational groups for Black adopted children and young people.
- Empower communities to lead awareness efforts and share adoption narratives, with the aim of increasing Black family recruitment.

The project has successfully recruited a project lead Charmaine Miller. The current focus of work relates to developing and delivering a number of projects and also researching key areas of the family finding process to explore if there is any critical learning from the journeys of black children compared to other groups that helps us to understand if there are practice issues that are impacting outcomes for children. The project was awarded Adoption England grant funding in 2024/25 to help mobilise a range of pilot projects developed in response to our phase 1 research, and in partnership with those with lived experience of Black adoption. We highlight progress with some of these pilot projects in this section of the report.

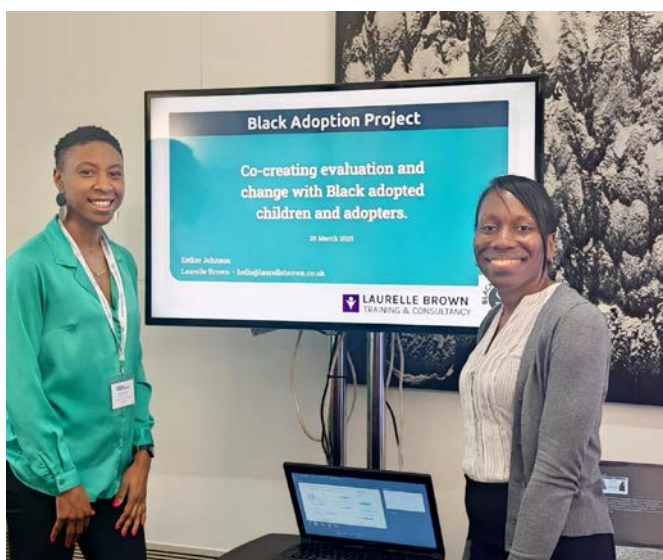
A key project principle is to support wider change through dissemination of learning, and therefore regular webinars are being held and are available after the event to watch on demand.



Some members of the Black Adoption Project Steering Committee

The work of the project is supported by a Steering Committee made up of those with personal and professional experience of Black adoption, co-chaired by an adopted person and children's services Directors. An Adoptive Parents Stakeholder Group and Research & Evaluation Advisory Group provide additional insight, challenge, and support.

Many of those with lived experience of adoption have spoken at national events this year on behalf of the Black Adoption Project, including presentations to the Department for Education, Adoption England's national conference, and Children & Young People Now conference.



Improving Support for Black Prospective Adopters

One of the pilots launched this year is co-designed with Black adoptive parents to improve the support and advocacy available for Black prospective adopters (including racially diverse couples) during the assessment process. The pilot aims to reduce some of the additional barriers Black households may face coming into the adoption process, and increase the proportion who complete the assessment and go on to adopt a child.

Following the design process a support group called 'Let's Talk About Adoption' was launched, run directly by adoptive parents. The group aims to provide a space away from professionals where prospective adopters can ask questions, access support to escalate issues within the RAA if needed, and meet role models who reflect their own racial heritage. The support available from the group also provides an additional incentive for Black families considering adoption to choose Adopt London as their agency. Positive feedback has already been received by those accessing the group and its importance recognised in Prospective Adopter Report assessments and at approval panel meetings. The impact is being independently evaluated by a research partner.

Supporting Black Adopted Children & Young People

Black and mixed Black heritage adopted children who participated in our theory of change process identified several key areas where the Black Adoption Project could help to improve their wellbeing. These included opportunities to socialise with other Black adopted young people, and support to better understand their Black identity and Black history within the context of their adoption. In response to these messages and through a co-design process for young people, a social group was launched in spring 2025.

Meeting in a youth centre on a Saturday, the group aims to provide young people with an opportunity to build friendships with other Black adopted young people, and provide creative ways for them to share their views and experiences with others. Although not the initial motivation for the group, it also provides an

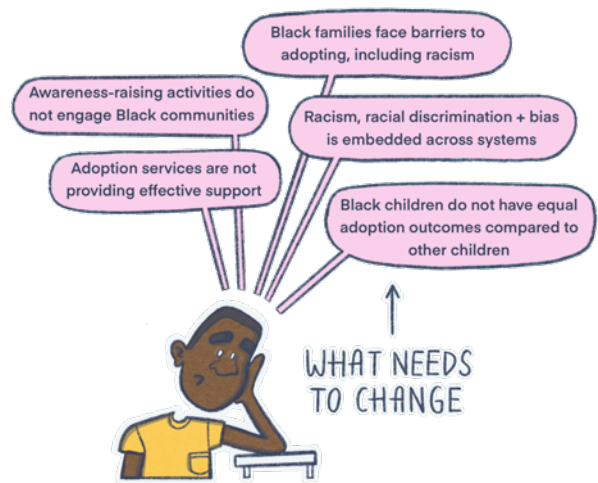


opportunity for parents to meet, network, and provide mutual support – including white parents who have transracially adopted.

Further to the successful launch of the social group, a second pilot has been developed for launch in autumn 2025 aimed specifically at older young people called 'Exploring my Black Identity'. This is a 16-week programme run by an experienced Black history youth worker and a therapist, designed to support young people to learn and reflect on Black UK and global history and Black identities within an adoption context. Topics identified with the young people will include: music and pop culture; hair, style, and self-expression; Black British and global history; resistance, joy & pride; and Black adoption. The therapist will support the young people to integrate emotional regulation practices and will provide 1:1 reflection points within the programme. Young people will be encouraged to keep a reflective journal and use photography to highlight their insights, both of which will contribute to an evaluation being undertaken by our research partner.

Specific Information & Advice to Black Prospective Adopters

Through the Black Adoption Project, Adopt London have started to offer specific sessions for Black and mixed Black heritage families considering adoption. Run in a similar format to our regular 'Meet The Adopter' events, these provide an opportunity for households to hear from a panel of Black adoptive parents and be provided with information about the additional support available through the Black Adoption Project, including the offer of 1:1 discussions with an experienced Black adoptive parent for anyone considering adoption. These events give us an opportunity to target our advertising specifically at Black households, including through social media and personal connections. We will continue to run these sessions through 2025/26 in different formats to evaluate the most effective model and impact on adopter recruitment.



Supporting Families and Strengthening the Workforce

While the project continues to support children and families, it also places strong emphasis on workforce development. Through staff training and learning opportunities, the project has encouraged more open and honest conversations about the role of race in service delivery. It is dedicated to equipping staff with the skills to approach these discussions with cultural humility, curiosity, and confidence – fostering meaningful, systemic change from within.



Stay Connected

To learn more about the Black Adoption Project and stay informed about upcoming events, resources, and milestones, scan the QR code to sign up for updates.





Adopt London South Adopter Voice and Participation

Adopt London South's Adopter Executive Group was formed in September 2023 and is a group of adopters who meet to discuss pertinent matters within their community. The group is chaired by an adoptive parent and amongst other things, the group highlight their key priorities and provide consultation on service development including reviewing of new policies or guidance which may affect adopters.

The core membership of the group is strong and committed and there is a general understanding that this can be changeable depending on the needs of adoptive families at the time.

The Adopter Executive Group provided the expert-by-experience voice on concerns around the experience of adopted children and adoptive families with education, and this is one of the priority areas that will be focused on moving forward.

Coram Intercountry Adoption Centre (Coram IAC)

Coram IAC are sector experts on intercountry adoption and provide a commissioned service to Adopt London South families as well as advice and consultation to Adopt London South staff.

Coram IAC are nationally renowned for their expertise in intercountry adoption matters and keep abreast of developments in adoption in different countries to provide accurate advice as laws and priorities around adoption shift globally. Coram IAC ensure the delivery of a service in line with the legislative requirements on the various states of origin for children and are commissioned to deliver all the intercountry work on behalf of the ALS partnership, including supporting adoptive placements and meeting the various regulatory monitoring requirements as stipulated from the country of origin for a child.

coram IAC 
Intercountry Adoption Centre

The Adoption Panel

Structure of the Adoption Panel

Adopt London South Adoption Panels and the role of the Panel is to oversee and make recommendations on:

- Matching decisions for children to be placed with adoptive families
- Best Interest Decisions for consented adoption (formerly referred to as relinquished children)
- Approval of prospective adopters, including recommendation of suitability of approved adopters as Early Permanence Carers where appropriate
- Reviewing the continued approval of prospective adoptive parents

The panel reviews assessments and reports that are presented and make recommendations based on these reports to Agency Decision Makers (ADM) to provide their view about the suitability of plans and assessments presented. The panel recommendations help the ADM's to make relevant decisions about:

- children going to live with identified adoptive families
- whether adoption is the right plan for a child whose parents are consenting to adoption
- whether prospective adopters are suitable to become adopters
- whether approached adopters can remain approved after a period of time.

There are two types of Agency Decision Makers who the panel share their recommendations with.

- Recommendations relating to decisions about children's best interests, or their future adoptive homes are presented to the **Agency Decision Maker in the child's borough** for the final decision to ratify the panel recommendation or not.
- Recommendations relating solely to prospective adopters are presented to the **Agency Decision Maker** in ALS for a final decision on the approval of prospective adopters.

The ALS panel is scheduled to meet 4 times per month. On some occasions, extra panels are convened to meet the demands of the service where necessary. The panel meetings are chaired by 2 Independent Panel Chairs and panel attendance comes from a central panel membership list consisting of panel members with varying experiences relating to adoption and permanence to ensure robust oversight of the work of ALS and consistency around decision-making.

ALS strive to ensure a good diverse mix of people on panel in terms of their experiences of adoption, care experience, age, gender, sexuality, disability and ethnicity and are successful in achieving this thanks to the diversity of the central list. Social workers from ALS and partner boroughs are part of the panel membership and this provides a further

opportunity for boroughs to become closer involved in the work of the partnership and shape the adoption journey for children and adoptive families.

Panel members can keep abreast of sector-wide developments by accessing relevant learning and development opportunities. Information is also shared about various learning opportunities ranging from the 'Lunch and Learn' sessions to the Culture Change webinar series which has been hosted by Adoption England and the University of East Anglia.

Each panel member also participates in a programme of annual appraisals to look at strengths and areas for personal development. The panel provide rigorous quality assurance feedback to ALS and the relevant local authority which is taken into reviewed and considered in shaping the work within the boroughs and the service that ALS provides.

Panel members attended a mandatory London wide virtual training session. The focus of this event was on the Black Adoption Project and AFDiT (Anti-racist Framework for Decision-making in Transracial Placements) which is

relevant for understanding the assessment process and supporting panel members to make recommendations about prospective adopters who wish to consider transracial placements and matching considerations for transracial placements.

Panel Chairs Voice

Adopt London South panels are chaired by 2 independent panel chairs who both bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the panel process. The 2 chairs work closely to provide a cohesive panel experience for all attending or participating in panel.

The panel chairs provide a 6-monthly panel report focusing on the quality and quantity of panel activity over the period including highlighting areas for improvement and particular areas of strength.

There are quarterly meetings held with panel chairs and ALS management team which provide a useful interface opportunity to share pertinent developments with a view to a forging a continuous path of improvement.

The conclusion of the panel chairs report was:

'The quality of the reports presented to the panel has consistently improved throughout the year. Panel members have observed that **the reports are child-focused, with greater attention given to ensuring clarity and sensitivity, especially when discussing challenging information regarding birth parents' histories.** Social workers are beginning to use more thoughtful language and are providing more comprehensive information about birth parents, including their aspirations and hobbies in some cases. **They are also making significant efforts to maintain connections between siblings who are placed separately,** arranging introductions at an early stage.

Social workers attend the panel well-prepared and display confidence when discussing prospective adopters and children, clearly explaining the reasons behind positive recommendations. **Prospective adopters are also well-prepared for the panel, and it is encouraging to note that ongoing learning has become more common between approval and matching.**

While it is disappointing that the number of matches has decreased compared to the previous period, **it is positive to note that the majority of these matches involve children from Black or mixed ethnic backgrounds.** Additionally, there are more prospective adopters from mixed ethnic backgrounds than in previous periods.'



The most recent report covered the period October 2024 to March 2025. The panel report notes improvements in the quality of the Child Permanence Reports (CPR's) and also commends the quality of the Adopter Assessments. It does make reference to cases being presented outside of the recommended timescales for both adopter approvals and matches between children and adopters. Panel has noted that boroughs may benefit from giving some consideration to the lack of matches being presented as some boroughs didn't have any children going to panel during this particular reporting period.

They make reference to the fact that although the numbers of children coming to panel are lower, there is still a good proportion of children of Black and Black mixed ethnicity achieving permanence through adoption and there has also been an increase in Black families being approved at panel too.

Of particular note is the ongoing strength of the panel processes and the positive communication between the panel and the agency.

Training for Local Authority Social Workers

An unintended consequence of the development of the RAA's has been the increase of a knowledge gap within the local authorities. There are a number of learning and development

opportunities available through Adoption England, Adopt London and Adopt London South to strengthen the adoption knowledge across the partnership including

- The UEA model 'Moving to Adoption' training to strengthen practice in transitions for children from foster care to their adoptive homes.
- Culture Change 'Staying in Touch' workshops and bespoke training to teams to improve practice around helping adopted children to maintain links with people who are important to them.
- Early Permanence training for social workers and team managers to better understand the role of early permanence in planning for children.
- Quality Assuring CPR's – delivered by ALS panel advisors to improve the quality of the records for children for decision-making now, but also for their future selves to have access to good quality information if they seek their records.

A significant barrier to embedding this knowledge lies in the transient nature of the children's services workforce. This leads to organisational challenges in embedding good practice and learning and is an ongoing discussion across the partnership to ensure that learning around adoption is shared and embedded into the workforce.

Finding prospective adoptive parents

Adopt London brand

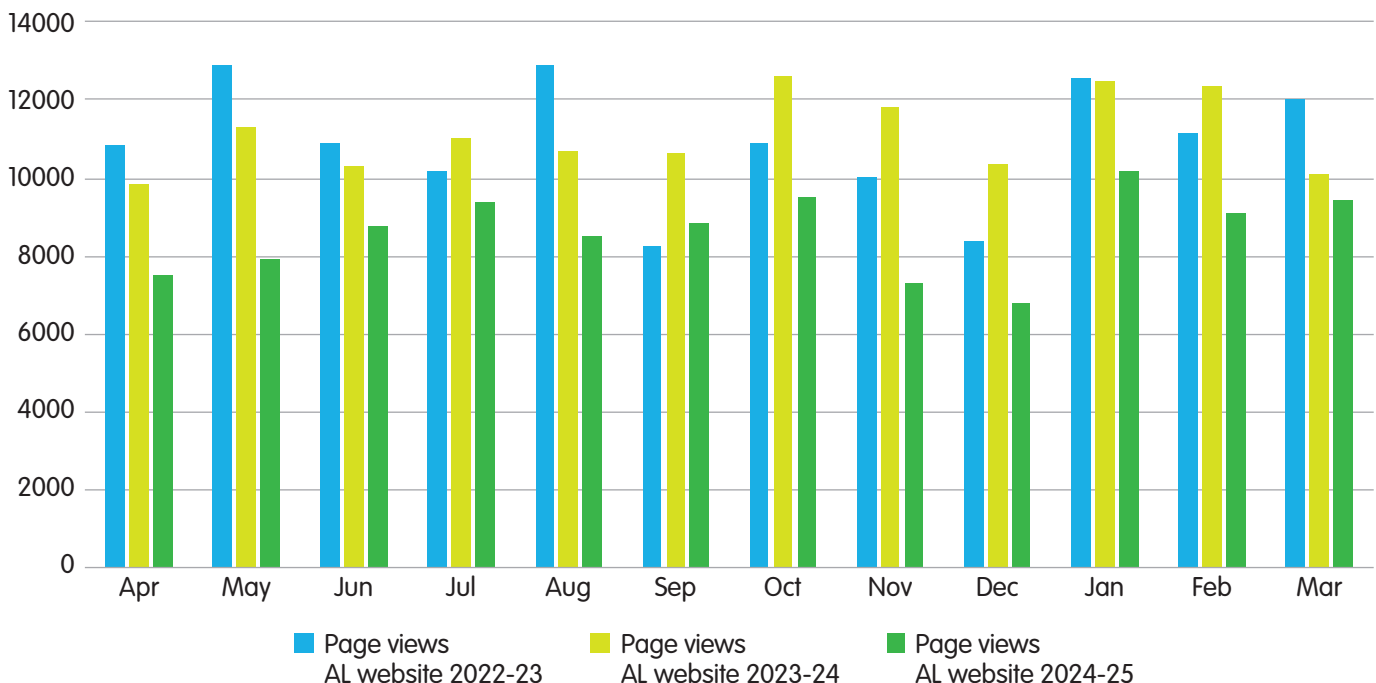
Working so closely alongside 3 other RAA's in London benefits Adopt London South. The single Adopt London presence on the web ensures that anyone considering adoption in London is able to easily locate their closest RAA and the responsive, attractive online presence is a hive of information for people considering adoption in a range of formats designed with full accessibility in mind.

Adopt London's shared marketing and recruitment strategy focuses on capitalising on the diversity across London to attract the best people for our children who are waiting for adoption through embedding the voices of experts-by-experience to tell their adoption story in an authentic way.

Adopt London have had the benefit of having a mystery shopper exercise which has provided feedback about the user experience of the website and this feedback is reviewed and changes made as part of a continuous improvement journey to ensure that everyone accessing the website feels welcomed to Adopt London.

Alongside external feedback, regular review of website activity metrics gives a stronger understanding about how people are using the website and highlights the most popular pages which all feeds into an ongoing development programme and this is discussed at regular meetings with the Adopt London Marketing and Communications team with a view to ongoing planning for the use of the website.

Website Page views 2024/25



A comparison of the Adopt London website page views over the past 3 years evidences a decline in traffic to the website over the past year. This correlates directly to the decline in enquiries and matches the national picture of adoption related enquiries. We see a peak in July, October, January, February and March which we hypothesise relates to the increased activity of National Adoption Week and the increased activity of User Generated Content and the 'Always On' drumbeat activity of the National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board.

Recruitment

The recruitment of adopters who are suitable for the children with a plan for adoption remains a key priority for Adopt London South. There are a number of ways that this is implemented and Adopt Londo South remain agile and flexible in considering how best to engage with prospective adopters.

The ['Am I Ready To Adopt'](https://tinyurl.com/mrsua48z) (tinyurl.com/mrsua48z) Tool provides an early opportunity for prospective adopters to find out more about the adoption process and gives bespoke guidance to help with preparing to adopt.

The recruitment team hold regular Adoption Information Meetings and Meet The Adopters events. Alongside this, there is the opportunity for 1:1 meetings with people considering adoption to look at their readiness in relation to their unique circumstances.

As mentioned previously, there is an ongoing National sufficiency challenge which is impacting ALS as well as many other RAA's across the country.

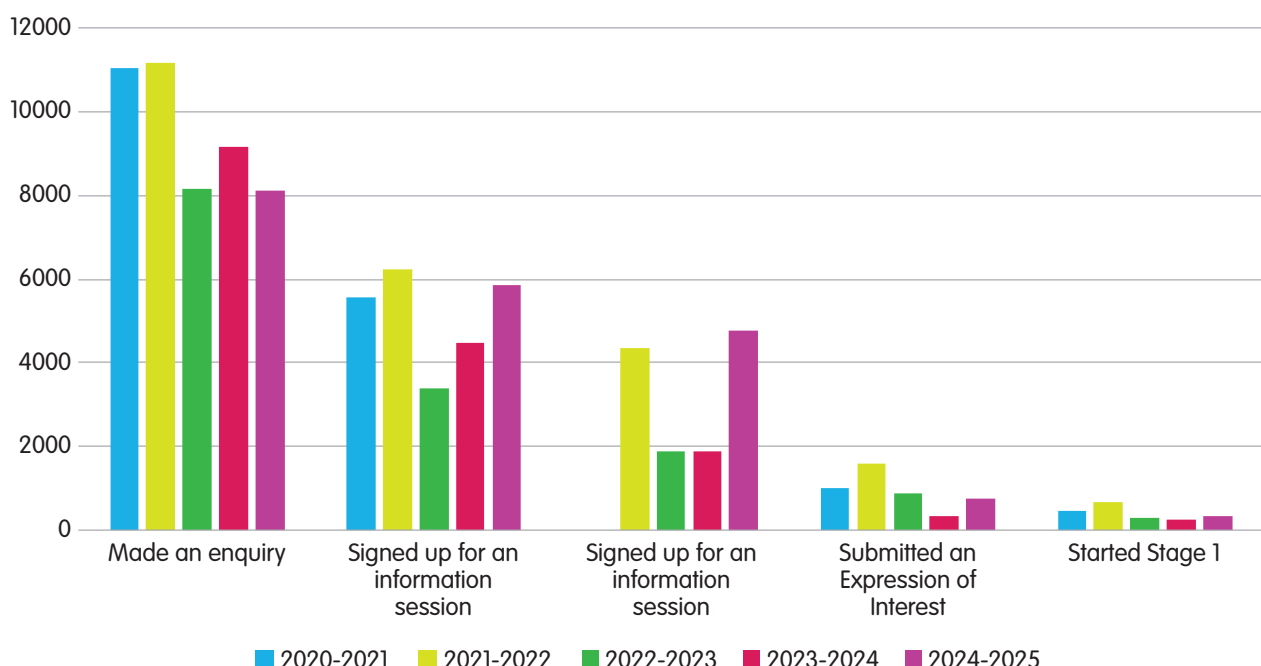
There has been a national effort to understand the current climate and what is causing the decline in the numbers of adopters coming forward as well as those in the pipeline. There are still more children needing adoptive homes

"I found the event engaging and inspiring, and the warmth and enthusiasm of the presenters really shone through. I found it encouraging and it gave me hope about the process. Thank you."

"Really interested to understand how to support the children and maintain contact with biological parents."

"Prob the best webinar I've ever attended. And I've attended a lot!" [sic]

Recruitment Journey 2024/25





"Great presentation and hosts. Very welcoming and encouraging making the choice to adopt exciting and ready to take on research to help better my application for when I am ready to join."

"A very well organised event with inspiring adopters. I am really glad I attended."

"How honest and open the parents were about their experience of the process and their informative answers to my question – it made me feel at ease."

than there are adopters available. This is the second year in a row since the formation of the RAA's that this position has been the same

ALS continue to focus efforts on prioritising families who are able to meet the needs of our children waiting and also on those who are able to consider Early Permanence arrangements.

It is of note that prospective adopters coming to adopt have increasingly complex circumstances that often require more in-depth consideration and ALS look at ways to explore how some of these circumstances can be overcome to ensure that prospective adopters are in the best possible situation to care for children who have experienced trauma and loss and are likely to have needs arising from this.

Just over 100 fewer people made an enquiry about adoption compared with the previous year, however there was a marked improvement

on the numbers of households submitting an Expression of Interest. It has been a challenging time for adopter sufficiency nationally and numbers of Expressions of Interest are significantly lower than the peak of 2021-2022, however there are some small shoots of recovery.

The Adopt London South Meet the Adopter events remain popular as this gives prospective adopters the chance to hear powerful first-hand information about adoption from those who have taken this. These events are unique to Adopt London and attendees provide powerful feedback as a result of attending.

ALS Meet The Adopter are virtual events provide us with an opportunity to share lived experiences and bring to life a true understanding the types of children waiting for adoption and their needs for prospective adopters to help them think through and mentalise the realities of adoption.



Preparing and approving adoptive parents

Assessments

There are two assessment teams in Adopt London South covering the South East and the South West boroughs.

As well as undertaking the assessments of prospective adopters, they also deliver the 4-day preparation group training looking at key aspects of adoption including the process, understanding the needs of the children, understanding the concepts of modern adoption including keeping in touch arrangements, therapeutic parenting and adoption support which broadly aligns with the Public Law Working Group recommendations and is aligned with Adoption England's work around preparation of adopters.

The assessments teams also provide ongoing support to approved adoptive families right up until the point of the Adoption Order which includes regular visits to the household, supporting with the Adoption Order Application and providing ongoing learning opportunities for adoptive household pre and post placement

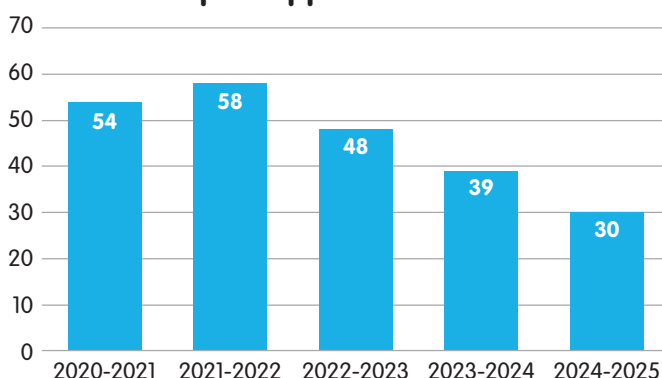


of children through group learning activity offers and tailored 1:1 support as required.

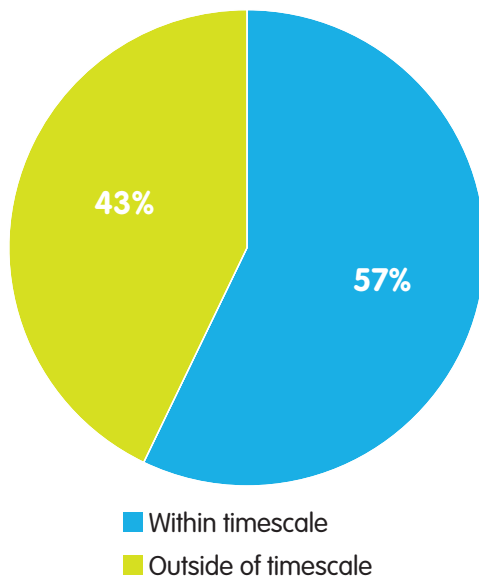
This year has seen a marked decline in adopter households approved by ALS. This does follow National trends in adopter approvals, and we are currently in a situation across the sector where there are more children needing adopters than there are adopter households. There are a range of potential reasons for this including cost of living increase, global and political uncertainty, increase in numbers of adults who are choosing to be child-free, increasing complexity within prospective adopter cohorts as we are becoming more open to discussing emotional well being as well as complexities with foster carers who wish to adopt and challenging circumstances which can impact the timeliness of assessments.

Adopter approval timeliness continues to be an area for improvement within ALS. Of the **30** approved households, **57%** of approvals being completed within timescales. Timely completion is dependent on a range of factors that may

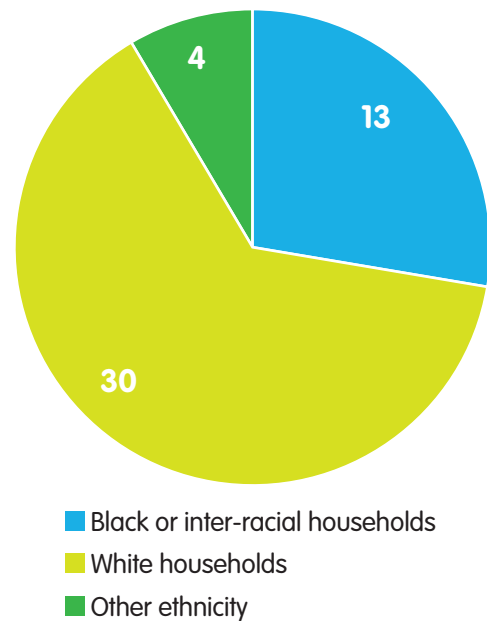
Adopter Approvals 2024/25



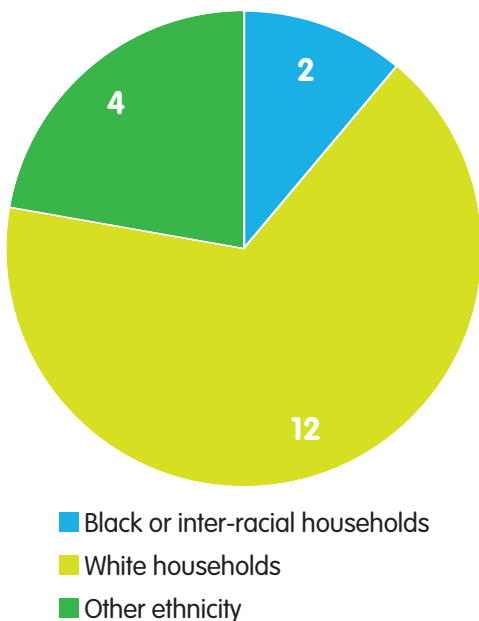
**Approvals Within Timescale
2024/25**



**Ethnicity of Households
Recommended for Initial Visit 2024/25**



**Ethnicity of Households Starting Stage 1
2024/25**



affect the assessment process such as waiting for key information from other sources or taking a planned pause to accommodate a life event to agency factors including timely submission of completed Prospective Adopters Report, panel availability and timeliness of the Agency Decision Maker which can be impacted by very small but important challenges within the wider service.

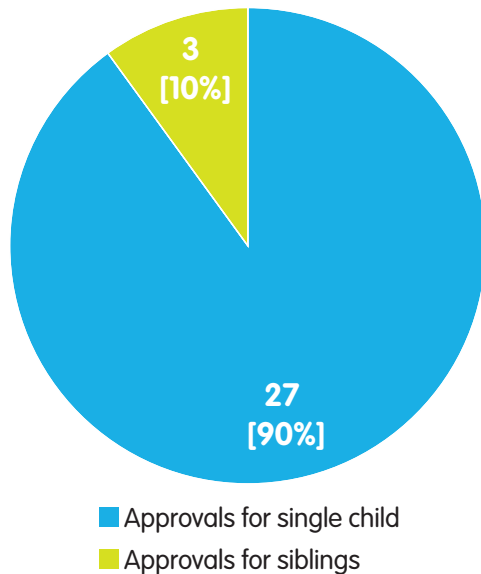
Black and Black interracial households have been consistent in making up $\frac{1}{4}$ of the approved households in the past year. This is a priority group for ALS children so it is positive to see that we continue to recruit adopters who can reflect the heritage of our waiting children.

ALS have also had a strong track record with same sex households and 23% of the households approved were from within the LGBT+ community.

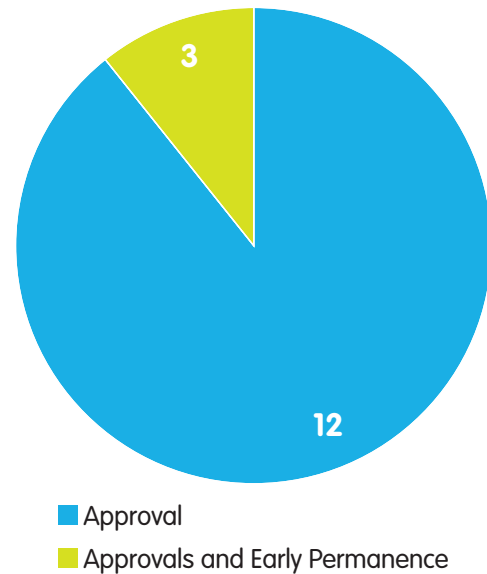
47 families were recommended for an initial visit which was an increase on the 34 families of the previous year. Less families were converted to starting stage 1. 18 families began the stage 1 adoption assessment process this year compared to 20 in 2023/24.

There has been a significant decrease in the number of black and interracial families who were recommended to start the stage 1 compared to those who actually began with only 2 families beginning stage 1. Just over half of the white households put forward for initial visit were

Approval Type – Single Child or Sibling Group 2024/25



Approvals Presented to Panel 2024/25



not ready to begin stage 1 following their meeting with the social worker.

ALS will be looking at what is happening in between the recommendation phase and the starting phase but the initial visit to families does provide much more information to help prospective adopters think about their readiness to adopt.

The figures in the charts above do not fully reflect the total demographic of approved adopters as it does not include 2nd time adopters or foster carers who are coming forward to adopt, as they do not start the stage 1 process.

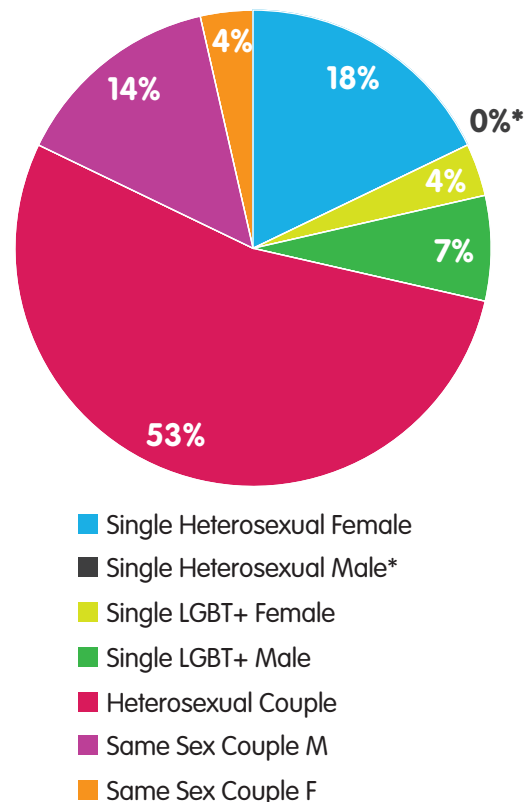
When these households are included the figures improve significantly for both cohorts with 11 black and interracial households being put forward for assessment in total and 18 white households being put forward for assessment.

Families Presented to Panel

ALS still have a strong track record in recruiting diverse family structures. **28** families were presented to ALS panel over the past year for approval and for consideration to be suitable for Early Permanence although 30 households were approved in the course of the year.

Only 3 families were in a position to consider Early Permanence arrangements which is disappointing when compared to the previous

Family Structure of Approved Adopters 2024/25



year but had good reasons for not being able to consider Early Permanence although they had been fully prepared through training and in the event of the right circumstances, they could be considered suitable for Early Permanence.

71% of adopter households presented to panel were two-parent households. **29%** were solo adopters. Just over a quarter of the households approved were for single parent households and of the 2-parent households, **18%** were same sex couples and a further **11%** were from the LGBT+ community totalling **29%** of LGBT+ households approved at panel. **3** households were approved for siblings which is a significant decrease from the previous year.

Foster Carer and Connected Persons Assessments

ALS provide consultation to the boroughs to enable a good dialogue around all considerations of achieving permanence for children who have been living with foster carers or connected persons for a year or more. This dialogue will focus on the capacity of the carers now and in the future and also consider if an alternative type of arrangement will be able to achieve permanence for a child.

ALS will undertake an adoption assessment of foster carers or connected persons if this is the

care plan for a child. ALS will objectively look at the capacity and attributes of a foster to care for a child over the duration of the child's lifetime.

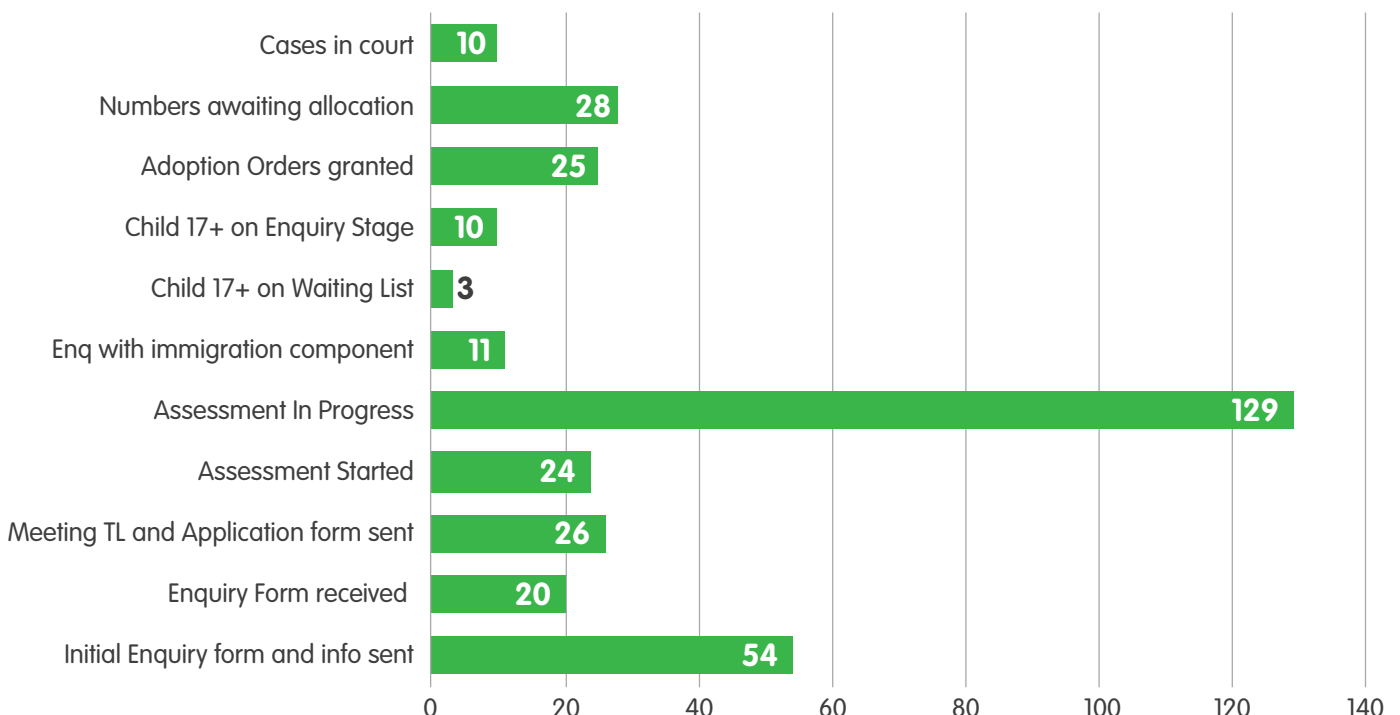
Non-Agency Assessments

Non-agency assessments are provided to the court to secure an adoption order for children in circumstances that don't involve court protection processes. They have previously been known as step-parent assessments as historically, this was the most common form of this type of assessment, however in more recent times, these assessments are used for a much wider range of circumstances which is a reflection of societal developments including surrogacy and IVF arrangements; to name but a few.

ALS have had to respond to the growing demand for these types of assessments which has led to the development of a role of a Non-Agency Assessment Lead who coordinates this service and supports Independent Social Workers to undertake assessments to meet the level of demand in this specialised and often complex area of work. Information presented in the data chart captures the nuance of this particular piece of work.

*The cases in court only represent 6 months of data as this information was only collated from Q3 of the financial year.

Non-Agency Assessments 2024/25



Planning for children

Adoption Permanency Planning

Family Finding Overview

An ALS Family Finder is assigned to each borough as the primary lead and contact, however the work of the family finders can overlap boroughs in order to provide an effective service to each child for whom ALS are seeking a suitable family.

The Family Finder plays a key role in the interface between the borough and the RAA and has a high level of contact in providing advice and ensuring is considered as permanence option for all children as appropriate. Their primary function is to identify suitable adoptive families for children with a clear plan for adoption or those

for whom Early Permanence is a consideration and the key to the success of the work of the Family Finder is dependent on developing effective working relationships with the boroughs, engaging early on in the care planning process and boroughs ensuring the provision of good quality, contemporaneous information to support the family finding process.

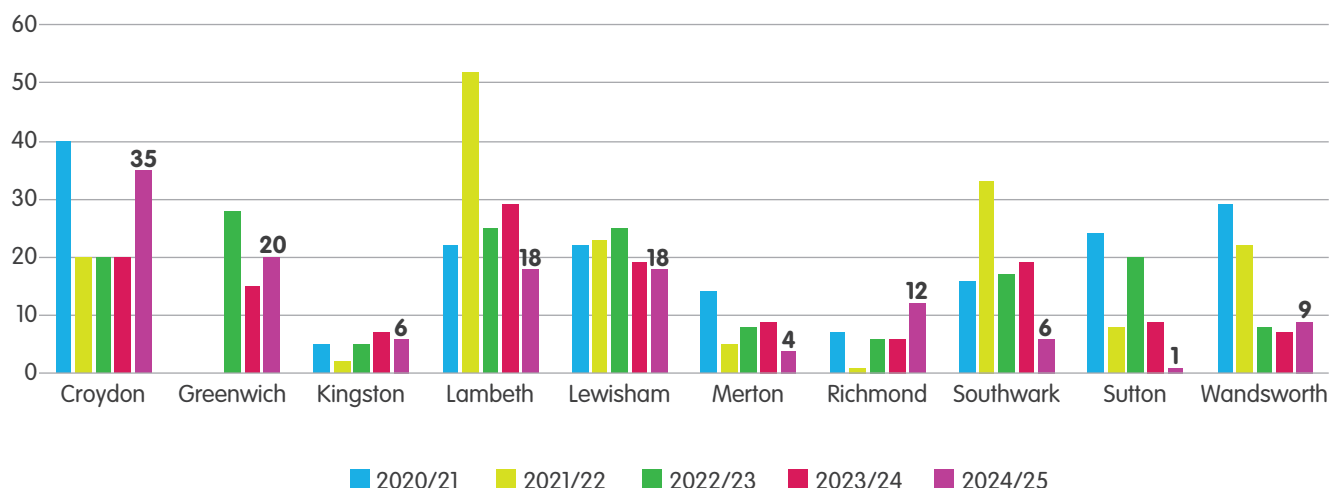
Key Activities and Responsibilities

Borough Engagement

Each Family Finder works close with their assigned borough and has several key points of interface through regular attendance at key meetings, including:



Referrals Into Family Finding Team by Borough 2024/25



Referrals into Family Finding Team by Borough

Borough	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Croydon	40	20	20	20	35
Greenwich	0	0	28	15	20
Kingston	5	2	5	7	6
Lambeth	22	52	25	29	18
Lewisham	22	23	25	19	18
Merton	14	5	8	9	4
Richmond	7	1	6	6	12
Southwark	16	33	17	19	6
Sutton	24	8	20	9	1
Wandsworth	29	22	8	7	9

- Permanency Planning Meetings
- Tracking Meetings
- Ongoing monitoring of children's care planning journeys.

Family Matching

Once adoption or Early Permanence is under consideration, the Family Finder:

- Undertakes routine or specialist family finding activity to find the most suitable family to meet the child's identified needs.
- Ensures all ALS-approved adopters are fully considered.
- Provides updates to boroughs around suitable families for their consideration.

Partnership Working

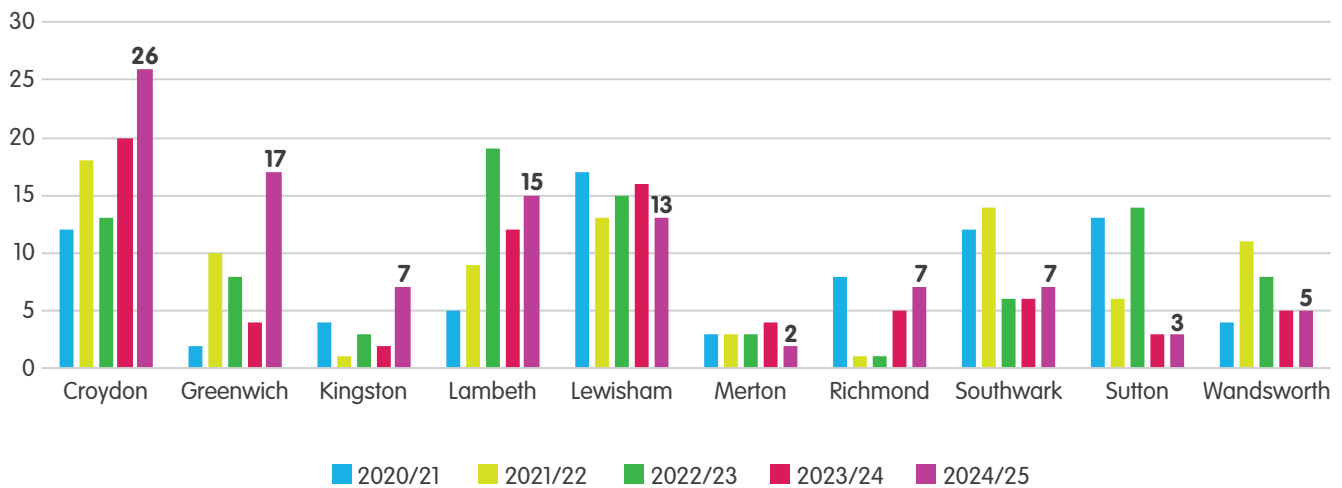
In order to find the best opportunities for matches for London children within the London area, the team has collaborated closely with:

- **Adopt London Matching Project**
- **London Early Permanence Project**
- **Voluntary Adoption Agencies**

Early Planning

Many of the Family Finding referrals into ALS will not go on to result in adoption as the outcome depends on the child's final care plan and the outcome of court proceedings. Despite this, Family Finders work closely with the boroughs to ensure ongoing tracking for children so that they

Best Interest Decisions by Borough 2024/25



ADM BIDS

Borough	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Croydon	12	18	13	20	26
Greenwich	2	10	8	4	17
Kingston	4	1	3	2	7
Lambeth	5	9	19	12	15
Lewisham	17	13	15	16	13
Merton	3	3	3	4	2
Richmond	8	1	1	5	7
Southwark	12	14	6	6	7
Sutton	13	6	14	3	3
Wandsworth	4	11	8	5	5
	80	86	90	77	102

can be ready to move swiftly if adoption is the plan for a child.

Adoptive homes have been found for 55 children this year. 15 children who had an Adoption Best Interest Decision made in 24-25 have had a change of care plan highlighting that adoption is no longer the agreed plan for a child and 10 of those children are black or of black mixed heritage.

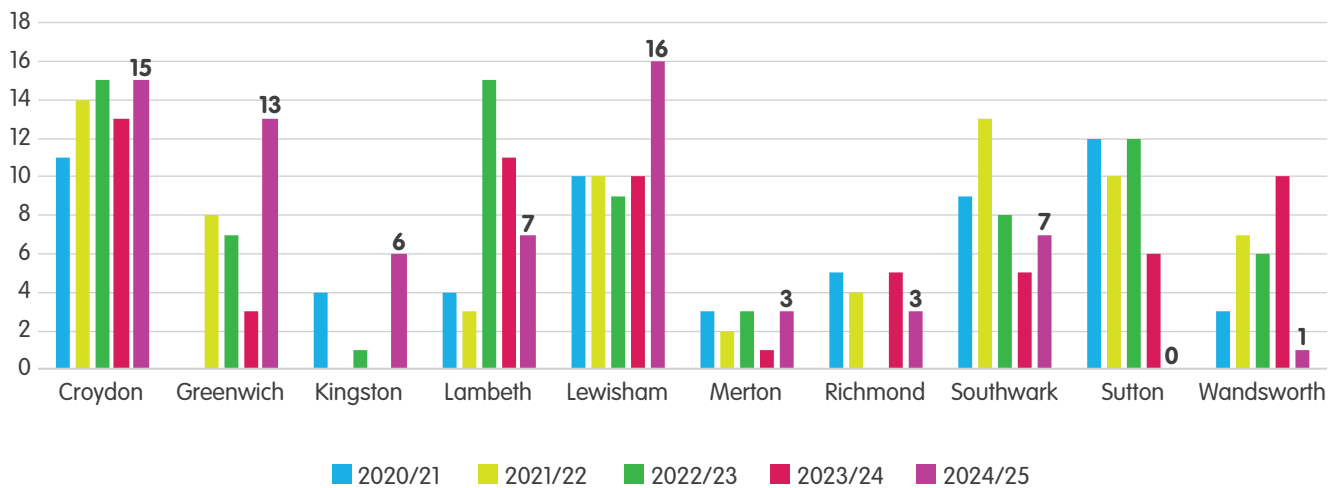
The remaining of the children are in different stages in the process including consideration for Early Permanence, being formally linked with adopters or living with foster carers who are considering adopting them.

Children with a Plan for Adoption

There is a wide variety across the partnership in the number of Adoption Best Interest Decisions (BID's) but overall, there have been a total of 102 BID's which is the highest number in the past 5 years. Most of the partners have remained steady or seen an increase in the numbers of BID's that have been made, however 2 authorities have seen a small decline.

The numbers of children who have had a Placement Orders granted has increased since the previous year. A total of 71 children were granted a Placement Order compared to 64 in the previous year. The 5 year data pattern shows ranges between 61 and 76 PO's being granted annually so this year is closer to the highest level that has been seen previous in 2022-23.

Total Placement Orders by Borough 2024/25



Total PO's by Borough

Borough	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Croydon	11	14	15	13	15
Greenwich	0	8	7	3	13
Kingston	4	0	1	0	6
Lambeth	4	3	15	11	7
Lewisham	10	10	9	10	16
Merton	3	2	3	1	3
Richmond	5	4	0	5	3
Southwark	9	13	8	5	7
Sutton	12	10	12	6	0
Wandsworth	3	7	6	10	1
Total	61	71	76	64	71



Placing children with adoptive parents

Family Finding

Family Finding is the process of identifying the most suitable home to meet a child's identified needs over their lifespan if they have adoption as their permanence plan. The Family Finding team in Adopt London South are responsible for identifying families to provide a permanent home for children with a plan for adoption on behalf of the 10 boroughs within our partnership. However the placing authority (which is the relevant borough for the child) retains the role of Corporate Parents and they have the ongoing responsibility for decisions around care planning, seeking relevant court orders as necessary and the decision making relating to plans for permanence for children.

Children Waiting for an Adoptive Family

Within ALS, there is close liaison between the Family Finding Team and the Assessment teams which means that Family Finders have a good knowledge of all prospective and approved adopters. This link helps to aid early discussions around possible matches between children and prospective adopter households which can prevent delay for children in the longer term.

Not all children remain placed locally within London and some children find homes outside of the pan-London region as families are found who can better meet the current and future needs of a child outside of the local area.

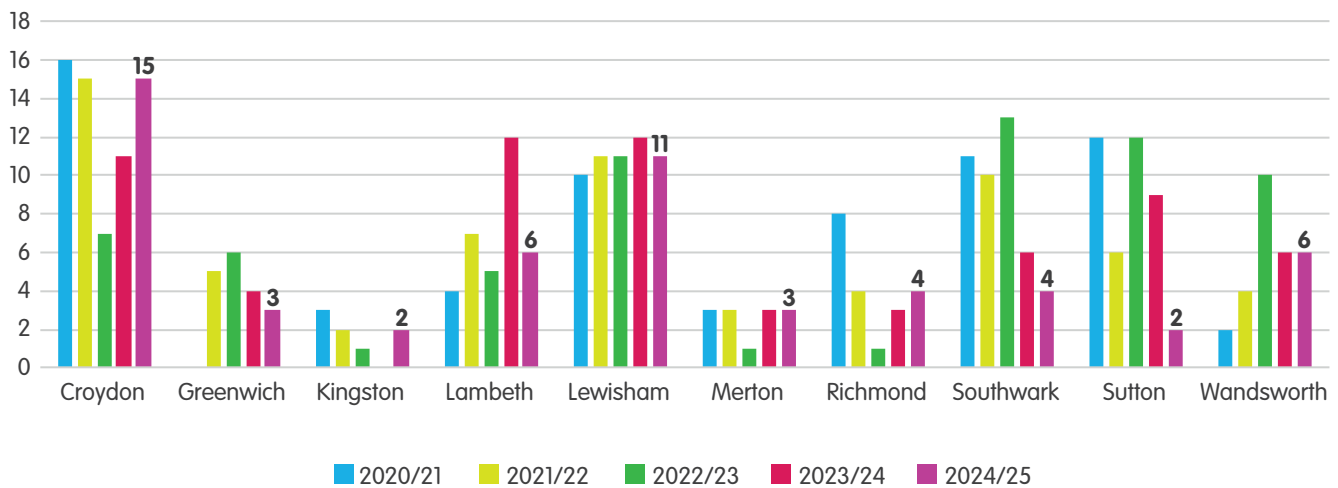
The Adopt London Matching Project has delivered a range of activities to ensure that all London families are considered for all London children including regular Stay and Play events, National Exchange Days and professional networking events which enable social workers to share and view profiles of children and approved adopters, to see if any align and can be considered a suitable match.

The information below shows matching activity by borough. Matching refers to the point when an adoptive family has been selected as being able to meet the needs of a child, the matter has been presented to the adoption panel and the Local Authority Agency Decision Maker has ratified the for match.

Whilst matching activity remains variable across the partnership, 6 of the 10 boroughs have seen the same performance as the previous year or an improvement in the number of matches made. Where this has not been the case, ongoing discussions are being held between the boroughs and ALS to understand the reasons for any changes.

A total of 56 children were matched to homes that were identified as suitable to meet their needs in 2024/25 which is 10 children less than the preceding year and a total of 54 children were placed in their adoptive homes in the same time period.

Children Matched by Borough 2024/25



Total Children Matched by Borough

Borough	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Croydon	16	15	7	11	15
Greenwich	0	5	6	4	3
Kingston	3	2	1	0	2
Lambeth	4	7	5	12	6
Lewisham	10	11	11	12	11
Merton	3	3	1	3	3
Richmond	8	4	1	3	4
Southwark	11	10	13	6	4
Sutton	12	6	12	9	2
Wandsworth	2	4	10	6	6

Early Permanence Placements

There have been a total of 13 children placed in early permanence arrangements in 2024/25 which is slightly lower than the 16 children placed the previous year. A lot of work has gone into improving Early Permanence arrangements, however the circumstances are determined by the child's situation and Early Permanence has to be the right option for the child for this to be fully considered.

All prospective adopters are prepared to consider Early Permanence with a view to being able to make informed decisions about whether this is something that they can offer a child taking into account their emotional capacity, lifestyle and other practical considerations. This approach has yielded positive results in increasing applicants

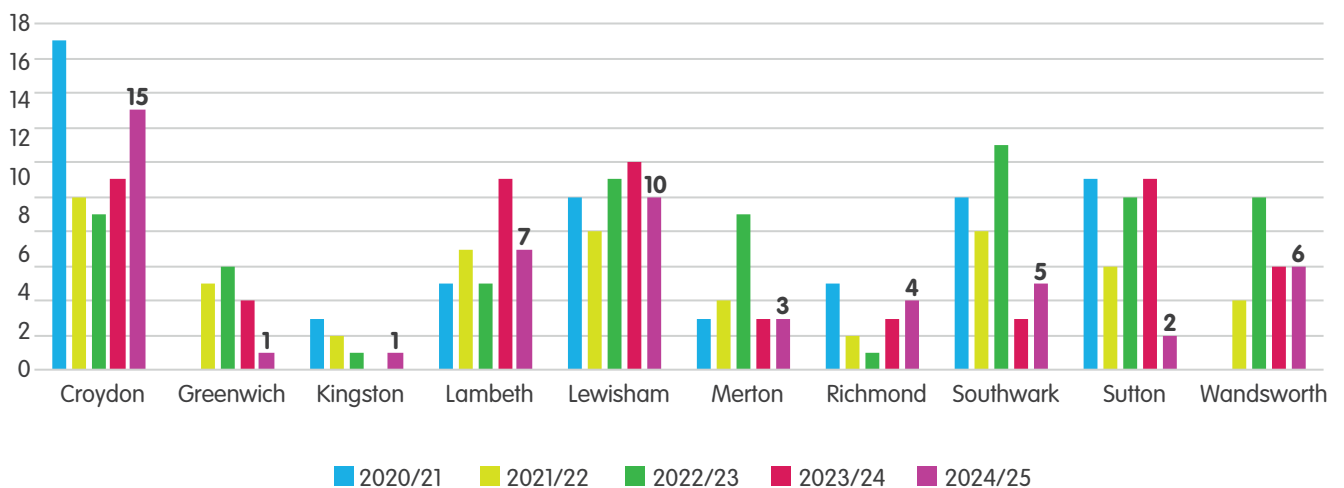
understanding of Early Permanence and the benefits that this can have for a child.

As discussed earlier on in the report, the training offer to the boroughs has seen an improvement in the borough's understanding of Early Permanence across the partnership which has resulted in more EP consultations with ALS. Whilst these consultations may not immediately lead to a situation being EP-ready, it is positive to see that more people understand Early Permanence and that this is being given full consideration for children as part of their care planning arrangements.

Location of Placements

ALS is committed to trying to keep children placed as locally as they can. This enables them

Children placed by Borough 2024/25



Children Placed by Borough

Borough	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Croydon	19	10	9	11	15
Greenwich	0	5	6	4	1
Kingston	3	2	1	0	1
Lambeth	5	7	5	11	7
Lewisham	10	8	11	12	10
Merton	3	4	9	3	3
Richmond	5	2	1	3	4
Southwark	10	8	13	3	5
Sutton	11	6	10	11	2
Wandsworth	0	4	10	6	6

to retain the London part of their identity and due to understanding the support that is available and being able to be more responsive, we know that children tend to fare better when joining a family that lives locally and is in closer proximity to the placing authority.

Whilst this is an ongoing ambition, the key driver for a match is that the family is the best family for a child whether this family have been approved by ALS or another agency. The best family for a child will not be compromised as a result of location if they can meet a child's needs in every other way.

Over the past year, 35 children have been matched with ALS approved families and 21

have been matched with adopters from other agencies.

A factor contributing to the successful number of in-house placements has been the result of the close working relationship between the Recruitment and Assessment service and the Family Finding service which provides opportunities to share information about children and families who are becoming available and ensure good early matching considerations.

The Adopt London Matching Project had a particular focus on improving the links between the four Adopt London RAA's. This has been underpinned by a focus on development of practice making use of the materials from Adoption England and developing local materials

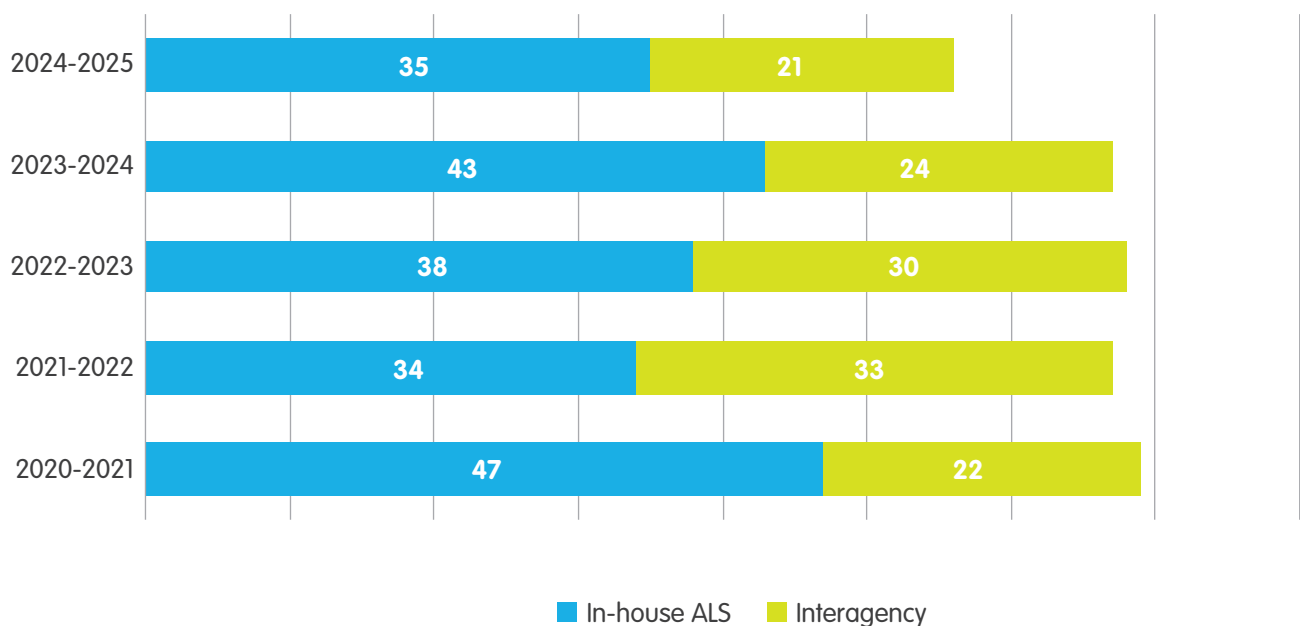
to improve matching activity alongside the implementation of regular profiling events so that information is shared in a timely way to promote matching across London.

This work has also been supported by the Adopt London Stay and Play events which have given adopters the chance to meet children in a relaxed environment and have a better understanding of how they would be able to meet their needs.

Disruptions

There has been 1 child who was placed for adoption but has not been able to remain with the identified adoptive family. This is an unforeseen and tragic event for the child and for the adopters and any learning from this sad situation will be shared as it emerges, across ALS and across the wider partnership with a view to improving practice if this is applicable.

Total Matches of In-house and Interagency Placements 2024/25



Supporting the Adoption Community

Support Offer for Families and Adult Adoptees

Adoption Support continues to be a growth area in terms of demand for services. The adoption community have a range of needs including basic signposting to services to severe crises in adoptive placements that require specialist therapeutic intervention usually accessed via the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) and/or the support of a skilled social worker to help a family through a difficult time.

A number of the Adoption Support social workers are qualified, not only in social work but often have one or more therapeutic approaches and disciplines underpinning their practice which enables them to be able to flexibly meet the needs of families either in a group setting, or on a 1:1 basis.

The team offers a range of therapeutic training or workshops including:

- Non-Violent Resistance (NVR),
- Therapeutic Life Story Work,
- Let's Talk about Adoption (which helps families to discuss life story work with their children)
- Introduction to Theraplay (which helps parents to have a taste of the benefits of this therapeutic approach and consider whether this is the right fit for their family).

Families are also able to access:

- Great Behaviour Breakdown training which is a therapeutic approach aimed at supporting



co-regulation of a child or young person when they are not able to self-regulate.

- Adoptive Parents and Toddler Group (which is a therapeutic group for newer adoptive parents to help support them through the early stages of adoption).

Adoption Support is a continuous growth area. The Adoption Barometer report 2024 which can be read [here](https://tinyurl.com/yrm35yvu) (tinyurl.com/yrm35yvu) has noted an increase in families facing severe challenge or reaching crisis point (30% in 2023 rising to 38% in 2024.)

Nationally, adoptive families have reported that things have deteriorated for them in the intervening period between asking for help when things are becoming difficult and being in full blown crisis by the time that support is offered.

Adopt London South have reviewed some of the processes for accessing local adoption support in a bid to streamline access, reduce the waiting list and meet families at their point of need with minimal delay. This has required some changes to the management of the Helpline and some back office changes to support the process for families.



"I have been to a few of these events and this one is by far the best!"

– Adoptive Parent

"We all had great fun despite the downpour! There was lots to do and it is great being in a space with other adoptive households who are accepting of our child the way he is." – Adoptive Parent

Alongside the formal support offer, there have also been informal opportunities for support for families to be able to participate in. One such event is the annual Adopt London South Family Fun Day which is a private event only open to ALS adopter households. This event provides an opportunity for adoptive families to gather, meet other adopters and meet the ALS staff team. In 2024/25 375 people were registered to attend and for those that came, there were a range of activities for the children to participate in and the opportunity for families to have informal discussions with the ALS staff team as they wished.

Helpline

The adoption support Helpline is the front door access to adoption support services. The Helpline is run by experienced social workers who can provide an early triage and response to families which range from signposting and providing information, advice and guidance to making a recommendation of a time-limited intervention by a social worker. Actions are reviewed by a senior worker and/or a manager for quality assurance and consistency in delivery of services.

Adopt London South's intervention has a primary focus on empowering families to be sufficiently equipped to manage difficulties as they arise, be that through therapeutic training for adopters, to role modelling for supporting co-regulation for a child. It is recognised that there are key times that may present more times of challenge and testing as a result of trauma, loss and the impact of severed attachments for children which often collides with the emerging behaviours that are appropriate to particular ages and stages of development.

Snapshot audits of the primary needs within Adopt London South repeatedly highlight that health and education are prevalent needs within the service and this is not a part of the Adoption

Support offer, however, difficulties that families face in accessing services of health partners via CAMHS and education via the Virtual School mean that adoptive households rely on adoption support services to plug the gaps whilst they are seeking to manage emerging or crisis-level situations within their families.

Over the past year, ALS have reduced the waiting list through a more streamlined approach to Helpline and a clearer and stronger core offer to families. The implementation of the [Children](https://tinyurl.com/muu939eh) (tinyurl.com/muu939eh) and [Young Person's](https://tinyurl.com/455y5fv4) (tinyurl.com/455y5fv4) Guides to Adoption Support has been instrumental; as has the development of a welcome pack for adoptive families to understand the ALS offer.

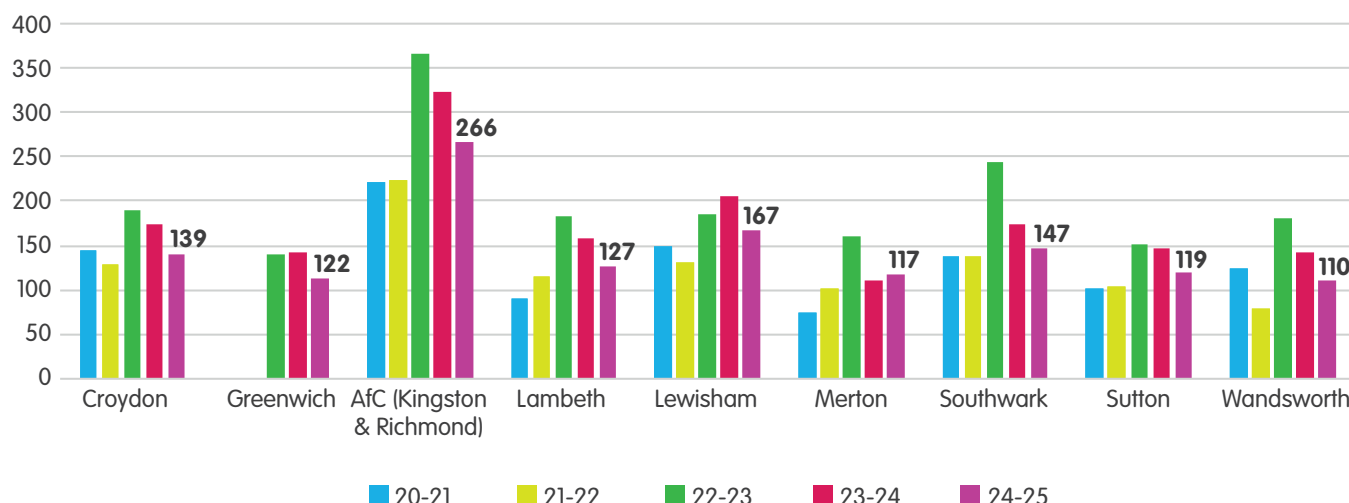
Adoption Support Social Work

Some families seeking support will have needs that require the input of a social worker for a limited period of time. When a family is allocated a social worker, they will have an assessment of need completed with their input to help identify the best way forward to meet any identified needs as is within the gift of the service and the best way to have these needs met.

The Adoption Support Social Workers are a multi-skilled workforce and have in-depth knowledge about the impact of insecure attachments and work in a trauma-informed way to support families. Many of the staff in ALS hold therapeutic qualifications in various therapeutic disciplines besides their social work qualifications (such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Great Behaviour Breakdown training, Non-violent resistant practice, Therapeutic Life Story Work, amongst other things) and bring these additional therapeutic skills into their work to provide families with an excellent service.

Some families may require support from an external therapeutic provider who is

Adoption Support Requests by Borough 2024/25



commissioned to deliver particular pieces of work through funding from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (see below for more information on the ASGSF) and social workers can make this application within the government-defined Fair Access Limit.

Usually, once work has begun with a commissioned therapeutic provider, there is little need for the social worker to remain involved, however on some occasions, this is necessary and; with the agreement of the family, social workers may continue to work with the family for a more extended period of time.

Social workers also run various workshops and groups with aims that align with the needs of adopters. This enables families to access support on a more ad-hoc basis if this is what they prefer.

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF – formerly ASF)

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) is provided by the DfE to fund a specified range of therapeutic interventions to support families who have adopted or who have achieved permanence through a Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order.

The ASGSF provides funding for families to access a range of therapeutic support and specialist assessments and for the year 24/25, the Fair Access Limit is set at up to £5k for therapy and

up to £2.5k for specialist assessments. The ASGSF will form part of the Government spending review and RAA's informed annually about the Fair Access Limit.

Keeping In Touch

A key shift in modern adoption is the reality that children are better served in being able to maintain relationships with people who are important to them through good keeping in touch arrangements.

This work is determined by the boroughs as part of the care planning process and ALS become involved once a referral has been made to the team following the making of an adoption order. ALS are responsible for all indirect keeping in touch arrangements and individual boroughs are responsible for the delivery of direct keeping in touch arrangements.

ALS have a team of workers to support families to stay in touch and proactively send reminders to birth and adoptive families about their next keeping in touch activity, be that exchanging letters or reminding them of their next meeting.

Alongside the personal support that is offered, families have access to [guidance \(tinyurl.com/424yrsmm\)](https://tinyurl.com/424yrsmm) for using the Adopt London South Letterbox Service to help them think about how each interaction can be of good quality and meaningful for all involved. A hard copy can be requested if required.

The Adoptables

The Adoptables is an activity-based support group run for adopted children. It is led by the staff in Adopt London South and enables children to meet other adopted children and be able to be themselves in a space where adoption is inherently understood and requires no explanation. This is a unique space for the adopted children and a valuable one.

There are two groups for different age ranges. The younger group range from 8-12 years and the older group is 13-17. The group meets monthly at a venue that is equipped with a range of activities in situ and is augmented by further activities (usually arts and crafts-based activities) to ensure that all children can find something that they enjoy to participate in.

What do the young people say about this group?



"I feel like the staff are very understanding."

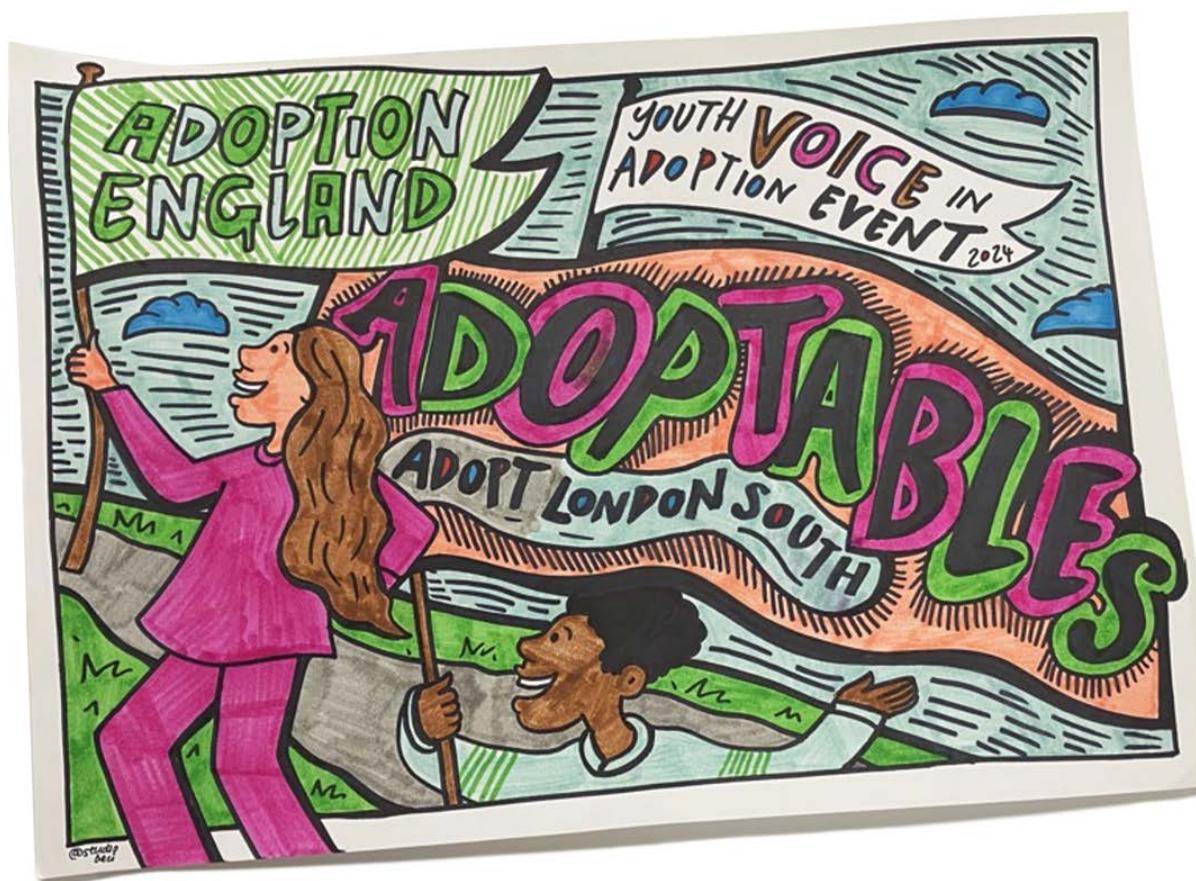
"...I'm adopted and I like to know that there is people who have experienced the same thing as me."
[sic]

Two young people from the group led a workshop at a National Conference – 'The Youth Voice in Adoption' sharing their views about what they think that teachers should know about children who have been adopted. They were supported to travel to Leeds by 2 members of staff and spoke confidently to the conference which was aimed at a range of professionals working with young people in different capacities.

The Adoptables continues to grow from strength-to-strength. The model works well and ALS are supporting other Adopt London members to develop their own groups for children through inviting them in for observation, sharing helpful feedback to think about design, set up and delivery of the group and supporting staff as the groups are slowly taking shape and emerging.

Peer-to-Peer Support

Our peer-to-peer support offer is primarily offered through our partnership with We Are Family (WAF) as mentioned earlier in this report. WAF offers a free membership to members of the adoption community through a validating process and provides opportunities for adopters to get together in social spaces or through a virtual meeting.



WAF's delivery model has a small staff team supporting a team of adoptive parent volunteers who lead and coordinate the delivery of activities in various areas. WAF's parent volunteers receive training to strengthen their impact in their role. This training can then be offered to other parent volunteers which creates a sustainable model for ongoing development of the WAF groups.



"I've grown in confidence, as a parent and as an adoption/ education advocate. Through WAF links we've managed to get real change and training going at our school."

– WAF member

"Simply the act of taking part in a series of sessions has provided me with a sense of momentum for starting a peer support group from scratch – I couldn't visualise it before the training."

– WAF Peer Support Attendee

"I have always found it hard to make time for self-care, and it dawned on me that the course wasn't so much about running a group, or even about self-care, but that the course was self-care."

– WAF Peer Support Attendee

Adoptive Parent Training

WAF Talks are funded by Adopt London and have provided 17 webinars on adoption-related topics and Adopt London South WAF members can access these live or on demand as part of their membership. The live attendance has been in excess of 400 families over the course of the year. WAF members have access to 113 webinars which are available to watch on demand on the Members Hub. These webinars provide learning opportunities for adopters and prospective adopters to engage with key themes that are likely to be relevant to parenting adopted children. In 2024-2025 webinars have included, but are not limited to:

- Speak Little One documentary screening Q+A
- Understanding and Supporting Transracial Adoptees
- 'Finding out I was adopted at 26'
- Studying Whilst Searching: An Adoptee Perspective on Learning and Identity
- Understanding the Impacts of Executive Functions on Neurodiverse Children
- A Wild Ride – Adoption, Neurodiversity and Everything In Between



"This was such a rich session as it offered multiple perspectives. I will definitely listen to the recording later as a refresher of all the great tips offered."

– WAF Member

Adopted Adults

Adopted adults are served by the ALS through the direct delivery of statutory duties but also through the provision of the Adopted Adults Support Group.

The group was supported by Adopt London South alongside PAC-UK, however work is underway to reduce the PAC-UK involvement and enable this to be a standalone ALS-delivered support group.

Following the formation of the Adopted Adults Steering Committee in February 2024, the group have gone on to share their views about things that they would like to see happen in the service. One thing that has been requested is an opportunity to share art with a wider community

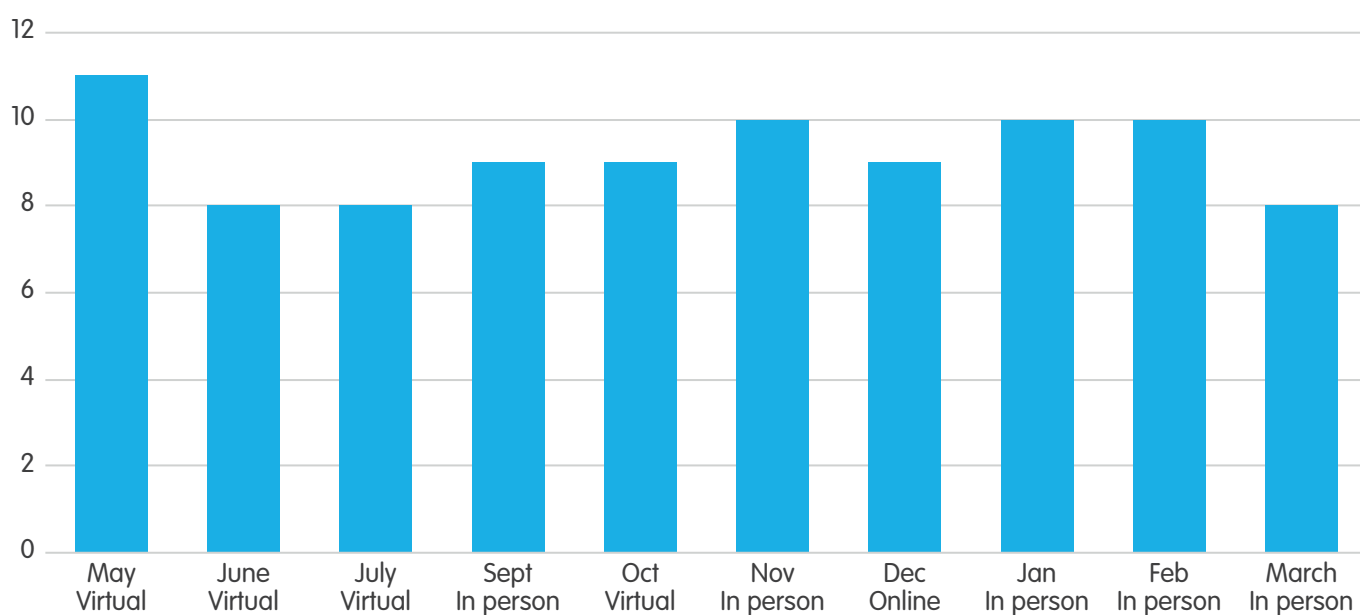
and this project is currently being worked on with a view to delivering an art exhibition in 2025.

The ALS adopted adults group operate both virtually and in person. Over the past year, 92 attendees have participated in the group. There have been speakers on some occasions and on other occasions space has been made to discuss and explore pertinent themes for the group.

Supporting Adopted Adults to Access Records

In addition to running the Adopted Adults support group, Adopt London South have a duty to support adopted adults to obtain their records and understand their adoption history. The format and route for accessing information vary according to the date the Adoption Order was made, and Adopt London South supports all of these processes.

Adopted Adults Group Attendance 2024/25



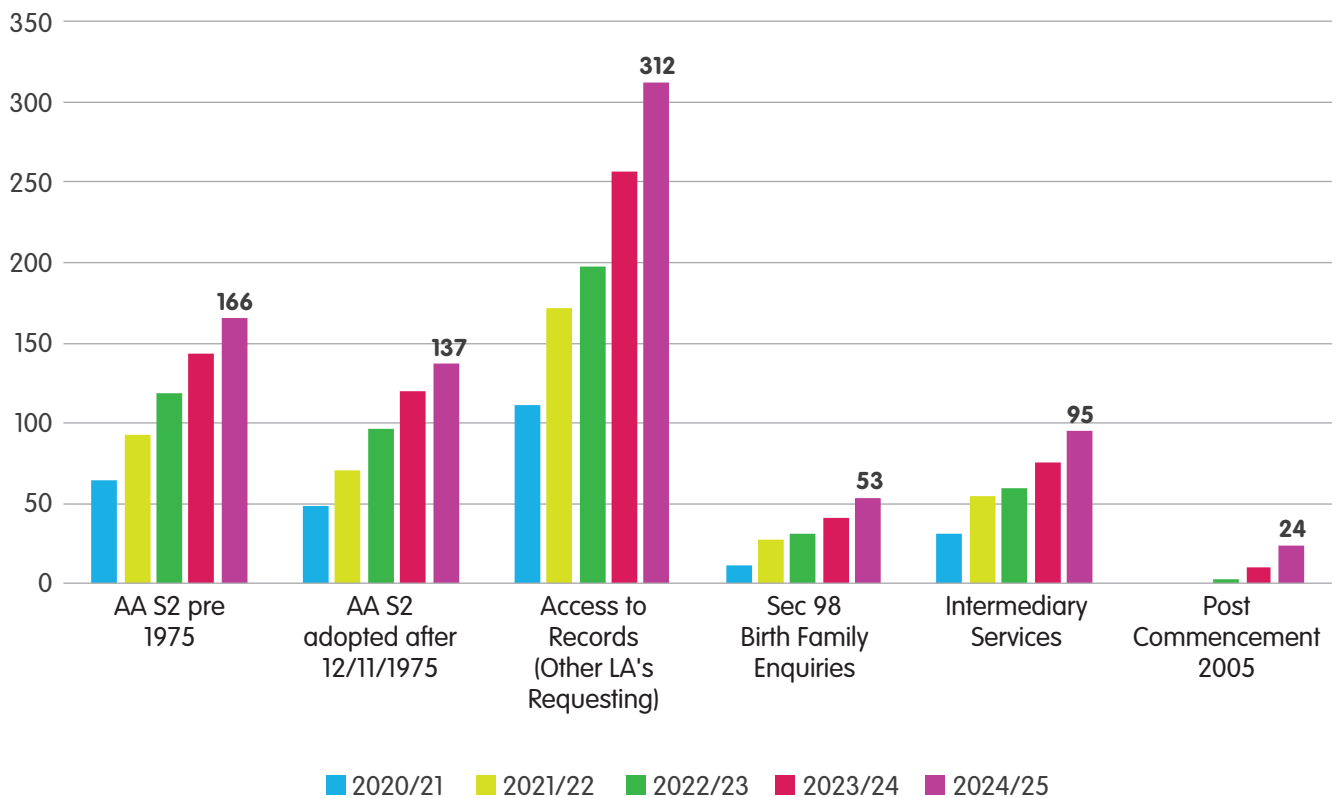
"I didn't really know what to expect from the first session I attended a few weeks ago, but it sort of blew my mind a bit."

"It was so refreshing and therapeutic to talk about adoption experiences so openly and with people who absolutely understood, even though their circumstances were often completely different."

"In the past, whenever I've talked about my adoption, most of the conversation is either explaining 'the feelings', the background or answering the usual questions. With this group, it was possible to completely cut through that and talk about it in a way that I realised I never had been able to before – sometimes pragmatic & logical, sometimes emotional but without apology or judgment and often with humour (which non-adoptees don't get)."

"I hadn't realised I needed these sessions in my life, but I clearly do!"

Adopted Adults by Case Type 2024/25



The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (enacted on 30 December 2005) has altered how this work is delivered. The legislation places extra duties on Adoption Services for anyone adopted on; or after 30 December 2005. Those affected began reaching adulthood from 30 December 2022, and this area of work is growing and requires a distinct; more in-depth and hands on approach compared with other services for adopted adults. Currently the numbers in Adopt London South are steadily increasing.

Adopt London South has provided a limited amount of intermediary work, mainly to complete cases that were already in progress when responsibilities transferred from individual local authorities to Adopt London South. Intermediary services are not yet a standard part of our offer.

Birth Parents

ALS are proud to share the fulfilment of an aspiration for a birth mother's group. Following a detailed planning and engagement process, the first group ran in August 2024. Whilst the initial meeting had lower-than-expected attendance, there were positive benefits for those who felt able to participate. Since the first meeting, there

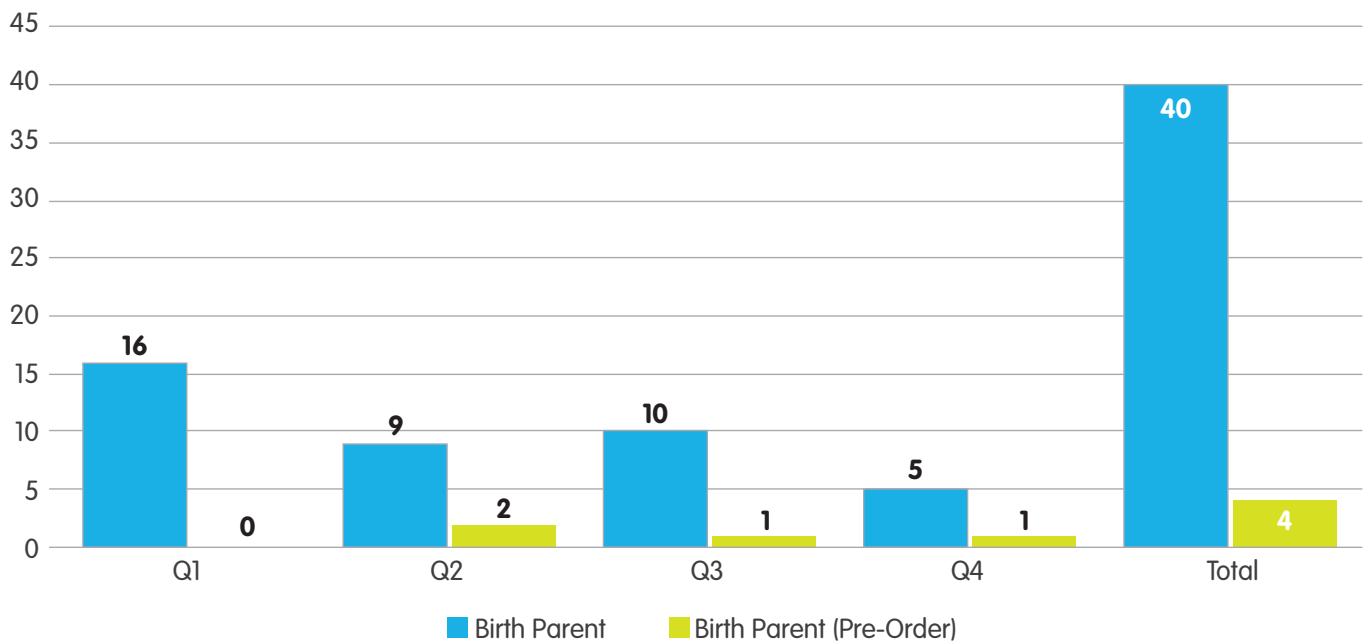
has been an improvement in attendance and there is a steady core group of birth mothers who are using this space to explore their feelings around adoption in a safe, supportive environment.

The decision has been taken (in conjunction with the members) to keep this group open to birth mothers at this stage; but it is recognised that birth fathers also need an opportunity to meet and reflect on their own experiences of adoption.

In addition to the ALS birth mother's group, birth parents have additional support available to them through a service level agreement with PAC-UK which offers up to 6 counselling sessions for birth parents as well as provision for parents who are considering consented adoption for their children. This service is open to birth mothers and fathers and is often accessed when families are signposted either during court proceedings or when they are in touch with adoption support services.

PAC-UK continue to offer a valuable birth parents support group. Some of the sessions are in person and are based at PAC-UK's offices in North London and others are virtual meetings

Birth Parents Supported By PAC-UK Service Level Agreement 2024/25



which can increase accessibility for some birth parents but can also exacerbate technical challenges for others.

This year has seen an increase in the use of the birth parents commissioned services for support once the adoption order has been granted. This service is being promoted by ALS when birth parents get in touch with our services. They are signposted for up to 6 sessions of counselling support.

There has been a small decline in birth parents using the service pre-order 7 families used it in the preceding year, so there is more work to do to promote this service by our local authority partners who are working with birth parents during the care proceedings. It is accepted that some birth parents feel unable to access support whilst managing the complexity of care proceedings, however this service does need to be well promoted across the partnership.



“With the support of PAC-UK counselling I felt able to re-visit the difficult emotions and decisions of my son’s adoption without being afraid. Exploring those feelings has helped become to a better understanding of what happened and what it has meant for both of us. I am more at peace with myself and full of appreciation for my son. This would have been too daunting a journey without the help of PAC-UK.”

Review of Strategic Priorities 2024/25

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
Finding Prospective Adopter and Early Permanence Carers	1. Make use of the all promotion materials from Adoption England National Adoption Recruitment Programme Board to support recruitment activity.	Increase in use of Adoption England material across website, social media.	Adoption England material has been successfully embedded in marketing material during the campaign and as part of an 'always on' approach. Reach has been increased through partner media teams promoting materials. Also use this widely across social media.
	2. Increase number of enquiries by prospective adopters by 20% in the coming year.	Increase in number of adopter enquiries.	Despite best efforts and use of all available marketing, this target has not been met.
	3. Messaging around Early permanence to form part of information meetings to ensure that this is an early consideration for prospective adopters.	Each information session will have contained information about Early Permanence as part of the delivery plan.	Every information session has contained messages about Early permanence, however these conversations often begin at the point of an initial phone call or email. Early Permanence is discussed with each prospective applicant and messaging continues throughout the journey from the front door throughout the assessment period.
	4. Increase availability of Early Permanence Carers through active and targeted recruitment campaign.	Early permanence focused campaign will be delivered with specific measuring of impact and outcomes of this campaign.	More campaign work around Early Permanence, coupled with improved training offer has led to an increase in adopters who can be considered suitable for Early Permanence Arrangements.
Preparing and Assessing Prospective Adopters for Adoption and Early Permanence	1. Embed use of adopters in delivery of Adoption Preparation training with a focus on sharing assessment experience and key messages about modern adoption including the importance of life story work, early access to support and maintaining links for their adopted children.	Approved adopters will co-facilitate Adopter Prep group.	Using adopters for segments but would like to get to a place of full service delivery
	2. Adopters to be co-facilitating Early Permanence Training.	Experienced Early Permanence carers will co-facilitate Early Permanence training.	Experienced EP carers are now routinely supporting the delivery of EP training.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
	3. Increase numbers of prospective adopters to be dually approved as early permanence carers thereby creating a larger pool of ALS Early Permanence Carers for Early permanence arrangements for children.	30% of all approved adopters in 2024-2025 will be dually approved for Early Permanence. (NB – there has been a change in approval and EP carers are now noted as suitable to be EP carers rather than dually approved).	Half of all approved adopters were also prepared for; and were considered suitable to become EP carers. This exceeded the 30% target that was set.
	4. Improve timescales for adopters assessments. 80% to be completed within timescales.	Adopter assessment rates will be completed within timescales.	This target was not met but will remain a target for the forthcoming year.
Planning for Permanence	1. Reduce average waiting time for children to be matched with suitable adoptive families with improved Permanency planning being considered across the partnership and earlier alerts and insights in to children who may need an adoptive home.	Matching times for children will improve and closer to the National average.	Although there was some improvement, This target was not met this year but will remain a target for the forthcoming year.
	2. Targeted responses to individual boroughs to focus on improving outcomes to enable development of practice and consequently improve overall performance.	Improvement in individual borough outcomes where there has been a persistent challenge in progressing plans for children.	With sustained and regular liaison between ALS and the individual partners, there has been some improvement across a number of the boroughs whilst others are on a journey to improvement. There are regular discussions from teams across the ALS service including Panel and Family Finding and frequent touchpoints with the Service manager as well as regular sharing of information at 6-weekly liaison meetings with LA's.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
	3. Ongoing programme of learning and development to support boroughs in better understanding the permanency route for adoption work including appropriate consideration of Early Permanence if this is suitable.	Boroughs will be better sighted on the timescales, options and planning parameters to be able to progress identified plans for adoption underpinned by quality work and within acceptable timeframes.	ALS have enabled improvement to practice by producing practice guidance notes on key areas e.g. fostering assessments, regular operational practice discussions at the QA group meetings and sharing details and encouraging boroughs to sign up to training events provided by Adoption England, Adopt London and ALS.
	4. Improve outcome as benchmarked by England national averages from 62% to meeting timescales of 70% over the coming year.	Children's journeys will reflect improvements on information systems.	There is still work to do to improve the timescales for children's journeys. This is being discussed in regular liaison meetings with partners and close monitoring and tracking occurs to minimise drift and delay for children.
Placing Children with Adopters	1. Improved quality of records to ensure timely access to panel.	Reduction in panel deferrals due to improved quality and/or timeliness of paperwork received.	Clear QA process to provide on-the-spot improvements to paperwork. Quality of paperwork. QA training on offer.
	2. CPR training offer to be co-facilitated by ALS and boroughs.		The CPR training is still in development phase with a view to launching in 2025-26 as there have been changes to the CoramBAAF CPR which are to be embedded in the training.
	3. Co-development of guides to support partners in understanding timescales and processes.	Guides will be available to share across the partnership which can be used during induction or to support inexperienced workers in understanding processes.	ALS have produced guidance to support Children's Social Work teams through adoption processes. This piece of work is ongoing and iterative as need arises.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
	4. Implement UEA Model Moving to Adoption across partnership stakeholder group including social workers, IRO's fostering services and foster carers through delivery of workshops or bitesize learn opportunities.	Increased understanding across all stakeholder groups of the importance of planning moves for children to support healthy and positive transitions into adoptive homes.	We have and continue to offer Moving to Adoption Training every 8 weeks to SW's, SSW's, IRO's and Foster Carers, I have attended Skills to Fostering Trainings to deliver the training to new foster carers twice so far and we are also open to upskilling people in the model through small things like sharing the leaflets and talking in person to carers and social workers or we can attend service days or similar if asked.
Supporting the Adoption Community	1. Design and embed improved recording systems to better understand the areas of need in adoption support to reflect messages that have been understood by specific areas of work including the Adoption Barometer, Conversations for Change, Improving Adoption Services for Adults, Public Law Working Group consultation paper.	Workflows in case recording systems will be accessible in Adoption support with clear points to measure service activity.	Workflows have been designed and are being launched. This is still in the early stages and too early to measure full outputs but there is measurable progress in the design and implementation of the workflows.
	2. Service reshape to increase helpline capacity and review of delivery model to reduce waiting times to access adoption support.	Helpline role will be redesigned and piloted with brief paper of initial review within 6 months of launch of new model.	Helpline has been revamped including the introduction of workflows to better understand the pace and demand of the work. The initial review of this revamp is yet to take place.
	3. Review and refine core support offer to include recommended early training to support adopters pre and post order to develop their therapeutic parenting skills.	Adoption Support offer will be available to families and partners to understand early model of adoption.	ALS have a clear core offer which is outlined in the Welcome Pack that is given to adoptive families.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
	4. Implement core offer of workshops and training for adoptive households to access as a rolling programme of events to provide an early support offer to pre-order and post order adoptive households.	Training offer will be available across the service and for partners to support adoption support planning and to support partners in articulating service offer to Ofsted.	ALS have delivered some training for adoptive households including Non-Violent Resistance training, Therapeutic Life Story Work and the popular Adoptive Parents Therapeutic Group which sits alongside the Toddler Group. There is a wider piece of work currently in development across Adopt London which will further increase capacity.
	5. Design and delivery of in-house training opportunities across ALS to strengthen understanding of therapeutic approaches across the service.	At least 3 in house learning opportunities will be delivered across ALS across different therapeutic modalities which will be open to all staff to participate in.	This area is still in development in line with the scoping project for Adoption Support across Adopt London.
	6. Support groups to be delivered across 4 main groups in adoption community (adopted children, adult adoptees, adopters and birth family).	Fully implemented support groups will be in place across all service areas either delivered by ALS or partners.	ALS are successfully running support groups to the 4 identified members of the adoption community. The birth family group is only currently for birth mothers.
	7. Explore development of specialist support groups to target specific types of adopters (e.g. adoptive fathers, single adopters, black adopters, transracial adoptive households).	Scoping paper alongside consultation document from reference groups to identify specific areas of need with proposals to meet the need from within existing resource or across strategic alliances.	This remains an area that needs more focus to ensure that the needs of the whole adoption community are considered within the service delivery model. Black adopters are able to benefit from joining groups established by the Black Adoption project but further work needs to be done for other affinity groups.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
	8. Scope development of bi-annual group for birth children in adoptive households.	Scoping document to identify if this is an area of need to be undertaken and if appropriate, presented to Board for consideration of experiences of this under-represented group of the Adoption Community.	Due to capacity issues, this piece of work has not yet been started.
	9. Scope use of digital systems to maintain links between birth and adoptive families.	Early pilot of digital system delivered and brief paper with onward recommendations as to next steps.	Early discussions and explorations about the implementation of digital systems have identified fiscal and technical challenges, therefore this has not progressed beyond scoping. Learning from a pilot project being run by colleagues in Adopt London North has highlighted the cost/benefit challenges.
Panel	1. Ongoing development of shared panel training to improve consistency in panel delivery across London.	Positive feedback from panel member appraisals. Positive feedback of the panel experience from all stakeholders attending panel.	There is annual Adopt London panel training and this has looked at BAP and AFDiT for panel members. There is an in-person panel workshop for panel members once a year ALS/AL-wide. Panel Advisors meet bi-monthly to look at practice development and also plan annual training. ALS have developed a panel newsletter. Panel members have been signposted to helpful resources and up and coming webinars from Adoption England as well as more local 'Lunch and Learn' events. Panel have had the opportunity to develop their knowledge of birth parents experiences and their understanding of the panel processes.
Business Support	1. Early scoping of the current business model to focus on underpinning specific service delivery areas to ensure business continuity planning arrangements.	Good understanding of the current strengths and vulnerabilities with opportunity for development of practice to ensure business continuity.	There has been a pilot of modelling undertaken by ALS. This has seen limited success but has highlighted the need for further training, learning and development. This will remain under review.
	2. Development of written systems processes to ensure clarity of approach and consistency in application.	Practice guidance for business support.	Written processes have been made available and continue to be in development to ensure clarity for service continuity.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
	3. Strengthen business support skill base in relation to service-wide data and present key periodic reports as required.	Improved understanding of business modelling and service delivery informed by data outputs.	Business support have received input and feedback and opportunities to develop skills in Excel to routinely share data regarding the service in a format consistent with ALS's reporting model.
Digital Development	1. Exploration of digital opportunities to transform business function.	Better understanding of digital formats and their ability to transform current service delivery.	ALS have embedded the use of Power BI as a Business-as-usual function to monitor service delivery.
	2. Pilot use of AI to improve efficiencies in the service.		ALS's host authority has been piloting AI technologies. The pilot has suggested that AI will be beneficial, however the full package has not yet been rolled out council-wide.
Value for Money	1. Reduction in staffing costs by recruiting to vacancies across the service.	Agency spend reduction and service stability.	Agency spend remains at a reasonable level and is consistently monitored to understand areas of pressure across the service.
	2. Review of all contracted services to ensure that they represent value for money services that meet the identified need.	All contracted work will have been reviewed and appropriate adjustments to service specification made accordingly.	All contracts have regular review meetings with the Head of Service to ensure value for money approaches and that the service continues to be fit for purpose.
	3. Scope opportunities for collaboration across specific service delivery areas and creative ways to build links across VAA partnerships.	Strategic working opportunities across service areas will be identified and options presented to Board to consider direction of travel for strategic alliances where this can strengthen service offer and outputs.	This work is considered in all partnership arrangements to consider the best delivery model to meet the needs of our families. Future opportunities will be considered for regional projects.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
Participation	1. Embed expert by experience voice across various user groups including adoptees, adult adoptees, adopters, birth parents within service delivery model to work towards full representation across the business of Adopt London South.	Each stakeholder group will have an opportunity to participate in various activities and forums to ensure their voice forms part of the delivery of the ALS service.	The Adopter Executive Group has been formed, providing the voice for adopters. The Adoptables have shared feedback on a National platform and regularly work on projects to think about improving experiences for Adopted children. There is a birth mother's group running and they have had the opportunity to speak with Panel to share experiences. There is an Adopted Adults Steering Group which shares views about the service. The panel Central list includes adopters, adoptees, care experienced members and members with disabilities which bring lived experience into the panel process.
	2. Reflect and review outcomes from consultations with user groups bi-annually across the service to look at how we are able to implement feedback and identify areas that are appropriate but ALS are unable to meet through further discussion with Governance Board.	Stakeholder group meetings will take place every 6 months to look at how feedback is being embedded in service delivery.	The stakeholder groups are set up but don't take place routinely as the intervals as identified. This will be an area for ongoing development.
	3. Participation with the Voice and Influence work led by Adoption England.	ALS will have a lead working alongside the National Voice and Influence lead to embed learning across the service.	ALS have a member of staff to champion the National Voice and Influence work.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures	Outcomes
Staff Development and Retention	1. Explore opportunities for secondments into ALS from across the partnership if vacancies arise to develop adoption knowledge which will be taken back into individual boroughs.	Boroughs will be aware of secondment opportunities and encourage their teams to consider these where appropriate.	This has not yet reached a conclusion, however there is ongoing work with the HR department to look at this model and there has been engagement with local RAA's who have successfully delivered this model to see if their approach can be adopted by ALS.
	2. Develop management and leadership skills through supporting students in ALS.	ALS will host students for the first time since becoming a RAA, offering a quality student placement and giving staff the opportunity to develop their management and leadership skills.	ALS workers have successfully hosted students for the first time. This has given social workers the opportunity to develop their supervisory skills and support students to have successful outcomes in their placements.
	3. Focused training and management development to strengthen and improve service delivery at management level.	Managers will be equipped with the right training and development to support them in their role and strengthen the core of the service as a result.	Two members of the management team have undertaken formal management training. This has been immediately impactful in the service delivery and more managers are lined up to complete this training in order to consolidate the existing strengths with the theoretical frameworks of the management and leadership role.
	4. Accessing opportunities for learning as offered across Adoption England or by others in the sector to strengthen practice.	Staff will have taken up learning opportunities offered across the sector to ensure contemporaneous understanding of best practice.	ALS has had good representation of staff across all learning opportunities offered by Adoption England and have been able to feed the learning back in to the service through leading challenging and inspiring conversations.
	5. Explore opportunities for discrete research and action projects to develop project management skills across the service.	ALS (possibly in conjunction with Adopt London) will seek opportunities for leads to develop practice across the board, exploring any available funding opportunities for research or pilots that may be available.	ALS staff have had the opportunity to consider regional practice lead roles.

Strategic Priorities 2025/26

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures
Recruitment of Adopters and those able to offer Early Permanence	1. Use of digital technology to improve messaging and accessibility to Adopter Information Meetings.	Use of video for people to watch AIM's at a time suitable to them.
	2. Increase opportunities for prospective adopters to make bespoke queries.	Offer at least 20 Q+A drop in sessions for prospective adopters to access to find out more information.
	3. Ensure messaging around adoption and early permanence is well embedded through presence on website and/or social media post.	G4A analytics will demonstrate regular visits to website.
	4. Front Door Guidance to shape and influence communications and engagement with prospective adopters.	Mystery shopping activity will reflect implementation of Front Door Guidance.
Preparing and Assessing Prospective Adopters for Adoption and Early Permanence	1. Embed use of experts-by-experience in delivery of Adoption Preparation training with a focus on sharing assessment experience and key messages about modern adoption including the importance of life story work, early access to support and maintaining links for their adopted children.	Voices of the adoption community will be part of the delivery of the Adopter Prep group.
	2. Experienced Early Permanence Carers to co-facilitate Early Permanence Preparation Training for prospective adopters and Early Permanence Carers.	Experienced Early Permanence carers will co-facilitate Early Permanence training.
	3. Increase numbers of Early Permanence-ready carers to provide options for children waiting.	30% of all approved adopters in 2025-2026 will be prepared to provide Early Permanence care to children.
	4. 75% of adopter assessments to be completed within national timescales.	Adopter assessment rates will be completed within timescales.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures
Planning for Permanence	1. Improve performance for average waiting time between PO and Match for children.	Matching times for children will improve and closer to the National average.
	2. Each borough to be offered up to 6 individual opportunities to meet with ALS specifically to progress children's care plans and to enable a targeted, bespoke response to individual boroughs needs with a focus on quality, timeliness and practice to drive positive outcomes for children.	Boroughs will have set meeting slots with ALS Service Manager or Head of Service in addition to monthly QA meetings and quarterly Board meetings and there should be an overall improvement in individual borough outcomes in achieving permanence for children.
	3. Ongoing offer of learning and development opportunities to be made available to boroughs to develop and strengthen their knowledge around adoptions.	Boroughs will be better sighted on the timescales, options and planning parameters to be able to progress identified plans for adoption underpinned by quality work and within acceptable timeframes.
	4. Improve outcome as benchmarked by England national averages from 62% to meeting timescales of 70% over the coming year.	Children's journeys will reflect improvements on information systems.
Placing Children with Adopters	1. Embedding use of new CoramBAAF documents across the service to maintain high quality records for children for both matching panel activity and for their future life story needs.	Reduction in panel deferrals due to improved quality and/or timeliness of paperwork received. 80% of panel feedback representing good or excellent quality documents.
	2. Shared CPR training offer to be embedded across the partnership and delivered by each partner at regular intervals.	Confirmation of dates for CPR training schedule and delivery. Feedback from delivery of training.
	3. Reinforcing the UEA Model 'Moving to Adoption' across partnership stakeholder group including social workers, IRO's fostering services and foster carers through delivery of workshops or bitesize learn opportunities.	Increased understanding across all stakeholder groups of the importance of planning moves for children to support healthy and positive transitions into adoptive homes.
	5. Share learning from disruptions across ALS, the panel and the wider partnership to inform and shape adoption practice by taking necessary learning and adapting service delivery to minimise risk of disruption where applicable.	Learning events and opportunities will be provided to ALS staff group, panel, QA group and other stakeholders in the partnership to understand and learn from disruption.

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures
Supporting the Adoption Community	1. Embed recording system to capture needs within adoption support across the key streams of adoption support work.	Data and reporting will reflect robust recording within case management system and be used to identify areas of need and opportunities to measure activity levels across service.
	2. Reduction in waiting times for access to adoption support services.	Families will not wait more than 3 months to access a support service.
	3. Implementation of core offer of services across Pan-regional footprint through upskilling of staff to deliver early support services.	Ambitions of innovation funding from Adoption England will be realised in terms of group work offer and development of early help offer at key transitional stages.
	4. Review and refine core support offer to include recommended early training to support adopters pre and post order to develop their therapeutic parenting skills.	Adoption Support offer will be available to families and partners to understand early model of adoption.
	5. Explore development of specialist support groups to target specific types of adopters (e.g. adoptive fathers, single adopters, black adopters, transracial adoptive households).	Scoping paper alongside consultation document from key reference groups to identify specific areas of need with proposals to meet the need from within existing resource or across strategic alliances.
	6. Continue to explore digital approaches to maintaining important links to help children stay in touch with those who are important to them.	Review of various digital platform offers to consider value-for-money services that are accessible to the adoption community.
Panel	1. Reviewing current panel model and central list to ensure balance of lived experience and diversity throughout.	Panel will reflect the adoption community and the wider community that we serve.
Business Support	1. Business support core function to include sharing data and using this to support team/service activity and function.	Business support will routinely provide key information around KPI's, service activity levels and routine data requests re. Ofsted using appropriate presentation platforms.
Digital Development	1. Exploration of digital opportunities to transform business function.	Better understanding of digital formats and their ability to transform current service delivery.
	2. Pilot use of AI to improve efficiencies in the service.	

Strategic Priority Area	Activity	Measures
Value for Money	1. Reduction in staffing costs by recruiting to vacancies across the service.	Agency spend reduction and service stability.
	2. Capitalise on avenues for symbiotic collaboration and strategic alliances with other partnerships with other RAA's or across VAA's or appropriate other interested parties.	Delivery of services with other partner agencies will be evident across the service such as shared learning and development opportunities, delivery of training or delivery of services.
Participation	1. Strengthen the voice of the experts-by-experience for young adoptees, adult adoptees, adopters and birth parents across the service to ensure their voice is considered in any service delivery or improvement activities.	Key stakeholder groups will be established and be consulted as appropriate when considering the shape and delivery of services.
	2. Representation in the Voice and Influence work led by Adoption England.	ALS Champion in this area will work alongside the National team to bring learning back to ALS and embed key principles within the service. Where appropriate, key stakeholders will participate in Adoption England events.
Staff Development and Retention	1. Upskilling of ALS staff to provide therapeutic interventions directly to families circumventing the need to commission all activity through spot-purchasing arrangements.	Identified staff will have attended training to learn how to deliver recognised therapeutic parenting approaches.
	2. Building a practice model in which staff will be trained to ensure personal development aligning with a framework of therapeutic approaches for consistent responses across the service.	Provision of training or workshops to embed preferred practice model across the service with attendance across the staff group.
	3. Provision of service-wide development opportunities in key areas of delivery of adoption services.	Delivery of training across teams or whole service delivery.
	4. Strengthening management and leadership development opportunities through focused L+D activities and through providing opportunities for students to join the service.	Managers/Aspiring leaders will be equipped L+D opportunities through provision of student placements, short training courses or accredited management training.
	5. Accessing opportunities for learning as offered across Adoption England or by others in the sector to strengthen practice.	Staff will increased their CPD through accessing training offers across ALS, Adopt London, LB Southwark, VAA's or other training provides and Adoption England which will be reflected in personal development plans.

References

Rawcliffe, C., Neil, E., Hancock, M. and Elias L. (2022) Maintaining relationships with birth families after adoption: What are Adopted Adults' Views? Centre for Research on Children and Families Research Briefing; Norwich: University of East Anglia.

Available at [🔗 https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families](https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families) (tinyurl.com/5f3v4fuz)

Adoption Barometer for England

[🔗 Download.ashx \(adoptionuk.org\)](#) (tinyurl.com/ym35yvu)

Public Law Working Group (Adoption) Consultation

[🔗 https://www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/public-law-working-group-interim-report-recommendations-for-best-practice-in-respect-of-adoption](https://www.judiciary.uk/guidance-and-resources/public-law-working-group-interim-report-recommendations-for-best-practice-in-respect-of-adoption) (shorturl.at/GTDpz)

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Meeting Name:	Corporate Parenting Committee
Date:	25 February 2026
Report title:	Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and Children's Rights and Participation Annual Report 2024-25
Ward(s) or groups affected:	All
Classification:	Open
Reason for lateness (if applicable):	N/A
From:	Alasdair Smith, Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Corporate Parenting Committee note the Independent Review Officers (IRO) and Children's Rights and Participation Annual Report 2024-25.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. The IRO Annual Report provides relating to the Independent Reviewing Service for children and young people in care within the local authority, as required by statutory guidance arising from the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.
3. This report contains a summary of work completed by Southwark's IRO service for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. It identifies the work of the service in fulfilling its statutory remit and highlights areas for development in relation to the IRO function.
4. The report is to be presented to the strategic Director of Children's and Adults' Services, the Lead Cabinet Member for Children, Young People, Education and Refugees and to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

5. Independent Reviewing Officers are dedicated to improving outcomes for children and young people in care through the review and challenge aspect of their role. They are often the stable and constant factor for children and young people in care and are committed to driving and improving outcomes for them through working in partnership with young people, their carers and the social work and professional network around children.

6. In the Ofsted Inspection of 2017 the oversight was an area that was felt to need development. Previous Focused Visits from Ofsted have shown that this area had improved and is continually improving. The OFSTED inspection of September 2022 in particular noted really good practice by the IRO service. In considering the IRO report the Corporate Parenting Committee is able to exercise its own scrutiny and challenge function and hold services to account.
7. The report set out in Appendix 1, highlights the work of the service and the areas for development going forward and provides an overview of children in care and services provided to them.

Policy framework implications

8. The Borough Plan has a commitment to a great start in life for all children and young people in the borough. This particularly has in mind those who are in care, for whom Independent Reviewing Officers are a key part of overseeing the Borough Plan commitment.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts

Community impact statement

9. The decision to note this report has been judged to have no or a very small impact on local people and communities.
10. The work of the IROs is intended to improve the outcome for children and young people in care.
11. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, lays out the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires public bodies to consider all individuals when carrying out their day to day work - in shaping policy, in delivering services and in relation to their own employees. It requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. The council's [Approach to Equality](#) commits the council to ensuring that equality is an integral part of our day to day business.
12. The Council's Children and Families Directorate involves working closely with all relevant stakeholders and partners across the sector and collectively we are committed to upholding the responsibilities towards advocating the Public Sector Equality Duty and complying with the Equalities Act 2010.
13. The PSED enables public bodies to consider the diverse needs of groups and have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance

equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. Due regard is about considering the different needs of protected characteristics in relation to the three parts of the duty.

14. The Equalities Act 2010 define the following as protected characteristics; age; disability, gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

15. The report takes account of the ethnicity, age, and disabilities of children in care, as well as the racial and ethnic background of current staffing of the IRO Service and addresses these areas in light of commitments set out by Southwark Stands Together (SST).

Health impact statement

16. The report takes account of the health and wellbeing of children in care.

Climate change implications

17. None.

Resource implications

18. None

Legal implications

19. None.

Financial implications

20. None

Consultation

21. Not applicable.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Southwark's Approach to Equality	Quality Assurance and Practice Development, Children and Families, Children's and Adults' Services 4 th Floor, Children's and Adults' Services Tooley Street 160 Tooley Street, London, SE1 2QH	https://www.southwark.aov.uk/council-and-democracv/equalitv-and-diversity/equality-objeictives
Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010	Quality Assurance and Practice Development, Children and Families, Children's and Adults' Services 4 th Floor, Children's and Adults' Services Tooley Street 160 Tooley Street, London, SE1 2QH	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2010/959/contents/2013-07-01
Southwark's Borough Plan 2022-26	Quality Assurance and Practice Development, Children and Families, Children's and Adults' Services 4 th Floor, Children's and Adults' Services Tooley Street 160 Tooley Street, London, SE1 2QH	Fairer, greener, safer - Southwark Council Delivery Plan 2022 - 2026

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and Children's Rights and Participation Annual Report 2024- 25

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Alasdair Smith, Director of Children’s Services		
Report Author	Clare Ryan, Service Manager, Quality Assurance and Practice Development		
Version	Final		
Dated	12 February 2026		
Key Decision?	No		
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER			
Officer Title		Comments Sought	Comments included
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance		No	No
Strategic Director of Resources		No	No
Cabinet Member		No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team			13 February 2026



Independent Reviewing Service and Children's Rights and Participation Annual Report 2024/25

Date	July 2025
Responsibility	Clare Ryan, Service Manager, Quality Assurance, Children's and Adults' Services

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Introduction

In line with statutory guidance¹, the purpose of this annual report is to provide an overview of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Service for Looked After Children between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025. The report provides analysis and evaluation of practice, plans and

¹ IRO Handbook, DCSG, 2010 [available here](#)

arrangements for looked after children. The report reviews the effectiveness of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service in ensuring that the local authority effectively discharges its statutory and corporate parenting responsibilities towards those children who are looked after.

This annual report provides qualitative and quantitative information about the service provided in the financial year 2024-25 and sets out our priorities for 2025-26 to further improve the effectiveness of the service.

Legal context and purpose of the service

The Independent Review Officers Service operates under the framework established in the IRO Handbook and reflects the statutory duties, Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2010.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have a critical and statutory role in improving care planning for looked after children. The responsibility of the IRO is to have an overview of the child's care planning arrangements and of the child's wellbeing in their placement. IROs achieve this primarily through chairing multi-agency reviews of children's care plans and will have a strong focus on plans for children's futures, as well as oversight of the child's health and education. The IRO must offer constructive and targeted scrutiny and challenge regarding case management and care planning through regular review and monitoring; and follow up between children's reviews as appropriate to the child's needs and circumstances.

Functions & duties of the IRO Service

The primary task of the IROs is to ensure that children's care plans fully reflect their current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. The IRO Service must have strong oversight of all care planning for children and young people throughout their time in care, notably at the key transition points where children and young people are entering and leaving care. This is to ensure that children and young people's needs are well identified and defined, and that the planning of service delivery is proportionate, impactful and effective in a positive way, and without delay.

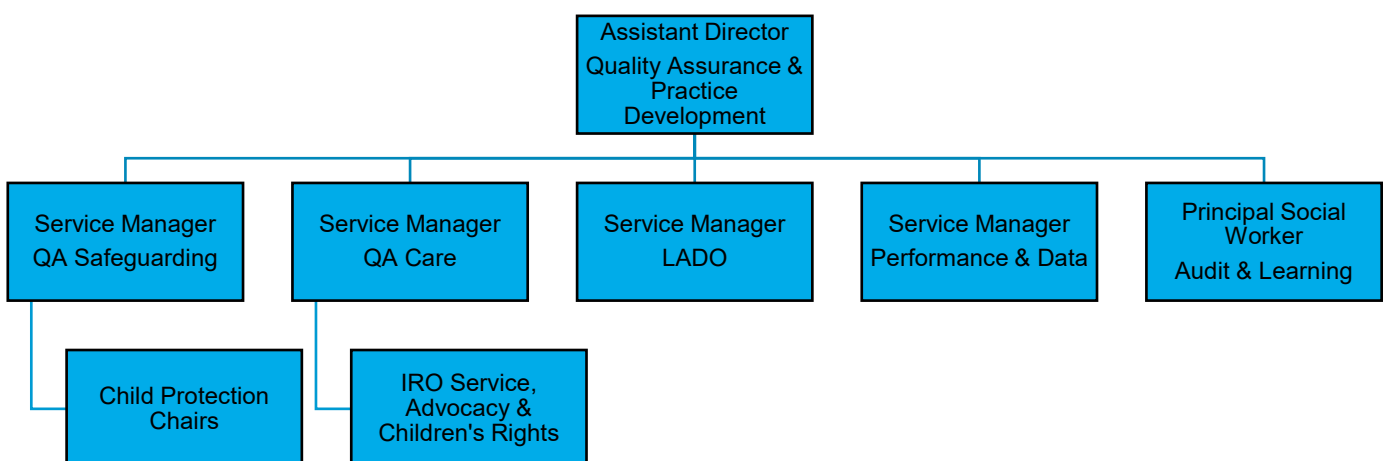
To achieve this, the IRO Service is expected to:

- Ensure that **the care plan is based on a detailed and up-to-date assessment of the child's needs**, and sets out realistic and effective actions to meet those needs, within an appropriate timescale for the child;
- **Identify any gaps** in the assessment process or provision of services, and notify the corporate parent about the implications of this for the child;
- Ensure that the **child's voice is heard**, their views, wishes and feelings are given full consideration and weight and, as appropriate, the child fully understands their care plan and the implications of any proposed changes to it;
- Ensure that the **child understands how an advocate could help** and that a referral to an advocate is made if necessary;

- **Consult** with and involve the child's parents, as well as other significant adults in the **family and professional networks**;
- Ensure any **safeguarding issues are identified** and addressed;
- **Challenge robustly any drift or delay** in the progress of the child's care plan, or the delivery of services to them;
- Ensure that **formal statutory reviews are held and recorded** within timescales set out by statutory guidance;
- **Monitor the local authority's actions** in between the review meetings, to make sure that progress is being made to achieve the outcomes for the child as set-out in their care plan, and to act on any concerns about drift or delay;
- **Take appropriate action** if the local authority fails to comply with regulations, or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way, including making a referral to Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS).

Service Overview

The IRO Service sits within the wider Children's Services Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement function. The Service Manager for Quality Assurance (Care) is responsible for the line management of the IROs and also has management responsibility for the provision of advocacy, independent visitors and children and young people's participation (for those children who are looked after by the local authority or are care leavers).



The Service benefits from close links to Permanency and Care Services (0-15), 16 plus Services, Safeguarding and Family Support Service, All Age Disability, the Virtual School and other services

within Quality Assurance and auditing services. There is also collaborative work with the Extra Familial Harm Service and with the QA Safeguarding Service (Child Protection Conferencing).

Administrative support is provided by a fulltime administrative officer managed by the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) Administration Manager. IROs are responsible with social workers for arranging looked after review meetings, and for recording all review meetings. There is administrative capacity for the distribution of care plans and IRO reports to the professional network. Social workers are tasked with sending out consultation documents and sharing plans and IRO reports with children and parents.

On 1 August 2024 the Fostering Independent Reviewing Service was brought in house to have more robust oversight. The reviews were initially undertaken by sessional and agency Fostering Independent Reviewing Officers (FIROs) whilst permanent recruitment took place. Two permanent FIROs started in January 2025. They each have caseloads of around 64 foster carers. All annual reviews are now conducted in person.

On the 1 January 2025 the council brought the Independent Visitor (IV) service in house. A permanent IV Coordinator started in January 2025.

The council's IRO Service has seven permanent IRO posts and consists of six permanent full time and two permanent part time IROs. The IRO Service has been stable over the past 12 months to April 2025, with one change occurring in January 2025 when one of the IROs moved to a FIRO position. There have been some long-term sickness issues within the team over the year. Where sickness risks impacting on service delivery to our children the service has a longstanding relationship with a trusted sessional IRO service provider, who are mobilised quickly to ensure any gaps in support to children are minimised.

IROs who are male, and of Black or Black British ethnicity continue to be under-represented within the service in comparison to the care population. Three of the eight IROs are of Black/Black British ethnicity and there are no male IROs in the service. IROs consider and promote the specific cultural and identity needs of children and young people through the review of their care plans and audit activity.

In the council we have an aspiring manager coaching programme and an additional coaching programme for established managers. These programmes will assist the council to 'grow our own' and inspire and upskill current members of staff to step up or across to IRO positions in the future.

All IROs have at least five years post-qualifying experience as a social worker and are registered with Social Work England. Seven of the eight IROs have previously held managerial roles in other services and all have had experience within safeguarding services and/or services for looked after children.

The IRO service is stable with some IROs having known their children for almost their whole lives. Often, IROs are the most consistent professional in children's lives and as such, hold a wealth of knowledge about them. This is particularly important when there are changes in the network around the child or young person.

IROs have access to the clinical service. A Clinical Practitioner co-chairs a bimonthly team meeting with the Quality Assurance Service Manager which focusses on reflective discussions regarding research and practice.

Caseloads

IRO caseloads are within the limits recommended in statutory guidance. The recommended average caseload is between 50 and 70 looked after children. The average caseload an IRO holds is 55 to 60 children. The highest currently is 60. The workload for an IRO is considered in relation to time taken to travel to visit children and young people as well as the complexity of issues for each child. Children and families whose origins are in other countries may need additional time in the care planning and review process to properly explore their cultural needs, as well as additional time for interpretation.

Most reviews take place in person however; some children and young people prefer virtual methods of interaction. If a review takes place virtually there is an expectation that the IRO will visit the child or young person where they live either before or after the review. All children and young people should be visited in person a minimum of twice per year in order for their IRO to understand their lived experience and ensure they are living in a suitable home.

Multi-agency liaison & quality assurance

The leadership of the IRO service is a strong and visible leader across the multi-agency partnership, ensuring the delivery of high-quality partnership services for children in care, this includes:

- Weekly multi-agency meeting which focuses on the timeliness of PEPs, Initial Health Assessments and Review Health Assessments. They also attend a weekly meeting which focusses on any young people in unregulated homes and those subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders.
- CAFCASS liaison takes place regularly with quarterly meetings between the Quality Assurance Service Manager, Head of Service for Safeguarding and Family support, Care Proceedings Case Manager and CAFCASS. IROs remain in close contact with Guardians and have electronic access to legal bundles to ensure oversight of children's cases where these are in proceedings.
- bimonthly performance meetings for the All Age Disability, Safeguarding and Family Support, Care and Permanency, 16+ Services and Fostering Services.
- biweekly Complex Needs Panel as well as other strategic meetings.
- quarterly 'Learning Fest'. This is a week-long event which focuses on a practice theme and involves auditing, closing the loop on learning from audit activity and training events which also include young people and adults with lived experience of children's services leading sessions. IROs participate in these quarterly thematic case audits, and the Service Manager is involved in the moderation of audits.

For IROs, manageable caseloads enable robust oversight between reviews, allowing time for ongoing monitoring and attendance/oversight at other key meetings for children (such as Permanency Planning Meetings, Stability Meetings and Professionals Meetings). This ensures

a greater focus on collaborative working across Southwark's services and with other agencies (schools, primary, community and acute health care, CAMHs etc.)

Profile of Southwark's Children & Young People

The rate of children who came into our care in 2024-25 increased by 10% on the previous year (chart 1). Whilst our rate of children entering care remains broadly in line with our statistical neighbours², our rate is above the national average.

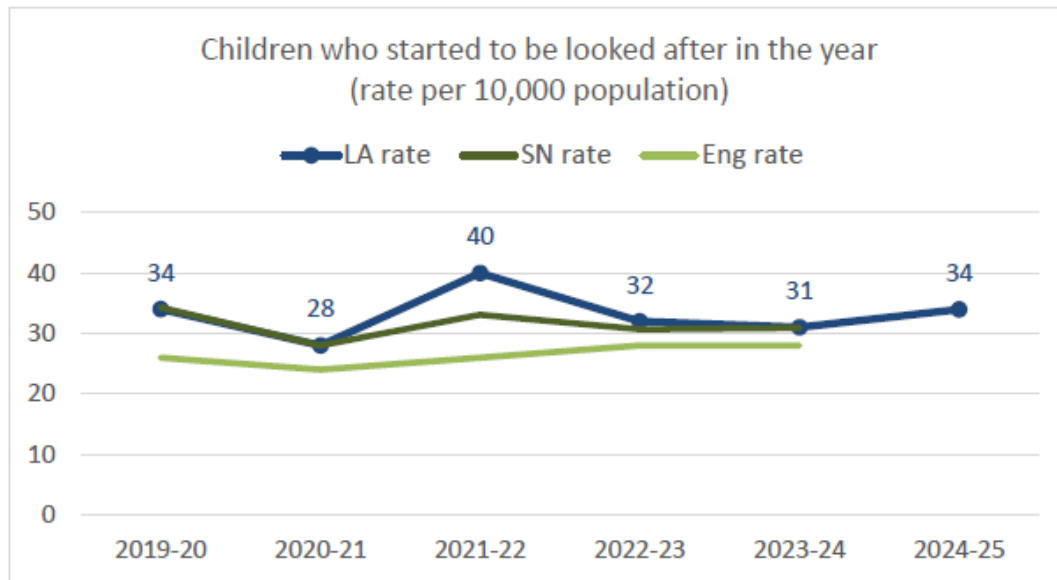
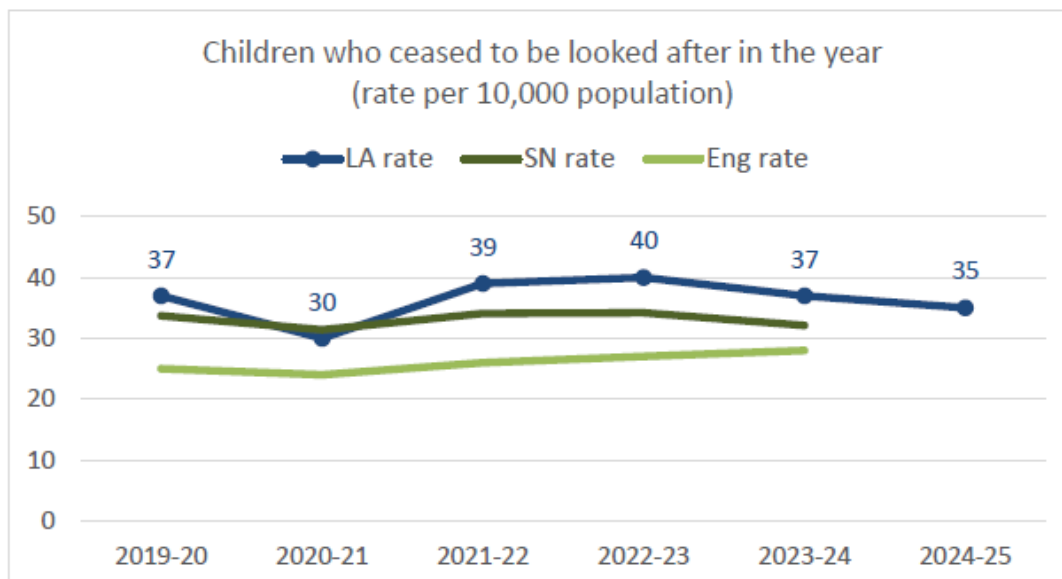


Chart 1: Children who started to be looked after

The rate of children leaving care continues to fall, bringing our rate more in line with that of our statistical neighbours (chart 2).



² As evidenced by regional improvement alliance quarterly benchmark reporting, ahead of national return publication.

Chart 2: Children who ceased to be looked after

Care leaver numbers remain relatively stable (chart 3). IROs have oversight of pathway planning for young people as they approach leaving care age and liaise closely with the 16+ Services. There is flexibility for IROs to remain involved for a time limited period post 18, with the young person's consent, if post 18 planning has not been finalised. In this case the IRO will continue to monitor the planning and chair the first 18+ Pathway Plan review. The 16+ Service is in touch with approximately 99.7% of care leavers aged between 19 and 21 years and 99% for those aged between 17 and 18 years.

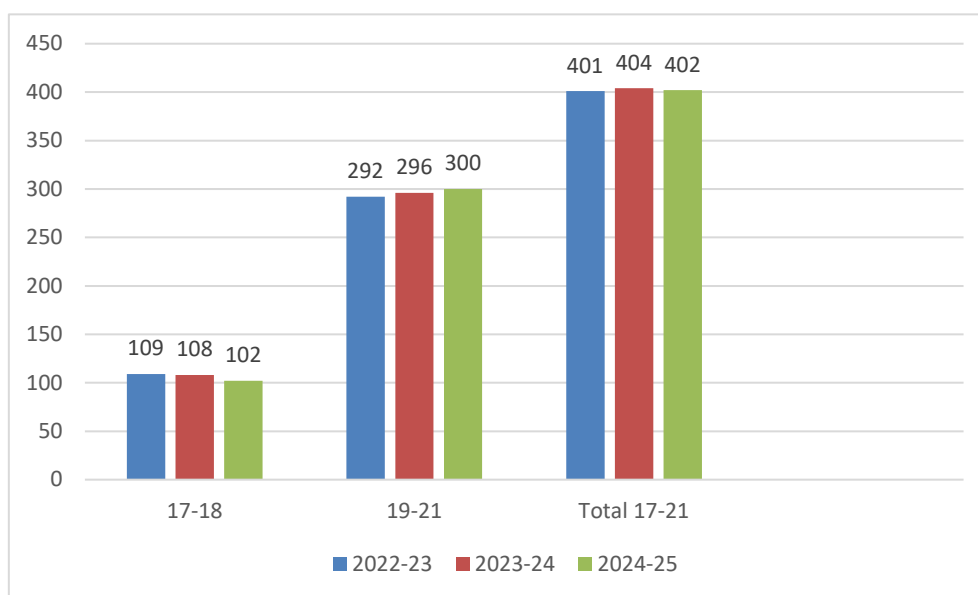


Chart 3: Care leavers by age group

	SNs 2023/24	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24	Southwark 2024/25
CLA as at 31 st March (n)	N/A	420	397	387
CLA as at 31 st March per 10,000	67.4	63.7	69.6	68.5
CLA starting to 31 st March (n)	N/A	182	177	192
CLA starting to 31 st March per 10,000	30.9	32.0	31.0	34.0
CLA ceasing to 31 st March (n)	N/A	228	208	198
CLA ceasing to 31 st March per 10,000	32.1	40.0	37.0	35.0

Table 1: Benchmarked comparisons - children in care

Children who are of Black or Black British ethnicity are overrepresented amongst our children in care (40.3% for 2024/25), though the gap between the overall borough population is narrowing. Children from mixed heritage backgrounds are significantly overrepresented amongst our children in care and the gap has widened in over recent years (table 2).

	Southwark Child Population	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24	Southwark 2024/25
White	29.6%	22.0%	24.0%	23.0%
Mixed	13.6%	21.0%	23.0%	24.8%
Asian or Asian British	6.8%	5.0%	5.0%	4.4%
Black or Black British	38.2%	43.0%	41.0%	40.3%
Other ethnic groups	7.6%	9.0%	8.0%	7.5%

Table 2: Care population by ethnicity

The Lifelong Links Programme is embedded in Southwark and committed to supporting children in care to establish meaningful links with people who are important to them and offer insight into their history, culture and identity. The service regularly attends IRO and social work services team meetings to ensure a steady flow of referrals. IROs highlight Life Long Links at every looked after review.

The gender of children and young people in care remains stable and is in line with our comparative national, statistical neighbours, and inner London averages (chart 4). As with our statistical neighbours, more male children than female receive care services.

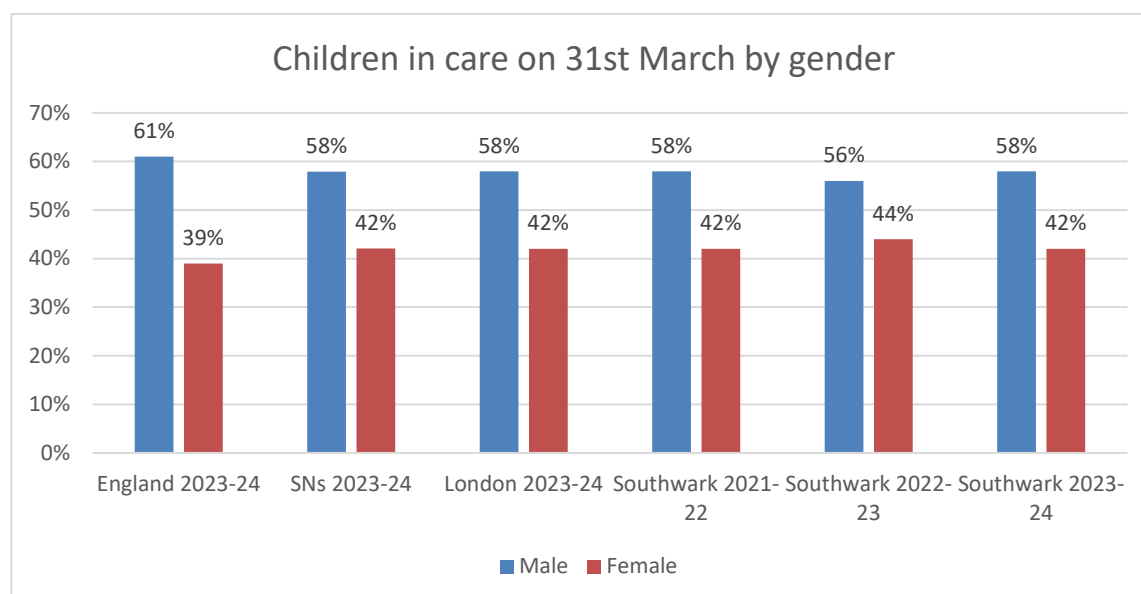


Chart 4: Care population by gender

Southwark's looked after children are proportionately older than our statistical neighbours and the inner London averages. The highest proportion are aged between 16 and over (table 3).

Working with teenagers and particularly late entrants into care require IROs to be confident with transition planning and support and safeguarding services. IROs have good links with the experienced practitioners in the 16+ service and will recommend that children are presented to the extra-familiar harm panel when there are concerns about missing episodes, criminal or sexual exploitation and complex needs panel when multi agency planning is required.

England 2023/24	SNs 2023/24	London 2023/24	Southwark 2022/23	Southwark 2023/24	Southwark 2024/25
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Under 1	4%	5%	5%	3.0%	3.0%	2.8%
1 to 4	13%	11%	11%	5.0%	5.0%	6.5%
5 to 9	18%	15%	14%	9.0%	11.0%	10.3%
10 to 15	38%	35%	36%	44.0%	38.0%	36.4%
16 and over	27%	34%	35%	40.0%	44.0%	43.9%

Table 3: Care population by age

Strong IRO oversight of care plans for very young children coming into care is crucial if the plan is to return children home where this is assessed as a realistic possibility. Many of our young children's parents and carers are affected by issues such as domestic abuse and violence, substance and alcohol use, and or mental health issues. Often, these issues are not resolved for children, and they remain in care, therefore, securing permanency early on at the initial and second reviews for these children becomes critical.

Permanency for children can be achieved in a number of ways. Children can be matched for adoption or matched for long term foster care or residential care. Children can also be placed with someone who is connected or related to the child or children (Connected Carers).

Outcomes and Performance

Stability of Care

IROs have a significant role in supporting children to remain living in a stable home and in ensuring that they have the right support to meet their needs (stability of care). Stability of children remaining where they are living has improved over the last year with less children experiencing three or more moves (a decrease of 4.9%) compared with the previous year.

The council has employed two permanent, part time, Permanence Leads who deliver focussed cross system support to services on increasing stability and permanence for children and young people. They ensure that regular permanence planning meetings are taking place, robust and regularly review of support plans are in place and children are being matched with foster carers at fostering panel or via the Looked After Review process, if over 14 years old. IROs regularly attend permanence planning meetings and hold important information about children and their journey into and through care, particularly when they have been working with children for a significant period of time. Stability meetings, to support children and young people's carers take place regularly, not just when things are challenging but as a pre-emptive and supportive measure.

Southwark's proportion of children in foster care is in line with London at 69%, and a good proportion of foster homes for children are with permanent foster carers (table 4).

	England 2023/24	SNs 2023/24	London 2023/24	Southwark 2023/24	Southwark 2024/25
Foster placements	67%	71%	69%	69%	69%
Concurrent planning foster placements	x	x	x	3.0%	2.8%
Foster placements with relative(s) or friends(s)	x	x	x	x	26.6%
Foster placements confirmed as permanent (long term)	x	x	x	x	40.4%
Placed for adoption	2%	2%	1%	0.5%	0.5%
Placement with parents	6%	4%	3%	0.8%	2.3%
Children's homes, secure units and hostels	x	x	x	23.7%	25.3%
Other residential settings	2%	2%	2%	2.0%	1.3%
Residential schools	x	0%	x	x	0.3%
Other placements	5%	4%	6%	5.0%	1.3%

Table 4: Care population by placement type

Audit and outcomes review shows that our children in long term stable homes with committed carers do very well at school and socially.

The council are focussing on sufficiency of homes for children and young people and developing capacity within and in the proximity of the borough as a high priority. The council opened their own four bed residential provision in 2025 with a second provision planned for 2026. Placement sufficiency remains a national issue.

	England 2023/24	SNs 2023/24	London 2023/24	Southwark 2023/24	Southwark 2024/25
% of children with 3+ placements	10%	11%	11%	15.0%	10.1%
% of children in care for 2.5 years in placement for 2 years +	68%	68%	68%	62.0%	73.8%

Table 5: Placement stability

Wherever possible, children should be placed to live close to their families. The proportion of children in care at the end of the year placed more than 20 miles from their home is above both the England, inner London and statistical neighbours' average. this has slightly reduced by 0.4 percentage point to 19.6% (chart 6).

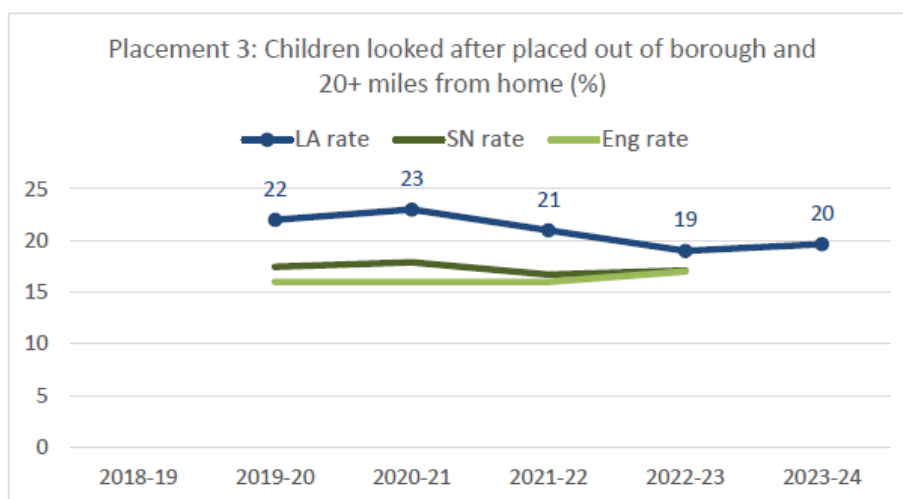


Chart 6: Placement distance

IROs have a statutory role in seeking to improve outcomes for the children in our care. This includes ensuring that children have an initial health assessment in good time, and that they then have an up to date annual health assessment and developmental checks, and that their mental health and wellbeing is monitored and addressed.

Whilst the majority of children have an up to date annual health assessment (98.1% as at the end of year 2025), the timeliness of initial health assessments is an area of focus. There is a weekly meeting to address improvements needed which is chaired by the Deputy Director and the timeliness of initial health assessments continues to increase no at 70% as of end of June 25.

Children's access to timely dental checks were significantly impacted by the pandemic and there was a continuing backlog impacting performance, however this has now increased to 90.3% this year.

The vast majority of children in care have an average SDQ score (13.8), but these indicators of emotional and behavioural health need should be more consistently evident in children's care plans. However, there is embedded clinical capacity (for children's mental health needs) available to our children, as well as a Virtual Mental Health Lead exclusive to children in care. In partnership with our Health colleagues we have greatly improved on the number of children with up-to-date immunisations with a steady increase over recent years, currently at 83.4%, well above inner London and statistical neighbours at 71% and 74% respectively (table 6).

Our audit evidence continues to show that IROs are addressing health assessments in reviews to inform review recommendations.

	England 2023/24	SNs 2023/24	London 2023/24	Southwark 2023/24	Southwark 2024/25
Number of children whose immunisations were up to date	82%	71%	74%	69.0%	83.4%
Number of children who had their teeth checked by a dentist	79%	80%	79%	84.0%	90.3%
Number of children who had their annual health assessment	89%	95%	92%	97.0%	98.1%

Number of these children whose development assessments were up to date (LAC 12+ months and aged 5 or younger at 31 March)	88%	91%	85%	100.0%	100.0%
Children looked after for at least 12 months aged 4 to 16 with an SDQ score	77%	90%	88%	98.0%	94.9%
Average score per child	14.7	14.0	13.8	14.3	13.8

Table 6: Health outcomes

Educational Achievement and Attainment

The IRO Service has oversight of Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion and quality as well as children missing education and work being done to support the young person to remain in education. A PEP should be started within 10 days of a child becoming looked after and their plan must be in place by their first review. The social work services completed 100% of the PEPs in 2024/25.

Of the 59 KS4 students in 2025, there was a significant improvement in English, especially in standard passes (+10%) and strong passes (+8%). This is as a result of the effective joint work between the virtual school and care services and our targeted interventions. Maths showed modest gains in both categories (+3%), indicating a more stable but slower recovery. The overall trend from 2024 to 2025 is positive, with all categories improving, reversing the outcomes seen in 2024 (table 7).

Full CLA Cohort - English and Maths					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
English Standard, 9-4	27%	47%	28%	14%	24%
English Strong, 9-5	16%	17%	20%	7%	15%
Maths Standard, 9-4	27%	17%	20%	14%	17%
Maths Strong, 9-5	20%	15%	8%	7%	10%

Table 7: KS4 Outcomes – English & Maths

Children in care achieving a pass (9-4) and a strong pass (9-5) in both English and Maths is showed significant recovery this year in comparison to last year. This also reflects improved support strategies, targeted interventions, or changes in cohort characteristics (table 7).

Table 22: Full CLA Cohort - Achieving a pass in both English and Maths					
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Standard, 9-4	22%	14%	16%	6%	15%
Strong, 9-5	15%	11%	8%	3%	8%

Table 7: KS4 Outcomes - All

There were a number of areas for celebration recognised on Results Day 2025 including:

- 7 students will be progressing onto university undergraduate courses this year
- 2 students achieved A-C at A Level and are progressing to Russell Group universities
- 5 students got their firm choice of university place i.e. their first choice of university
- 1 female student is studying a STEM subject (Engineering) at a competitive university
- 3 of the 4 A Level students achieved A-D at A Level
- At Level 3 BTEC, 7 out of 8 students achieved Distinction*-Merit grades which is a superb achievement

Children's Reviews

A child's initial review should be conducted within 20 working days of the child becoming looked after; and the second review should be conducted within three months of the initial review of the child's care plan. Subsequent reviews should be held not more than six months after this. A review should be held in a venue which is comfortable for the child or young person, usually where the child or young person is living. IROs see children and young people where they live either before the review, as part of the review, or afterwards, depending on the wishes of the child or young person.

All care and pathway plans are written in the first person and co-produced with children and young people. The Service Manager along with the Audit and Learning Team and Permanence Lead run regular training for social workers to embed this practice. The IROs all write their minutes as a letter to the child or young person and this is also now embedded as best practice. Feedback from young people has been positive.

Of the children in our care at 31st March 2025, 87% had an up to date review (table 8). This is a decrease from the previous two years and is largely attributable to the impact of sickness and personnel issues. Where gaps in our records have arisen due to short notice sickness issues there is robust oversight of care planning for these children and young people. The IRO service has employed additional IRO capacity to re-review each child and young person in a timely way to ensure there is appropriate oversight and a review completed and recorded for all children.

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
No. of children looked after for 20+ working days at 31st March	439	408	391	387
(of the above) No. of children with reviews held in timescale	394	403	383	315
% of children with reviews held in timescale	88%	99%	98%	87%
Total no. of reviews held in the year for all children & young people	1222	1158	1055	991

Table 8: Review performance

Children's Views

Of particular strength in our system is the rate of children who are supported to participate in their care planning and reviews (chart 7).

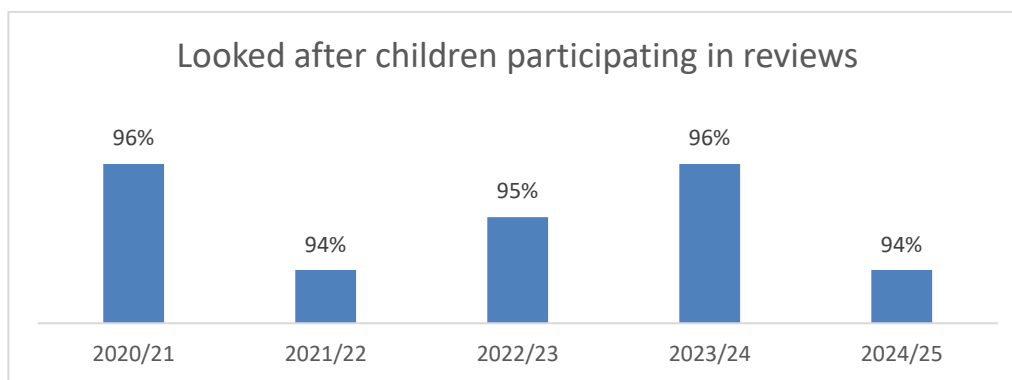


Chart 7: Review participation

The above graph shows the proportion of children and young people looked after (at the end of year) aged 4 years and above who had participated in their review in some way. There is no published comparative information available for participation. Various methodology is used to encourage children's participation, notably if they do not wish to physically attend their review, children and young people will meet with their named IRO face to face before their review to give their views. They also use phone calls, texts, WhatsApp, email and online methods to share their views about where they live, their education, their social life and their health care.

Family time with birth families and carers remains a high priority for children and the frequency with which they can see their parents and or their siblings. IROs are ensuring that family time plans are being regularly reviewed in terms of the venue and levels of supervision. Young people have also fed back that having a stable home, feeling safe in their community and aspirational education and employment opportunities are of high priority.

IROs will consult with children and young people before, during and after their reviews to hear their views, wishes and feelings and to monitor their needs whilst in care. The Service records consultations via an electronic format which is overseen by the Quality Assurance Service.

Regular consultations take place with Speakerbox, our Children in Care Council, to involve children and young people in evaluating practice.

Children's Views

Children's Rights Officer & Speakerbox

Speakerbox is chaired by designated young people supported by the Children's Rights and Participation Officers (CRO) and is divided into Speakerbox Junior and Speakerbox Senior. The Speakerbox mission and purpose is *empowering, upskilling and equipping our children and young people with the tools to self-advocate whilst amplifying the voices of all our care experienced*

children and young people.

Since April 2023 there have been two CROs in post with one post being 50% funded by the Virtual School alongside educational activities for care experienced children and young people.

Throughout 2024/25 Speakerbox have continued to shape practice and influence decision making through various means such as developing and delivering training, recruitment of staff, consultations, attending training workshops, attending events/programmes and campaigning. Over the course of the year there were 1448 episodes where young people participated via Speakerbox.

Children, young people and parents are actively involved in the recruitment of social workers and managers of all levels, there is an expectation that all recruitment will include a panel of young people and parents. Panel chairs and members are responsible for feedback to children and young people on the outcome of recruitment processes and are universally positive on the impact of young people's participation and how insightful they are.

Speakerbox run a fortnightly session called Creative Collective which is an opportunity for care experienced young people to come together to express themselves through music and engage in creative activities, facilitated by a music producer and songwriter.

Speakerbox also run a fortnightly cooking group in collaboration with Bread Ahead Bakery in Borough for young people aged 14-25 who have an Education and Health Care Plan. This group has been well attended and young people have had an informal opportunity to come together, make friends and learn how to cook a variety of different things. This included a particular highlight in the last year with internationally renowned food critic Jay Rayner delivering a cooking class for our children in care and care leavers.

Young people have grown in confidence and are active participants at every Corporate Parenting Committee and one young person assists with co-chairing of the Committee. They have raised topics which are important to them such as housing for young people leaving care, high quality homes and care for children and young people in care, finances, opportunities for paid employment and training, safer communities and as a result have influenced plans and services for young people.

Speakerbox over the past 12 months have focused on the Home campaign, advocating for better quality of care for themselves and their peers.

Speakerbox were chosen by the Mayor of Southwark as one of the 3 charities/organisations that were supported in 2024/25. Young people participated in fundraising activities which included designing and hand screen printing their own t-shirts which they then sold at various events. They are excited about choosing how to spend the money raised.

Speakerbox planned activities and events throughout 2024/25 to take place each holiday period to provide new opportunities and experiences for children in care and care leavers. These activities have included a project on 'Home' for different age groups, a film making project, a music project where young people created their own album, a football mentoring programme, and trips to escape rooms, bowling and Thorpe Park. They also planned residential trips to Jamie's Farm.

The CROs over the next 12 months will focus on Speakerbox continuing to have more strategic influence with the senior leadership team of the council as well as engaging more under 12s, young people with additional needs, young people in custodial and residential settings and young people living out of borough.

Advocacy and Independent Visitors

IROs are proactive in making referrals and encourage children and young people to make referrals for an advocate if they feel they are not being heard or specific issues are not resolved in a timely or satisfactory way. Social workers and Personal Advisors are also proactive with making referrals or promoting advocacy for children and young people.

After a tendering process, involving children and young people, the council has commissioned Barnardos to provide advocacy to children and young people and in 2024/5 they provided 1017 hours of advocacy to 46 children and young people. The reduction in young people accessing the service is likely to be due to the change in provider. Referrals increased in quarters 3 and 4 so it is expected that higher numbers of young people will use the service going forwards.

Barnardos are using an issues based advocacy model and have a strong focus on helping young people build confidence to advocate for themselves and encouraging young people to identify others in their network who can support them in the future.

The advocacy service is designed to be as accessible as possible, via a freephone helpline, website, referrals from professionals and carers, and promoted with age specific and translated promotional materials. All Southwark young people have access to telephone interpretation where English is not their first language. There is a focus on increasing the use of advocates in Child Protection Conferences through promotional materials and attendance at service meetings and Learningfest.

A high proportion of children and young people who have a disability accessed advocacy services in 2024/25 with 45% of young people who used the service throughout the period self-identifying as having a disability. Barnardos have specialist advocates who are able to provide non instructed advocacy when needed.

39% of young people who used advocacy were aged between 12 and 17 years of age, with 61% aged between 18 and 25.

The predominant issues raised via advocacy are shown below:

Issues	Primary	Secondary	Additional
Care planning	7	1	1
Complaint	5	5	2
Child Protection	4		
Education	3	4	
Housing	11	4	1
Immigration	1		
Pathway Planning	3		

Placement	9	3	
Social Care Communication	3	1	2
Financial		1	

Table 9: Advocacy Issues

There are positive examples of feedback about the advocacy service:

"K has been proactive and very supportive in my son's case. She is doing a great job in following up with people and making them accountable for what they should deliver for my son."

K really helped me to get things moving with the personal advisor regarding my brother, once K was involved the PA moved a lot quicker, always kept in contact, was reliable and easy to talk to, very understanding and made sure the wishes were heard. Thank you K!

Independent Visitors

In January 2025 the council brought the Independent Visitor service in house. 18 Independent Visitors transferred from Coram to the council, shortly after 4 IVs ceased their role and 14 maintained their matches with young people. There has been a focus on setting up the service, working on policies and procedures, safer recruitment and a campaign to recruit IVs. We are off to a promising start with the advertising campaign underway and at least 20 prospective IVs scheduled to start the first training sessions in October 2025. We are focussing on trying to recruit a more diverse group of IVs to meet our children's needs and to find IVs in areas such as Kent, where we have higher numbers of looked after children in need of IVs.

"He's amazing. Not just with visits but he's gone beyond visits personally to help me out when needed and coming to see school shows. Gives me great advice."

"I would not change a single thing about him. He's very helpful. Helped me with college. Not judgmental. Very encouraging."

Young person said it was the *best day of his life* on the way home from a special birthday treat visit.

Monitoring and Escalation

As stated, IROs have a statutory responsibility to raise concerns about the arrangements or services being provided for and to children and young people, and ensure that we are addressing

issues raised in a prompt manner to prevent delay in service provision or decision making affecting children's care.

It is usual that issues raised for children can be resolved at an early stage by talking to or meeting with the social worker or Team Manager directly. IROs will seek to resolve issues informally, and this is evidenced by data which shows that from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025 there were 92 case alerts (on Mosaic) by IROs resulting in resolution at an early stage necessitating far fewer escalations.

The IRO Service has mechanisms in place to scrutinise the practice of IROs and make sure that the focus remains on the needs of the child. Managerial oversight of midway reviews and escalations are the checks and balances in place to monitor IROs' effectiveness in responding to concerns and achieving improved outcomes for children.

The table below (Table 11) shows escalations made to year end 2024/25 by type of issue raised by the IRO Service. As can be seen, the predominant issues centre on the quality of care planning and care plan delays as well as health and education. ***Please note that numbers will not tally as IROs will select multiple choices from Mosaic when recording alerts and escalations.***

Issue raised	Issues number
CLA Inadequate care plan	4
CLA Drift in implementing plan	5
CLA Safeguarding concerns	7
CLA Social work provision concerns	0
CLA Placement concerns	4
CLA Education concerns	0
CLA Health concerns	0
CLA 18+ planning concerns	1
CLA Incomplete review decisions	2
CLA Other	4

Table 11: Advocacy Issues

From April 1 2024 to March 31 2025 IROs have made 15 formal escalations to managers. Two (13%) were escalated to stage 2 to Deputy Director to be resolved and one (7%) to Stage 3. No issues were referred to CAFCASS, although as stated, IROs work in close liaison with Guardians for independent oversight of care planning.

Monitoring, alerts and escalation is an area which requires ongoing review to ensure the IRO Service is as effective as possible in the interests of children. To support this a new Escalation Policy and whole system guidance will be completed early in the new year and promoted across services, with specific training arrangements included in our Learning & Development Offer for staff.

Update on 2023/24 priorities

The following provides high-level updates on the progress against the previous year's priorities as set out in the 2023-24 IRO Annual Report:

- Obtaining 360 feedback from young people, families and professionals about their

experience of the review to enable the service to build on it's strengths and respond to young people and families voices and feedback – *IROs now routinely complete peer observations and receive feedback on delivery. Feedback forms and 360 feedback are an ongoing piece of work.*

- To work with the social work services to change the culture of care plans and pathways plans often being provided late for reviews and dates being changed at the last minute due to social worker availability – *this is a key focus of service performance meetings with regular Head of Service, Deputy Director and Assistant Director oversight of performance now part of business as usual performance arrangements. This has delivered improvement in the last year but this remains an ongoing area of focus.*
- To improve the timeliness of IROs recording the reviews within statutory timescales – *this remains a continuing area for development.*
- Midway Review form to be redeveloped to ensure there is a consistent approach and the recording of ongoing monitoring and oversight – *this has been completed and delivered.*
- To complete the redevelopment of the escalation forms so there is a consistent, timely and child focused approach to resolving issues for children and young people – *this has been completed and will be launched in the new year as noted above.*
- There will be closer oversight and monitoring of stability and permanence for children and young people and a consistent approach to escalating if there is drift and delay – *IROs are closely linked with the permanency leads and are now attending or contributing to permanence tracking meetings as business as usual.*

Developmental Priorities for 2025/26

Work is ongoing continually to improve the effectiveness and quality of the work done by IROs and the wider Service. The following priorities have been identified for 2025/26:

- IROs consistently recording their ongoing monitoring and oversight outside of routine review processes
- IROs consistently recording informal and formal resolutions (escalations)
- Improving performance on statutory recording timescales
- Continuously improving and modernising our mechanisms for feedback from young people, families and professionals
- Improving the Mosaic forms and workflows for the annual reviews of foster carers.
- Developing FIRO ongoing monitoring and resolution (escalation) workflows
- Improving the quality of information on the Fostering Powerbi dashboard in order to better

monitor how the Fostering service and FIROs are functioning

- FIROs undertaking exit interviews with foster carers to understand the strengths and areas for development in the fostering service
- Continuing to build the IV service and recruit more volunteers to be matched with children and young people
- Speakerbox continuing to focus on a strategic approach to ensure young people's voices are heard and acted upon

Meeting Name:	Corporate Parenting Committee
Date:	25 February 2026
Report title:	Corporate Parenting Committee – Work Plan 2025-26
Ward(s) or groups affected:	All
Classification:	Open
Reason for lateness (if applicable):	Not applicable

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the corporate parenting committee agree the approach and work plan as set out in the report.
2. That the committee review and identify any further items for consideration in the work plan.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Role and function of the corporate parenting committee

3. The constitution for the municipal year 2025-2026 records the corporate parenting committee's role and functions as follows:
 - a. To secure real and sustained improvements in the life chances of looked after children, and to work within an annual programme to that end.
 - b. To develop, monitor and review a corporate parenting strategy and work plan.
 - c. To seek to ensure that the life chances of looked after children are maximised in terms of health, educational attainment, and access to training and employment, to aid the transition to a secure and productive adulthood.
 - d. To develop and co-ordinate a life chances strategy and work plan to improve the life chances of Southwark looked after children.
 - e. To recommend ways in which more integrated services can be developed across all council departments, schools and the voluntary sector to lead towards better outcomes for looked after children.
 - f. To ensure that mechanisms are in place to enable looked after children and young people to play an integral role in service

planning and design, and that their views are regularly sought and acted upon.

- g. To ensure performance monitoring systems are in place, and regularly review performance data to ensure sustained performance improvements in outcomes for looked after children.
- h. To receive an annual report on the adoption and fostering services to monitor their effectiveness in providing safe and secure care for looked after children.
- i. To report to the council's cabinet on an annual basis.
- j. To make recommendations to the relevant cabinet decision maker where responsibility for that particular function rests with the cabinet.
- k. To report to the scrutiny sub-committee with responsibility for children's services after each meeting.
- l. To appoint non-voting co-opted members.

National and local context for care leavers

- 4. There is national momentum towards improving outcomes for care leavers. The government introduced 'Keep on Caring' strategy in 2016, increased council statutory duties to care leavers in the Children and Social Work Act in 2017, appointed a national Adviser for Care Leavers who produced a report in 2018, alongside the national launch of the Care Covenant. The council has responded to the various recommendations, for example by prioritising education, employment and training outcomes for care leavers in the Council Plan and developing the care leaver local offer as well as increasing service capacity for the extended personal adviser duties to 25.
- 5. Although much has been done to improve services and outcomes for care leavers, the council has an ambition to go above and beyond, by creating the best Leaving Care Service possible, by co-designing this with young people, learning from other organisations and trialling new ideas to test what works best.
- 6. In 2017 the council and Catch22 received funding from the DfE Social Care Innovation Programme to work in partnership to design and test new ways of working to support care leavers. The Care Leavers Partnership (CLP) works to improve outcomes for young people in Southwark by working across boundaries, reshaping the service delivery model, unlocking capacity in the community, and co-designing solutions. There are a number of strands that the CLP is working on to achieve our goals.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- 7. The corporate parenting committee review and update the work plan each

meeting. Following the beginning of the municipal year 2019-20, and reflecting on the momentum towards improving outcomes for care leavers, the opportunity has been taken to review how the committee works and present proposals to refresh this in relation to: non-voting co-opted members; committee approach; and work plan and suggested agenda items.

Corporate Parenting Committee work plan – 2025-26

22 April 2026

- Speakerbox verbal update
- Southwark homes for Southwark children update
- Annual virtual head teacher's report
- Update on local offer on Kinship care.

To be allocated

- Exploitation, risk and harm and measures to break the cycle.

SpeakerBox

8. SpeakerBox, established in 2005, ensures that the views of looked after children and care leavers are used to influence decision making that affects their care and support particularly service planning and design. Representing children and young people between 8 and 24 years the group also provides a peer-to-peer networking support system for looked after children. The programme is operated independently and run by the young people themselves, although it is supported by the council's children services and councillors.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts

Community impact statement

5. The work of the corporate parenting committee contributes to community cohesion and stability.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact and health impact statement

6. Relevant issues will be addressed in the reports submitted to the corporate parenting committee.

Climate change implications

7. The work plan process for the committee has no direct implications.

Resource implications

8. There are no specific implications arising from this report.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Minutes of meetings of Corporate Parenting Committee	Constitutional Team 160 Tooley Street London SE1 2QH	Paula.thornton@southwark.gov.uk
Web link: http://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=129&Year=0		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Alasdair Smith, Director of Children and Families		
Report Author	Beverley Olamijulo/ Paula Thornton, Constitutional Team		
Version	Final		
Dated	13 February 2026		
Key Decision?	No		
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER			
Officer Title		Comments Sought	Comments included
Assistant Chief Executive – Governance and Assurance		No	No
Strategic Director of Resources		No	No
Cabinet Member		No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team			13 February 2026

Meeting Name:	Corporate Parenting Committee
Date:	25 February 2026
Report title:	Corporate Parenting Strategy 2026-2030 – update
Ward(s) or groups affected:	All
Classification:	Open
Reason for lateness (if applicable):	N/A
From:	Helen Woolgar, Deputy Director of Children’s Services – Safeguarding and Care

RECOMMENDATION(S)

1. To note the contents of this report.
2. To agree the timeline for delivery of the new Corporate Parenting Strategy 2026-2030.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. Southwark’s Council’s Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2025 was published in July 2021 following approval by the Corporate Parenting Committee. The strategy set a renewed vision for every child and young person in the care of the council, or who had left care, which was:

“We want all children and young people in Southwark to grow up in a safe, healthy and happy environment where they have the opportunity to reach their potential”

4. The strategy defined six strategic priorities:
 - **Supporting More Families to Safely Stay Together** – Ensuring all our children & families get the right help at the right time, and at the earliest possible opportunity. To make sure that every child is supported to safely thrive at home.
 - **Growing Up Safe and Independent in Society** - Giving all of our children the tools, skills, resources and support that they need to grow towards independence, and be protected from the threats and risks to them from an increasingly complex world.
 - **Health, Wellbeing, Education & Opportunity** - Marshalling the unique resources of the borough to ensure that every one of our children and young adults gets the support and advocacy they deserve and expect from an excellent parent.

- **Happy, Safe and Stable** – Making sure that everyone of our children has a say in where they live and who they live with. That they are safe and in permanent homes earlier, closer to home, and supported to remain there as long as they need to.
 - **Identity & Belonging** - Giving all our children and young people the chance to learn about themselves, their history and identity, and to live with carers who understand and reflect their cultural identity. Providing every chance for our children to appropriately engage with their own families and personal history.
 - **A Whole Borough That 'Cares to Care'** - Placing delivering for our children and young adults at the heart of everything the council and its partners do. Broadening the voice and experience of our children across all decision making, and making Southwark a truly Corporate Parenting Borough.
5. Building on the foundations of the existing vision and priorities, the council is working to develop the next iteration of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. We are looking to be bold and ambitious in our plans to develop services for children in care and care leavers for our 2026 to 2030 strategy.
 6. The development of the new strategy follows the council's **Southwark 2030 Strategy**, launched in September 2024. We have begun work with our care-experienced children and young people to design the new **Corporate Parenting Strategy 2026 – 2030**. This will be developed in full collaboration with our children and young people ensuring their voice, lived experience and ambitions are at the heart of the next phase of our whole partnership corporate parenting delivery.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

7. Progress towards the development of the new strategy has included the initiation of the **Bright Spots Survey** for children and young people in our care and those who have left our care.
 - Since 2013, Coram Voice has delivered the Bright Spots programme to help local authorities directly hear from the children and young people in their care and those who have left their care.
 - The survey measures the well-being and quality of our children and young people's experience of care and the support they have received whilst in care and beyond.
 - The tool provides a holistic insight into the views and experiences of our children and young people which is invaluable in the future development of our services and whole council approach to supporting the life chances of our children.
 - The output of the Bright Spots surveys is due to be completed in March 2026.
8. As part of ongoing engagement with children and young people, **Speakerbox** - the council's Children in Care Council - have developed eight pillars which set out the priorities for care-experienced children and young people. These will be integral to the development of the new strategy:

- Education and Employment
- Non-discrimination
- Safety and Support Services
- Freedom of Expression
- Standards and Treatment in Care
- Voice of the Child
- Knowledge of Rights
- Health Services

9. Building on the results of the Bright Spots survey and Speakerbox's pillars, further detailed and meaningful consultation will be undertaken with our children and young people, and other key stakeholders to develop the strategy. This will include evaluation of the 2021-2025 strategy.

Delivery Timeline

10. The following delivery plan sets out the timescale for consultation and engagement and completion of the draft strategy by April 2026:

Action	Due By
Consultation and engagement with care-experienced young people	Oct – Dec 2025
Update on strategy development to the Corporate Parenting Committee	Feb 2026
Independent analysis of Bright Spots surveys completed	March 2026
Presentation of draft strategy to Corporate Parenting Committee for review and comment	April 2026

Policy framework implications

11. An updated and ambitious Corporate Parenting Strategy that recognises the shift in national policy context and builds capacity across the local public sector system to deliver outcomes for our children in care and care leavers, will increasingly serve the delivery of our Southwark 2030 Strategy.

Community, equalities (including socio-economic) and health impacts

Community impact statement

12. Successful delivery of a strategy to improve outcomes for children in care and care leavers will have a significantly positive impact on the outcomes of one of the most vulnerable groups.

Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement

13. In the development of the strategy, all care-experienced children and young people have an opportunity to share their views and contribute to the strategy. This will be done by working closely with colleagues

across the system to monitor participation in consultation and engagement.

Health impact statement

14. The health and wellbeing of our care-experienced children and young people will be integral to the development of the strategy and the strategy itself.
15. The Bright Spots survey asks directly about the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and young people. Each young person aged 4-17 will have the support of a trusted adult to complete the survey.
16. Clinical service, commissioning and health colleagues will be integral to developing the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2026-2030 - particularly the Virtual Mental Health Lead for Looked After Children, Designated Doctor for Children Looked After and Care Leavers, and Designated Nurse for Children Looked After.

Climate change implications

17. There are no climate change implications associated with the development of the strategy.

Resource implications

18. There are no resource implications associated with the development of the strategy.

Legal/Financial implications

19. There are no legal or financial implications associated with the development of the strategy.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2025 Corporate Parenting Committee 22 July 2025 https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s99637/Appendix%201%20Draft%20Corporate%20Parenting%20Strategy%202021-2024.pdf	Constitutional Team 160 Tooley Street London SE1 2QH	Paula Thornton Paula.Thornton@southwark.gov.uk

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Helen Woolgar, Assistant Director for Safeguarding & Corporate Parenting		
Report Author	Poppy Laurens, Service Development Officer		
Version	Final		
Dated	8 October 2025		
Key Decision?	No		
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER			
Officer Title		Comments Sought	Comments Included
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance and Assurance		No	No
Strategic Director of Resources		No	No
Cabinet Member		No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team			13 October 2025

CORPORATE PARENTING DISTRIBUTION LIST (OPEN)**MUNICIPAL YEAR 2025-26**

NOTE: Original held by Constitutional Team; all amendments/queries to
Paula.thornton@southwark.gov.uk; Beverley.olamijulo@southwark.gov.uk

Name	No of copies	Name	No of copies
Membership		Paula Thornton/Beverley Olamijulo	5
Councillor Jasmine Ali (Chair)	1		
Councillor Natasha Ennin	1	Total:	9
Councillor Mohammed Deen	1		
Councillor Maria Linforth-Hall	1	Dated: 17 February 2026	
Councillor Emily Hickson	1		
Councillor Charlie Smith	1		
Electronic versions (No hard copy)			
Councillor Sarah King			
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Councillor Sunil Chopra			
Councillor Bethan Roberts			
Councillor Irina Von Wiese			
Councillor Sunny Lambe			
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Mark Kerr (email)			
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Children's Services - electronic versions (No hard copy)			
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Legal – electronic version (no hard copy)			
Sarah Feasey / Joy Hopkinson			