



Fostering
makes an extraordinary difference

2020-21
Annual Report
Southwark Fostering Service

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KEY MESSAGES

It has been a challenging year for all with the COVID-19 pandemic, and Southwark Fostering Service both carers and staff have been hugely impacted in this period. This report covers a period of service provision that must be considered in line with the challenges of an unprecedented pandemic. Timescales for actions have been greatly affected for various reasons such as the service responding to national lockdown and the inherent challenges this created, bereavement and loss greatly impacting on staffing and their emotional well-being as well as availability, the difficulties with adapting to virtual working, and managing the natural fears of staff and foster carers who were often self-isolating and dealing with the anxiety of our children and young people. The needs for support increased and the capacity to provide said support was realised even with the variables in staffing levels.

On the 23rd March 2020 - when the government announced emergency measures to safeguard the nation due to COVID-19 - the Fostering Service took immediate action to ensure all foster carers were contacted and received support. This was initially in the form of remote/virtual visits and doorstep visits, and we continued to provide a full duty service to ensure any request for new placements were actioned.

The Fostering and Care Services in 2020/2021 have consistently maintained a clear focus on ensuring children, for whom their permanence plan is long-term fostering are matched with long term foster carers and permanency is secured. It is a really positive achievement that the work on permanence is enabling permanence to be achieved for more children and for the last four years there has been a real culture change with significant increases each year on the number of children in care achieving permanence. It is expected that in 2021/2022 long-term matches will continue to increase, with 22 children already having been matched at Fostering Panel in the first 6 months of 2021/2022. The long-term fostering policy and procedure was strengthened and relaunched in January 2019, and was further supported and cemented by creation of templates for Initial Permanency planning meetings and subsequent review in February 2020.

Southwark Fostering Service continued to work together with the University of East Anglia to embed the Secure Base Model of therapeutic caregiving. The service has worked in partnership with foster carers and to roll out training to the Care Service and this will continue to extend this across all of Children's Services in 2021/2022 as a key part of the Southwark Practice Framework. Training on Secure Base is co-delivered by social workers in the Fostering Service, foster carers, the Clinical Service and young people from Speakerbox, although no Secure Base training was held in 2020/2021 because of the constraints of the pandemic. The Secure Base Model continues to underpin the training programme that is offered to all of our foster carers.

Southwark were visited by Ofsted in September 2020 for a focused visit looking at the local authority's delivery of child centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ofsted highlighted areas for growth and development but reported positively that *'Foster carers spoke very positively about the support and help that they are receiving for children's care and education during the pandemic. They said that 'Social workers do what they say they are going to do'. Another carer told Inspectors that their child felt 'extra valued and cared for' during lockdown, as a result of all the extra help with their remote learning. Additional support for Foster carers during the pandemic included payments and Out of hours support from the Clinical Service.*

Staff recruitment and retention has remained a priority over the year and both fostering teams remain fully staffed with a permanent workforce. This ensures there is consistency in both developing and implementing work procedures, as well as supervision for our foster carers. This has also created a sense of purpose within the teams; relationships are created and embedded along with a shared vision of offering the very best support to our foster carers. There has been movement within the staffing cohort, with social workers moving to the Special Guardianship and Connected Person's teams, and seconded for 12 months to Safeguarding & Family Support Service.

The South London Consortium was formed from the former South London Adoption and Permanence Consortium. Currently there are four members - Bromley, Southwark, Lambeth, and Royal Borough of Greenwich, with ongoing interest from Waltham Forest. The aim of the consortium is to share ideas and working practices so there is a joined up approach to service provision. The consortium consists of sub groups for Special Guardians and Fostering, so that discussions are specific to the distinct areas. The Consortium has offered joint training for its members, often commissioning specialist training that would be too expensive for an individual local authority to run. The consortium also presented shared prep group training for prospective Special Guardians across the consortium. Southwark hosted this virtual event in October 2020 for 3 months.

Purpose of Annual Report

The purpose of this document is to report on the activity of the Fostering Service fulfilling obligations in the Fostering Services Regulations (2011) to review and improve the quality of care, and National Minimum Standards (2011) to report to the executive side of the local authority. It will cover: performance and developments in Southwark's delivery of Fostering Services; how the council is compliant with key national minimum standards; and the service offered to those seeking to foster and those children in care who are fostered.

This report details the work of Southwark Council Fostering Service from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

When a child enters care, it is one of the most important and significant changes in their life and it is crucial that the families who look after these most vulnerable children through foster care provision are the best they can be. As part of its wider agenda to create a fairer future for the most vulnerable children and families, Southwark Council wants every child to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. For those children who cannot remain with or return safely to their birth families, good quality foster care offers the best opportunity for them to experience a warm and loving family environment while the most appropriate plans are made for their future.

The Fostering Service is a service for children in care. It is committed to supporting stable placements for children and young people where foster care is the identified plan. The service is a key element in the council's drive to place more children and young people with Southwark foster carers in or near the borough where possible. It is a fundamental part of our sufficiency strategy to develop enough in-borough placements with the range and capacity to meet the needs of Southwark's children who cannot live at home for whatever reason. Southwark Fostering Service remains the largest in inner London borough in respect of the total number of children placed with in house foster carers. In comparing with outer London boroughs only Croydon offers more local authority foster placements¹.

The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide high-quality care for children and young people in safe, secure and nurturing families. The Fostering Service in 2020 - 2021 have fully embedded the Secure Base Caregiving Model and worked to embed it across Children's Services in particular the Care Service. We aim to develop highly skilled foster carers, supported by reflective, challenging and enabling social workers. Our overarching aim is to give children and young people the best possible childhood, to help them become valued members of society and to maximise their life opportunities.

The National Fostering Context

- 57,380 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2020.
- This is 72 per cent of the 80,080 children in care looked after away from home.
- There are around 44,500 foster families in England.
- Every year thousands of new foster families are needed in England.

[\(<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics>\)](https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics)

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN SOUTHWARK

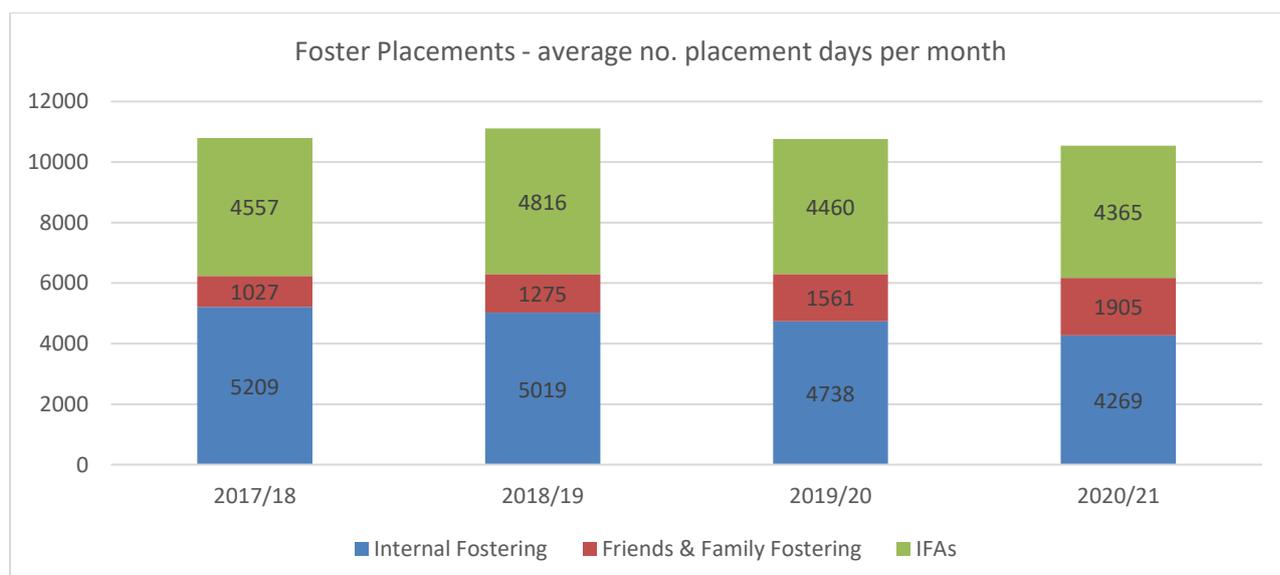
Data at snapshot date of 31st March

Activity Overview - children	March 31 st 2017	March 31 st 2018	March 31 st 2019	March 31 st 2020	March 31 st 2021
Children in care	498	491	459	458	449
Children in foster care	381 (77%)	381 (78%)	385 (84%)	356 (78%)	343 (76%)
Children with Southwark registered foster carers	231	204	178	156	133
Children with Independent Fostering Agency carers	109	138	159	144	139
Number of Children with Connected Carers (Regulation 24 and Regulation 27 Carers.)	41	39	47	57	69
Matches for Long Term Foster Care during the year	3	15	16	22	41*

*26 Matches were via Fostering Panel and 15 were via the 14 plus IRO recommendation and agreed by the ADM.

Use of Foster Care - Bed Nights for children

Placement Type	Average Bed nights per month 2017/2018	Average Bed nights per month 2018/2019	Average Bed nights per month 2019/2020	Average Bed nights per month 2020/2021
	Average numbers of children in care type monthly	Average numbers of children in care type monthly	Average numbers of children in care type monthly	Average numbers of children in care type monthly
Internal Fostering	5209 173	5019 165	4738 156	4269 141
Connected Carers (Regulation 24 and 27)	1027 34	1275 42	1561 51	1905 62
IFA Carers	5031 149	4816 158	4460 147	4365 144
Staying Put	1229 40	1244 40	1168 38	1353 44



Changing Age Profile

Since 2019/2020 The age profile of children and young people in care has changed, with an increase in the number of young people aged 16 and over. The chart below shows Southwark has a significantly higher rate of children 16 plus entering care and this has increased as a percentage in the last year. In understanding why less children in 2020-2021 are in foster care than in previous years it is thought that the increasing age profile of children entering care is likely to be a contributing factor. In particular for teenagers entering care where they are being exploited and have been involved with criminal justice it can be really difficult to find foster carers that feel able to meet their needs.

	England	SNs	London	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Under 1	19%	12%	12%	13%	15%	12%
1 to 4	17%	11%	11%	13%	10%	13%
5 to 9	16%	13%	12%	14%	10%	10%
10 to 15	27%	31%	31%	28%	31%	28%
16 and over	20%	33%	34%	31%	33%	37%

Ethnicity of children in foster care and ethnicity of foster carers

The table below shows the ethnicity of children in foster care, including those placed with connected carers, and the ethnicity of our foster carers. Whilst care is taken to meet the needs of children by matching them with foster carers of the same ethnicity, this isn't always possible. We train foster all carers on equalities, diversity and supporting children around issues such as racism and discrimination, so they are able to effectively support and care for children who are of a different ethnicity to themselves.

Ethnicity	Foster Carers at March 2021	Ethnicity	Children in Internal Foster Care at 31st March 2021
Any Other Ethnicity	1	Any Other Ethnicity	8
Asian Bangladeshi	2	Asian Bangladeshi	0
Asian Indian	0	Asian Indian	1
Asian Other	1	Asian Other	10
Asian Pakistani	1	Asian Pakistani	2
Black African	25	Black African	33
Black Caribbean	60	Black Caribbean	21
Black Other	5	Black Other	8
Chinese		Chinese	1
Mixed Other	1	Mixed Other	16
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	0	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	7
Mixed White and Black African	0	Mixed White and Black African	2

Mixed White and Asian	0	Mixed White and Asian	0
White British	39	White British	24
White Irish	4	White Irish	0
White Other	2	White Other	3
Unknown/Not Stated	0	Unknown/Not Stated	0

SOUTHWARK'S PROVISION OF FOSTER CARERS

It is apparent from the data that there is very gradual trend of a reducing number of children needing to be in care in Southwark. The number of children placed with in-house foster carers has been variable this year and changes on a daily basis. The pandemic added significant pressure to the Fostering Service as several carers with underlying health conditions made the difficult decision not be available to foster children for significant periods of time due to their own household circumstances. The analysis of bed nights shows that a parallel trend of reducing numbers of children in internal foster placements and some reduction in the use of IFA foster care. The key reasons for this appear to be: a reduction in the number of children overall in care, a very positive and consistent increase in children being in connected carer placements and also the increasing age profile of children entering care meaning more children 16 plus are entering care and foster carers are struggling to feel they can offer the placements needed and meet the needs of these children.

Placements and stability

The Access to Resources Team (ART) established in 2017, continues to strive to unify and strengthen the placement finding process, increasing the shared focus on improving placement stability and getting the right placement for children as soon as possible. The joint collaboration and decision making between ART and fostering colleagues improves placement stability primarily by getting the best possible matched placement for each child while in parallel seeking to maximise use of our own internal fostering provision where the placement choice is right for the child. Placement stability has improved in 2020/2021 both for short term and long term stability and the increased use of stability meetings ensures intervention and support is provided promptly when issues arise.

The Ofsted focused visit in September 2020 noted 'Well considered decisions are being made about children's care placements in difficult and complex circumstances.

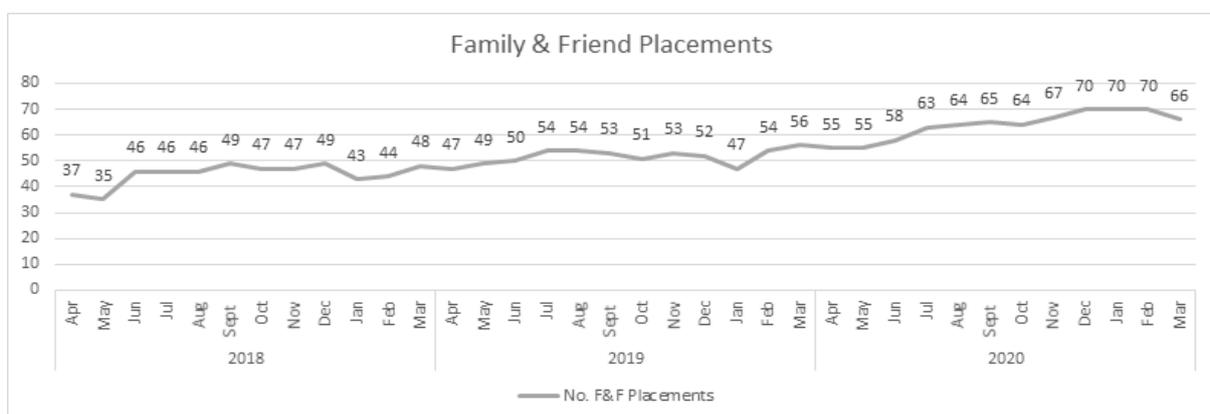
However, support to prevent care placements from breaking down is not always happening early enough’.

Finding placements for teenagers with challenging behaviour, gang affiliation, those at risk of child exploitation and those at risk of or stepping down from residential care remains the most significant challenge to placement sufficiency. The Fostering Service continues to work closely with the Access to Resources Team and Clinical Service to develop more and better quality placement choice. In 2020/2021 the clinical service continued to attend placement stability meetings, and consulted with foster carers about strategies to better support the children in their care.

In March 2020 the Fostering service held a focused training session with its most experienced Level 2 and Level 3 carers. This was specifically to look at and discuss the challenges in caring for children for whom we struggle to find suitable placements, i.e. the gang affiliated teenagers, those who are self-harming or at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation, and those with challenging and complex aggressive behaviours. The feedback from this session will be utilized in forming a bespoke training and support package for Southwark’s enhanced foster carers, and think about ways social workers can better support foster carers and children to improve placement stability. This work has evolved in 2020/2021 with a series of multi-agency meetings taking place around the development of a Fostering Therapeutic Hub (FTH). The FTH will receive wrap-around support following a series of bespoke and intense training from key partners such as Health and YOS, so as to ensure the selected foster carers are best equipped at managing the complex care needs of our children and young people, and this very often includes adolescents.

Connected Carers

Analysis of the use of shows Southwark’s Fostering Service has maintained its strong performance but the balance of support has shifted towards friends and family foster care. Over the last 3 years friends and family care has increased from 16% of the overall Fostering Service provision to 32%.



The Special Guardianship and Connected Persons team is now established and has a focus on assessing and supporting Special Guardians, as well as assessing friends and family (Kinship) foster carers and presenting them to fostering panel. Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010). Wherever possible - when the children cannot be rehabilitated to the care of their parents and where there is a positive assessment - the local authority would support them applying for an SGO to secure permanence for the child/ children outside of the care service. There were 116 referrals received in the team by March 31st 2021, with 97 assessments started and 19 withdrawals before the assessments began. There were 20 Special Guardianship Orders granted in Care Proceedings, enabling those children to leave care.

Matches for Long Term Foster Care

The development of a revised Long-Term Fostering Policy in January 2019 has been key in ensuring practice standards are uniform across the service and in supporting the focus remaining on permanency for children in care. The policy provides clear direction around procedures for long-term fostering and matching processes, as well as promoting new and innovative ideas working with Carelink, the Clinical Service and the Family Group Conference Service to promote placement stability. We will also be facilitating lunchtime workshops to fully understand Delegated Authority, and these will be co-run with foster carers, supervising social workers and a team manager from the Care Service.

The Fostering Service has continued to work closely with the Safeguarding and Care Services to ensure that children in long-term placements have their placement formally matched at the Fostering Panel. Attending panel is a day of celebration for children and carers, and we have introduced a matching certificate and send out letters tailored to children, as well as any photographs of children and their carers taken at the Fostering Panel. For children aged 14 and over, the decision for long-term fostering may be recommended outside of the Fostering Panel by the IRO at a child's Looked after Review and then referred for a decision by the Agency Decision Maker. This enables independent scrutiny to ensure the match is the best possible for the child and to provide optimum support. In 2018/19 the number of children matched was 16; In 2019/2020 the number increased to 22 children matched at panel; in 2020/2021 there were 26 approved at panel and 15 via the 14 plus matching process and agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.

RECRUITMENT OF FOSTER CARERS

Activity Overview	2020/2021	2019/2020	2018/2019	2017/2018
Foster Carers (general) recommended for approval by panel	15 <i>*only 8 of the 15 had an ADM decision in 2020/2021 due to delays with medicals.</i>	10	12	12
Foster carers ceased approval	5 <i>(de-registrations only via panel awaiting final figure to include leaving via other routes)</i>	36	21	16
Connected carers approved by Panel (Regulation 27)	21	12	9	5
Family Link carers approved	1	1	3	3

Recruitment of foster carers

Year	Total enquiries	Assessments to Panel	ADM made
2018/2019	123	12	12
2019/2020	201	10	10
2020/2021	173	15	8

In 2020/2021 the number of general foster carers presented at panel and recommended by the panel for approval was 15 and this was an increase in approvals from 2019/20 despite there being fewer enquiries than the previous year. Some of the carers had not had their medical or health declaration reviewed by the Agency Medical Advisor which caused a delay in some ADMs being made. Further delay was caused as some carers moved to stay with family during the period of lockdown and others did not want to start fostering during the pandemic.

An increasing number of our fostering approval assessments are now being done in-house. We have also developed a workbook for prospective carers to complete while they are being assessed. This is a good way for foster carers to complete written work, for them to expand their learning on all aspects of providing care to children in care, thus deepening their theoretical knowledge before facing the reality of being a foster carer. In line with the Independent Fostering Agencies we now ask all our carers to be

approved for the age range of 0 – 17 and, if possible, depending on the number of bedrooms and support they have 1 – 3 children.

There was considerable activity within the Recruitment team which had assistance from Southwark's Communications team. The Recruitment team advertise ZOOM recruitment events on the Southwark website where prospective carers can hear more about from Southwark staff and most critically hear directly from an experienced Southwark foster carer.

The recruitment team decided to use the expertise of the Fostering Network to assess the effectiveness of the Fostering Recruitment and Retention strategy and team. The recommendations from this review will provide the basis of the 2021/22 Fostering Recruitment Strategy. Recommendations include to recruit a dedicated marketing officer to develop recruitment activities further; to enhance and develop the Wellness Programme for foster carers to promote mental health awareness, to ensure a culture of belonging and value exists within Southwark so it becomes a unique selling point for Southwark Fostering, and will enhance both recruitment and retention; to introduce Fostering Ambassadors, to support with recruitment activity and to link with prospective foster carers, keeping them on track, motivated and committed throughout.

Retention of Foster Carers

The retention of foster carers is critical to the functioning of the Fostering Service. The Fostering Network reported in 2017 that on average a service will lose 10% of carers annually through, retirement, adopting, changing career and de-registration.

The Fostering Service recognise the importance of support in retaining carers, based on a combination of regular social work support, increased support packages considered for those placements that are complex and may require extra provision, professional packages of relevant training, opportunities for contact with other carers and adequate remuneration.

The Fostering Service responds promptly and efficiently to issues and concerns raised by foster carers. Communication includes newsletters and e-mails and phone calls about community events and opportunities. Fostering supervising social workers visit carers monthly to support carers in their role, assessing the support needed prior to each new placement which contributes to increasing carers' confidence and capabilities in taking children with high needs. There is a monthly support group and coffee morning which takes place in East Dulwich, with regular attendance from staff in the Fostering Service as well as foster carers. The support group often have guests on topics such as Welfare Benefits and new initiatives for children in care. At the carers request every 3 months there continues to be a therapist available to offer therapeutic massages to carers to help them relax. During this year due to covid restrictions the coffee morning adapted and became a Zoom meeting.

TRAINING AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

A Team Manager, alongside an experienced Supervising Social Worker, continue to deliver Skills to Foster for the Recruitment Team. The three day course consistently receives excellent feedback, and our inclusion of current foster carers is especially appreciated. Many participants often cite these sessions as being the turning point in their decision to continue in the journey to become foster carers.

The Team Manager and Training and Development Coordinator provide training for carers post-approval on a monthly basis to ensure they are able to submit their Training and Development Standards portfolios. This consistent approach has enabled the service to improve compliance and meet its targets and responsibilities in this area.

Building on the themes from our focus group in 2020, we continue to develop our Fostering Therapeutic Hub. Initially, we will start as a pilot using our existing experienced carers and then recruit to the hub directly. Our current partners from the clinician service, ART, finance and QA have been working closely with us to ensure that project scope, training and evaluation enables strategic planning, and improved

service delivery for young people with complex, often trauma informed adverse life experiences.

Building on the work in Keeping Families Together, we are developing a STAIRS analytical framework for foster carers and social workers working with young people with complex related issues. The focus will be on caregivers understanding the needs and strengths of the young person, working collaboratively to produce targets in partnership with young people, interventions based on systemic thinking, hypothesis and analysis and tracking progress with the aim to changing what is not working and supporting the continuation of identified good practice.

We have also run training on: Appropriate Adult Roles and Responsibilities, Caring for Unaccompanied Minors, Restorative Practice, Transitions, and Transracial placements, alongside our existing courses.

In February 2020 at the beginning of the Coronavirus Pandemic, the service, in anticipation of a change of working practices began to increase the number of on-line training opportunities. Working in partnership with KCA Associates we were able to offer 54 courses to both foster carers and staff. The fostering service continues to deliver all training courses virtually, and have found this mechanism has not impacted on the quality of course delivery or on the number of attendees. There are no current plans to resume face to face training courses, but this is being kept open for review in line with National Guidance when received.

There continues to be a healthy learning culture in the Fostering Service incorporating and reaching both foster carers and social workers. Foster carers recognise that as professionals working with children they need to continuously reflect on their practice and update their knowledge and skills. The importance of building supportive, trusting and empowering relationships with foster carers is the responsibility of the supervising social worker and the service as a whole. In order to provide the children and young people with the opportunity to experience safe, caring family life we have continued to embed the Secure Base Model for therapeutic parenting and Empathic Behavioural Management (EBM) across the service. Secure Base as a concept underpins all in-house training, therefore reaching all the carers that attend training. As a Fostering Service we deliver the Secure Base Model to all ASYE social workers and have provided training across Children's Services for our more experienced colleagues and managers.

In 2020/2021 the number of fostering households successfully completing the EBM training and follow up workshops was 4, taking our total number to 61 households. The workshops have been on-going with carers finding this increasingly useful to both share ideas and obtain advice on how to implement an empathic caring approach.

We aim to encourage new and experienced carers to continue to develop their skills and knowledge. As we move towards a greater understanding of how trauma impacts on a child's development and can continue to do so over the course of their lives, we are challenged to anticipate difficulties and strive to understand better the internal world of the child.

Our Core training is to be undertaken every 3 years:

- Safeguarding
- Placement Stability
- Attachment, Child Development and Secure Base
- Diversity

LEVEL ONE: Post-Approval Training in the First Year or 18 months if you are a Connected Carer (covers TSD Induction Standards)
This training will be repeated twice yearly.

1. Working with the Department: your role as a foster carer
2. Safeguarding, Child Protection and Safer Caring
3. Attachment, Child Development and Secure Base
4. Managing Behaviour
5. Supporting your child with Education and PEP's
6. Active Listening Skills (Responding effectively to challenging behaviour)
7. Promoting the Health of Looked After Children
8. Transitions – helping children when they must move and Preparing for Independence
9. Emotional, Physical Well-Being for Foster Carers
10. TSD Workshops

LEVEL TWO (Parent & Child)

- Child Observation
- Working with Parents to Assess Attachment
- Advanced Safeguarding
- Legal Process & Report Writing
- Roles & Responsibilities

LEVEL TWO (Teenagers)

1. Preparing for Independence & Transitions
2. Help Young People Deal with Street Violence
3. Restorative Justice
4. Mental Health and Well-Being
5. Sexual Health & Relationships

LEVEL THREE (Specialist Therapeutic Carers)

Therapeutic carers will complete Empathic Behaviour Management training, Advanced Safeguarding and provide written evidence with their practice observed by the SSW to demonstrate that they are practicing at an advanced level. They will continue to develop their skills, e.g. through specialist training and other learning - courses, e-learning, attending conferences, self-directed learning, reading etc. and will assist with training and support of other carers.

Our training programme continues to assist foster carers in developing the understanding and recognition of trauma informed practice. From Skills to Foster, EBM, Secure Base, Caring for Unaccompanied Minors and Challenging Placements, we are able to provide a direct link to the body's and individual's need to recognise the effects of early childhood trauma.

We have continued to develop links with differing sections of the service which has seen training run by our LADO and a team manager, providing a valuable addition to carers understanding of both process and standards required of them by Southwark. An experienced social worker and the Training and Development Coordinator provide post-approval training for carers on a monthly basis to ensure they are able to submit their Training and Development Standards portfolios. This consistent approach has enabled the service to meet its targets and responsibilities in this area.

Shared training through the South London Consortium

We continue to be an active member of the South London Partnership consortium. The Acting Team Manager shares training knowledge and guidance with their Lambeth counterpart in particular. Agreement has been reached with regards to sharing of spaces on Skills to Foster courses, and we continue to advise and share good practice on the development of Level 3 foster carers.

Southwark has initiated work with Brook Advisory service to provide Traffic Light Training across the consortium, hopefully in 2022. Brook provided training to our carers in 2021 on Understanding and responding to sexual behaviours in children and young people. This course was well received.

SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CARERS

Despite its rewards, foster care can be a very demanding vocation. Southwark's Fostering Service recognises this and understands good outcomes for children can only be achieved when foster carers feel valued, supported and equipped to provide the attention, commitment and care that children who may have experienced neglect, harm and loss require.

Support for foster carers encompasses the following:

- Allocation and support of a dedicated supervising social worker during the working week and access to dedicated out-of-hours support 7 days a week.
- Foster carer induction for all newly approved households.
- A comprehensive post approval training programme that incorporates the therapeutic care giving model. The aim of this approach is to help foster carers feel confident and equip them with the right skills and techniques to help children experience safe and secure care.
- A more advanced approach to caring – Empathic Behaviour Management training and ongoing workshops to enable carers to improve their therapeutic parenting skills.
- Training pathway for foster carers to enhance professional development and quality of placements linked to a clear payment approach.
- Therapeutic intervention and support from a lead clinician, medical advisor, education, and Carelink service to support children in placements and the fostering household.
- Regular foster carer support groups accessible for all foster caring households run by the Fostering Service.
- Regular communication and information sharing is maintained via emails, quarterly fostering newsletters and coffee mornings.
- A Foster Carer run support group has also been set up and continues to meet and offer peer support to all foster carers.
- An annual foster carer's ball is held to thank carers for their commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and young people in Southwark. This was not held in 2020/ 2021 due to the national lockdown and we will resume in 2022.

- Membership of The Fostering Network for all Southwark foster carers, which offer independent advice and support with allegations.
- A Wellness programme that includes yoga classes, Zumba, meditation and mindfulness, and the opportunity to get access to Southwark leisure centers for free.
- Virtual supervisory visits remained in place and the frequency of visits was increased. The teams also offered face-to-face visits at times of crisis and/or when this was requested.
- Information disseminated from LAC health team in regards to COVID-19
- Zoom Zumba and Zoom Yoga

Staying Put

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a duty on the local authority to provide 'staying put' arrangements for children in foster care to continue to live with their former foster carer beyond their 18th birthday and potentially up to the age of 21 years if they are in education. This is a welcome development for young people who have not developed the maturity to move into independent living and who want to remain as part of a family. The service was well-placed to implement these changes as we were already enabling young people to remain in their placements while they completed exams and were prepared fully for independence.

On 31st March 2021 there were 45 young people in staying put arrangements – 37 were with internal carers and 8 were with IFA carers. As can be seen, the majority of these young people were with Southwark carers. Supporting Staying Put arrangements is a key part of offering a secure base to young people so they are able to benefit from continued full family membership; a key aspect of this is being able to remain in a family setting until they are ready for independence. The government has increased the amount of Staying Put grant payable to local authorities for 2020/2021. The analysis of bed nights shows young people stayed put more in 2020/21 than in any previous year and it is thought this may be due to university accommodation closing during the pandemic and young people spending more time back with their former foster families.

The Staying Put guidance and the Staying Put policy is has been updated, with input from foster carers, young people and staff from the Care Leavers and Fostering Service. The renewed policy and guidance will be launched in 2021/2022 and aims to maximize the opportunity for all young people where this is the best plan for permanence and supporting with independence.

Quality Assurance

The Fostering Service has a Quality Assurance Framework, which is part of the overarching quality assurance and performance framework for Southwark Children's Services. The framework includes: effective Fostering Panel scrutiny; foster carer feedback through consultations, the annual review process and feedback on training and development; management oversight of casework and performance data and reviews including audit activity; as well as learning from complaints and placement breakdowns.

The audits programme in 2020/21 remained focused on monthly audits of children's case files done by team managers and service managers. This activity is coordinated by a central audit team, who also ensure that a selection of audits are moderated to enable consistency and quality. Social workers contribute to the audit, mirroring the approach taken by Ofsted during an inspection. Actions from audits are fed back to the allocated social worker and their manager.

In 2020/21, the Managers from the fostering service worked closely with the audit and learning team, in completing audits of cases selected across Children's services. The shared learning is beneficial to both practitioners and managers in terms of standardising practice. It was planned that a specific audit of fostering cases would be devised to look at relevant themes such as placement stability and carer compliancy. This will be undertaken in 2021/2022 and the Fostering Managers will focus on auditing fostering files and work as opposed to monthly participation in the audits of children's files.

Other quality assurance activities have included conducting themed audits, a focus on improving staff performance, Mosaic improvement, the facilitation of focus groups with staff and carers.

SOUTHWARK FOSTERING PANEL

Fostering Services Regulations (2011) and National Minimum Standards (2011) require a Fostering Panel to be constituted, chaired by an independent person. Panel members include representatives from Children's Social Care and independent members with a range of experience. The panel makes recommendations about the approval of foster carers, matches of children for long-term foster care and in certain circumstances reviewing the approval of foster carer. Final decisions, based on the panel's recommendations, are made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADMs), Assistant Director Safeguarding and Care and the Director for Children and Families.

From April 2017 the Adoption Panel and the Fostering Panel in Southwark combined. In September 2019, the two panels separated when Southwark's adoption team joined

nine local authorities to create Adopt London South. This followed DFE legislation requiring local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to come together to create Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA) around the country. The overall aim of RAAs is improve adopter recruitment and speed up matching and additional support to improve the life chances of vulnerable children. Southwark's Fostering Panel began operating as a single panel in September 2019. The panel has continued to hear fostering cases and work with the Fostering Service to further improve the quality of care provided to Southwark's Looked after Children.

There are currently 20 Fostering Panel Members on the central list. Membership is carefully discussed when someone resigns as it is important that the panel reflect the diversity of the wider community in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, ability and sexual orientation. During the course of the year four new members joined the fostering panel; two women, one man and one non-binary person. The Fostering panel now has two independent members with care experience and two kinship carers. There were two resignations; both due to lack of availability. All new Panel members observe panel on two occasions before joining as a panel member.

There is continued evidence of good practice by social workers and supervising social workers, with the voice of the child in the majority of cases evidenced through appropriate consultation. The majority of Fostering assessments were good, with sufficient detail and analysis throughout. In order to take the next step to achieve 'excellent' feedback, assessments will need to be more analytical and evidence-based, with clear analysis of the applicant's ability to meet the needs of children now and in the long term. 'Excellent' assessments should be used as exemplars for social workers, and panel will in future add a note to the feedback forms to highlight these assessments as 'Good practice exemplars'.

In March 2020 the United Kingdom went into lockdown with the introduction of the stay at home policy due to an increase in COVID-19 infections. The first virtual fostering panel was held on 18th March 2020. Fostering panel remained virtually held during 2020/2021 and there are no immediate plans to resume face-to-face Fostering panels. This will be reviewed in October 2021 in line with National Guidance as and when received.

Complaints

The fostering service reviews complaints received from foster carers, and uses the learning from these to inform service improvement on what we need to do better. In 2019/2020 there were four complaints relating to fostering. Between April 2020 and March 2021 we had 10 complaints made about the Fostering and SGO Service, with 8 investigations concluded, and 2 carried into 2021/2022.

The themes emerging from complaints are around finance and carers being disappointed when allowances are paid late, and most recently the perceived lack of support and communication in that minutes from meetings were not shared, and/or emails not responded to in a timely fashion. The learning from complaints, as agreed with the complaints team, is always shared with the fostering teams and the Managers are encouraged to use this as a discussion with team meetings. A Supervising Social Worker fed back to Service Manager, 'It's important to continuously learn from complaints because we're reminded that we provide a service and the voices of our carers promotes good practice'.

The Fostering Service works closely with colleagues in finance so as to ensure there are clear lines of communication in understanding why delays happen and thinking about improvements that can be made. The fostering service has also tasked the role of financial support to the Family Support Worker in the team, who works closely with foster carers that are experiencing difficulties with payments. This ensures communication is kept open, delays are reduced in addressing the issues, and the foster carers have a named contact.

REVIEW OF FOSTERING DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2020/2021

This section reviews the commitments to improvement within the service stated in the Annual Report 2019/20 and reflects on the progress made during 2020/2021

Fostering development plan 2020/2021

1. Ensure that the voice of children families and carers is heard, so that their views shape and improve our services and all parts of the service on a continuous learning journey

We have ensured that the Skills to Foster training for prospective foster carers includes direct input from current foster carers and parents, and importantly we have continued to deliver the programme virtually throughout the pandemic. Foster carers also attend recruitment events to speak directly about their experience to members of the public who are considering becoming foster carers.

Foster carers are involved in the training of social workers to embed the Secure Base Model. Staff recruitment across Care and Permanence now involves the input of young people. Two care experienced young people now sit on the Fostering Panel which recommends the approval of prospective foster carers.

A Southwark foster carer now sits on the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Bright Spots Survey (Jan-April 2020) an in-depth study of subjective wellbeing of Southwark children in care reported: 100% of children aged 8-11yrs; and 98% of young people (11-18yrs) trusted their carers. All children 4-7 years old trusted their carers.

There has been a closer collaborative working formed between the Care Service and Fostering, whereby the Fostering Team Managers have been invited to the Care Service away days and discuss topics that are relevant to both services. We are now better able to ensure that feedback is received for foster carers Annual reviews from children's social workers and young people which further enables the service to drive improvements and further developments across the service – this is an area we will strive to further improve in 2021/2022.

2. Improve placement stability of children in the Care Service both short and long term

There is a target for placement planning meetings to be held within 5 working days, and there has been a drive for these to be completed. In order to effectively monitor this it is proposed to make changes to referral and the care planning process.

Long term placement stability (*high is good*) is at 71% in the DfE 901 provisional data return for 2020/2021 compared to national and comparator averages of 69% and 71% respectively. This is a really positive improvement from the 2019/2020 figure of 64%.

The number of children with **3 or more placements** (*low is good*) is at 10% (2020/2021 DfE 901) down from 16% in 2019/2020. In line with national and comparator averages of 10%.

Challenging placements are identified as early as possible (through foster carers, allocated Social Workers and Supervising Social Workers) and placement stability meetings take place as early as possible with input from Carelink or the Clinical Service.

In the last year there has been an increase in the meetings where clinicians are in attendance. Clinicians have been able to offer ample support in the form of direct work or consultations with foster carers, young people, Supervisory Social Workers and Social Workers. Again, this supports collaborative working and building a skill base across the services to work towards preventing placement breakdowns, or in some cases having planned endings and transitions. This has been incorporated with the ART service when looking at support packages after placement moves, enabling children and young people's emotional wellbeing and educational stability to be a priority.

Adherence to the Long Term Fostering Policy and Guidance published in January 2019 has resulted in an increase of children matched with their long-term foster carers at the Fostering Panel. For young people over the age of 14 this is done through the direct involvement of their IRO at their LAC review with ultimate agreement lying with the Agency Decision Maker.

3. Maintain and further develop a stable and high-quality workforce across the Permanence Service

All social workers are given the opportunity to attend fortnightly group supervision sessions led by the Team Manager. All social workers were invited to the Service Practitioner Forum where they had the opportunity to shape the ongoing development of the Practice Framework.

Social workers have used Practice Group Meetings as a reflective space where bite-size training has occurred on relevant topics delivered by Clinicians, SSW's and other members of the Permanence & Resources Service.

The Principle Social Worker has enhanced the Council offer of learning and development through a varied programme of short courses and professional development courses.

4. Improve placement choice and sufficiency as set out in the Sufficiency Strategy and to reduce the percentage of children who are looked after who are living 20 miles or more from the borough

The Fostering Network have reviewed our Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention strategy, which resulted in a list of recommendations to increase the numbers of Southwark foster carers who live within the borough or nearby to Southwark who are able to meet the needs of Southwark children.

The recruitment Team has targeted Southwark-wide events since the easing of lockdowns in 2020 to work towards increasing Southwark residents as foster carers. There has also been a link with both the Southwark staff and resident LGBTQ+ networks

Senior management oversight of all children placed in Residential settings remains in place, to ensure the development of creative and robust support plans to enable more children to experience family life in foster care. Positively 77% of children in Residential Care are in good or outstanding provision.

It remains a significant challenge across London and the wider region. Southwark children are positively more likely to be placed in **foster care** than their national and comparator peers.

From 2018 to 2021, over three years, 30 new fostering households have been recruited. Despite this the service have not been able to achieve the desired growth in overall numbers of foster carers due to the retirement of many carers, and a drive within the service to provide high quality care based on the [secure base model](#). Some carers have not been able to meet these standards, leading to an increase in resignations and de-registrations exceeding the numbers of carers recruited. 21 of the 30 carers approved live in Southwark continuing to evidence the importance of the Council Tax exemption for Southwark unrelated foster carers resident in borough. In March 2018 20% of children in care were placed at least 20 miles or further away from

the borough. In March 2021 this figure had risen to 22%. Over the course of those 3 years the figure has ranged between 20 and 22%, seldom much higher or lower. The average of our statistical neighbours (similar London boroughs) is 17%.

5. Continue to Roll out and embed the Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving across children's services as part of the Practice Framework

The Fostering service, in collaboration with colleagues in Care, continue to work to ensure that all children cared for by Southwark foster carers have Life Story Work which their foster carers are actively involved in and that all children and their carers know why they are looked after and are supported with this understanding. A therapeutically trained social worker in the Care Service delivers training on Therapeutic Life Story Work to social workers and foster carers. In 2020 a Supervising Social Worker started the Therapeutic Life Story Training, which will further support the fostering service in the future to embed Life Story Work with foster carers.

All Southwark foster carers can access high quality training and support to continue their professional development. All training is underpinned by the principles of the Secure Base model.

Southwark foster carers have continue to be supported to complete their TSDS through the pandemic, with virtual workshops to improve the statistics in this area.

The fostering team have aimed to undertake a peer and management review on the quality of Annual Reviews for foster carers. Work started on this in January 2020, however did not progress due to the national lockdown and attendant difficulties. Next year the management team will ensure they complete this, using a focus group with staff and feedback from the fostering Panel. A new Mosaic form for Annual Reviews has been devised, and will go live in 2022 after the SGO/Connected Team Regulation 24 Workflow is completed; this will reduce the administrative burden for social workers relating to Annual Reviews.

6. Develop high quality support for Connected (Kinship) carers and SGO carers

There has been closer working relationships with the Safeguarding and Family Support Service looking at Viability Assessment to ensure high quality support as early as possible. This collaborative working will also improve the understanding for families in regards to the process and to achieving permanency in the timescales that children need.

Robust tracking of timescales for all assessments by the SGO and Connected Carers team manager ensures Friends and Family assessments are undertaken within the required timescales where possible, and any exceptional delays are understood and have risk assessment and Senior Management oversight. This has improved since the recruitment of a Senior Social Worker in the Team, who works consistently monitoring the tracking with close management oversight from the Team Manager.

A new workflow for Connected Carer (Kinship Carer) Regulation 24 assessments has been completed, and we are currently in the test phase and will be going live on Mosaic in December 2021, this work and progress with it was hugely delayed due to other priorities during the pandemic. Ongoing work with Kinship continues to develop greater support networks for all kinship carers, which are local to carers and organized and run by carers.

On the 31st March 2018 Southwark were paying allowances to 185 Special Guardians. On 31st March 2021 this has increased by 17% to 216 Special Guardians.

SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2021/2022

Service Priorities:

1. Ensure that the voice of **children, families and carers is heard**, so that their views shape and improve our services and all parts of the service are on a continuous learning journey.

Undertake a peer and management review on the quality of Annual Reviews for foster carers (including the contribution of foster carers to their own review)

Exit interviews to be introduced for all foster carers upon resignation.

Undertake regular feedback questionnaires with foster carers to ensure continuous improvement.

Foster carers to support the young people in their care to participate in Speakerbox (Children in Care Council) activities and campaigns.

Attending team away days with Care colleagues to share information and develop better links and understanding of children's views.

2. Maintain and further develop a **stable and high-quality workforce across the Permanence Service.**

Ensure all staff receive regular one-to-one management support, have a work plan, a learning and development plan and have an annual appraisal.

Give all social workers the opportunity to attend fortnightly group supervision sessions led by the team manager.

Implement the new supervision policy to ensure 1-1 and group supervision promotes self-reflection, staff development and improved outcomes for children and young people.

A skills audit of all staff in fostering is to be completed by December 2021.

3. Improve **placement stability of children in the Care Service** both short and long term

Foster carers to have access to specialist training, which will equip them to meet the demands of children who have complex needs. Strengthen foster carers knowledge base to improve their resilience.

Development of Fostering Therapeutic Hub.

Ensure that children attend all required health appointments (health, assessment, dental, optical and immunisation appointments) by working closely with the designated doctor.

Obtain the best possible understanding of children's emotional well-being by ensuring that foster carers complete the SDQ questionnaire.

A new focused working group to be developed where team managers in Fostering and Care and other professionals including the clinical service meet to embed support and develop solutions for children and foster carers that improve placement stability, this will build upon the Stability work undertaken in 2020/21 which has made a serious of recommendations to further improve stability.

4. Improve **permanence outcomes and practice**, particularly through long-term foster care, placements with friends and families and life story work

Ensure that more children have their permanence confirmed and celebrated in long term fostering placements in order that they feel safe and secure and enjoy family life.

Continue to develop the Permanency Planning Policy and adhere to the Long-term Fostering Policy, ensuring that children are tracked through permanency tracking panel.

Collaborative working with ART, Care and the dedicated Family finder.

5. Improve **placement choice and sufficiency** as set out in the Sufficiency Strategy and to reduce the percentage of children looked after who are living **20 miles or more from the borough**

Recruit more foster carers living within the borough or nearby to Southwark who are able to meet the needs of Southwark Children, by implementing recommendations from a review of the Southwark Recruitment and Retention Strategy by The Fostering Network.

Ensure creative and robust support plans enable more children and young people to experience family life in foster care, allowing them to move out of residential care.

6. Roll out and embed **the Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving** across children's services

Evaluate the implementation of the Secure Base model by measuring the impact on children, YP and foster carers

Foster carers to continue to be involved in the Secure Base training of social workers across children's social care.

7. Develop high quality support for **connected (Kinship) carers and SGO carers.**

Continue to develop SG team in their remit of assessing and supporting SGO Carers and friends and family carers

Ensure there are a robust quality assurance mechanism in place for all special guardian and connected person (Kinship) fostering assessments.

Ensure Safeguarding and Connected Persons teams are supported to work more closely together in respect of Regulation 24 assessments.

Ensure robust tracking of timescales for all assessments to ensure Friends and Family assessments are undertaken within 16 weeks and the 8 week extension is only sought at Panel in exceptional circumstances.

Ongoing work with Kinship to develop greater support networks for all kinship carers local to carers and organized and run by carers.

8. Develop a **responsive and professional Foster Carer cohort** in Southwark

Develop the Fostering Therapeutic hub to ensure the Level 2 and 3 carers have the support and training they need in order to take challenging placements, and understand our expectations of what a specialist carer is.

Develop a clear framework for foster carers that details what they need to do in order to progress from Level 2 to Level 3

Foster carers to return to panel every three years to ensure they continue to provide good care for Southwark children who are looked after.

Ensure carers complete their Training Support and Development standards.

Appendix 1

Southwark Adoption & Fostering Panel Annual Report 2020-21

Introduction

The role of the Fostering Panel is to hear fostering cases and work with the Fostering service to further improve the quality of care provided to Southwark's Looked after Children. This Fostering Panel report covers the period from 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2021, in compliance with the Fostering Standards Regulations (England) 2011. It provides details of the Panel activity and the range of assessments on which Panel were asked to make a recommendation over the twelve month period.

It has been a challenging year for the Fostering Service and Fostering Panel due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial 'Stay at Home' policy introduced by the Government in March 2020 was followed by social distancing rules that continued for the rest of the year due to the increase in COVID-19 infections and deaths. It is therefore to their credit that despite their losses due to COVID-19, the Fostering Service continued to provide a service, completing assessments, reviews and supporting foster carers and the children placed with them. This in turn enabled the Fostering Panel to fulfil its function by meeting twice a month to make recommendations about the suitability of foster carers to care for Southwark's Looked After children.

Changes to the Panel Process

During lockdown the Fostering Panel moved from face-to-face panels to virtual panels using a virtual platform. A Virtual Panel Protocol was written by the Chair to support panel and attendees with the new virtual panel process. The new process increased the workload of the Panel Administrator and has not been without its early challenges. Poor internet connections, camera and audio problems led to the loss of attendees, and occasionally panel members during panel, causing delay. Panel was also surprised to note the number of foster carers who struggled with understanding how to use their equipment, despite support from the Panel Administrator the previous day. A number seemed to prefer to use handheld mobile phones. Fortunately this has improved over time as more people have had to adapt to virtual meetings.

During panel, applicants/review foster carers and social workers are held in a virtual waiting room before being invited to join the meeting. They return to the waiting room during Panel's discussion, and are invited back to be informed of the recommendation. This process seems to work well.

Changes to Fostering Regulations

COVID-19 led to a significant change in Fostering Regulations between April 2020 and 25th September 2020. The interim Regulations allowed a variation on Panel quoracy, matters presented to panel, medicals and timescales for assessments. Under the new Regulations Medical Disclosures were completed by new applicants and foster carers' in lieu of GP medicals, however delays in the Medical Advisor reports led to delays in cases being presented to Panel. The relaxing of timescales however meant that cases remained within timescale. Panel members were pleased to note that although the COVID-19 Addendum allowed for a reduction of panel membership during this period, Southwark along with a number of other local authorities felt it important to maintain a quorum of 5 Central List members and often an additional member to prevent cancellation due to emergencies and more recently internet connection failure.

Fostering Panel Central List Membership

Role	Experience
Independent Panel Chair	Fostering panels and Regional Adoption Agency Panel Chair. Independent Social Worker
Independent Vice Chair	Educational Psychologist
Independent Panel Member	Foster carer and adopter
Independent Panel Member	Adopter
Independent Panel Member	Adopter and foster carer
Independent Panel Member	Care experienced
Independent Panel Member	Connected carer
Independent Panel Member	Connected carer
Independent Panel Member	Residential Children's Home Manager and care experienced
Independent Panel Member	Independent Social Worker
Independent Panel Member	Independent Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	LAC Specialist Nurse

Agency Panel Member	LAC Specialist Nurse
Agency Panel Member	Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Care Proceedings Case Manager
Agency Panel Member	Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Supervising Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Supervising Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Supervising Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Supervising Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Supervising Social Worker

There are currently 22 Panel Members on the central list that aims to reflect the diversity of the wider community:

Number of Women: 17, Number of Men: 3, Number of Non-binary: 1

Ethnicity: White British = 9 Black British = 10 White Irish = 1 Dual ethnicity Black and White = Asian (Indian) = 1

Sexuality: Heterosexual = 17 Homosexual = 2 Other = 2

Age: 20 – 25 = 1; 26-35 = 0; 36-45 = 5; 46-65 = 12; 66-80 = 3

Four new independent members joined the Fostering Panel this year. Two are Connected Carers able to use their knowledge and experience of the role to advise Panel; one is an adopter and the fourth is a young care experienced person. Both the latter members have been able to comment on the impact of care on children from different perspectives. There have been two resignations during the course of the year; a teacher who is also an adopter was no longer able to commit to the role due to work pressure and an Independent Reviewing Officer, who was retiring. She had been a panel member for a number of years.

Panel Advisor

Panel is grateful for the consistently good advice provided by its Panel Advisors over the course of the year. The quality of reports have also continued to improve under their supervision.

Panel Administrator

Panel members have praised the Administrator for the efficient distribution of paperwork five days before each panel, the quality of the minutes and support provided to panel members. The volume of work leading up to and during the panel has increased due to 'pre panel test runs' with all applicants to ensure they are able to access the Panel meeting, and moving people between panel and waiting areas during panel. The role has never been more valued than during the introduction and running of virtual panels.

Panel members Appraisals

Panel appraisals were completed for all panel members in December 2020 and discussions proved positive and also enlightening. Panel members felt they were part of a strong and committed panel with a diverse range of ages, cultures and backgrounds. However a new panel member said she would have liked advice on what kind of questions she should be asking when reading panel papers.

Many panel members have found virtual panels more challenging than face-to-face panels. This is primarily due to focused periods staring at a screen which many found quite tiring. Southwark responded to this by reducing the number of cases presented to panel, which panel members were very grateful for. Some panel members commented on the one dimensional head and shoulder view of attendees making it harder to read non-verbal cues. Panel members also acknowledged the positives of virtual panels, particularly for some applicants/foster carers as noted that - once successfully connected - many seemed more relaxed in their presentation. This may partly be to do with being in their own home surroundings. Panel members have continued to enjoy matching panels, particularly when able to meet with some of the young people.

Panel training

There was a delay in delivering annual training due to the pandemic. Panel members and staff from the Fostering service attended 'Embracing Diversity' training, which

explored diversity, its meaning and importance for children in care. Training on the current legislative framework, research and case law was also provided to support new panel members and as a refresher for others. Learning material in the form of articles continues to be shared with and between panel members as part of their ongoing development.

Panel activity throughout the year

The Fostering Panel met on 23 occasions between April 2020 and March 2021.

During the period covered by this report the Fostering Panel considered:

Fostering approvals

Fostering Approvals	2020/21	2019/20
General Fostering households	15	10
Connected Persons households	20	12
Family Link short break carers	1	1
Applicants ethnicity		
White British/Irish/Scottish/European/other	7	
Black British/African/Caribbean	7	
Asian	0	
Mixed/Other/White and Black Caribbean/White and Black African/White and Asian/Any Other Ethnic Groups	1	
Not stated	0	

Despite the challenges of COVID-19 there has been an increase in the number of fostering approvals during the course of the year. General fostering household approvals have increased by a third which is very welcome given the national shortage of foster carers. Southwark continues to work to recruit carers that reflect the cultural heritage of the children in its care and this is reflected in the even numbers of White British and Black African and Caribbean carers. General fostering household approvals consisted of 7 couples and 8 single carers, 2 of whom were male, one providing respite care. This is also positive for a profession dominated by female carers. Panel members were very impressed with the quality and diversity of the applicants whose variety of transferable skills would add much to the role.

The significant increase in Connected Carers' households offers a positive alternative for many children to remain within their family and friends network; maintaining their culture, identity and often established friendships. Although positive, these placements are not without challenges. A number of carers' are older, usually grandparents who may have some health conditions and/or are less mobile. There have also been older siblings taking on the responsibility while already caring for their own children. Overcrowded accommodation has been a concerning feature in these cases that

Panel is aware will take time to resolve. Some of these carers' will seek Special Guardianship Orders while others will continue to need the support of the local authority, so remain Connected carers'. It is reassuring to Panel that Southwark has a dedicated team to support these carers', whichever route they choose.

Only one Family Link carer was approved this year to provide short break care for a child with a disability. This is the same number as 2019/20.

Fostering Matches

Fostering Matches	2019/2020	2020/2021
Total number of children matched with permanent foster carers at panel	22	26
Total number of children matched as part of a sibling group	14	11

Placement stability has been shown to be a key factor in children's overall development and emotional wellbeing. Southwark social workers and involved Independent Fostering Agencies supervising social workers must therefore be congratulated for their hard work in presenting 27 children to the Fostering Panel during this very difficult period. It is to their credit that 26 children, 10 of whom were part of a sibling group of 2 and one of 3 children were permanently matched within 20 fostering households. Most of the children had been placed with their foster carers for 2 years or more at the time of the match and 18 were placed within 14 fostering households approved by Independent Fostering Agencies.

Panel was able to meet with some of the children virtually in their homes so had the pleasure of hearing their views first hand. One young person made a video sharing his views about his foster carer but also included his views on the people he liked in the area where he lives. It was clear from the video and speaking to the children that achieving permanency was important to them as it provided them with a real sense of belonging.

Panel deferred 1 match where a child had been placed in a transracial placement for a number of years. Panel requested further work to evidence the carers' ability to support his cultural and identity needs as a black child placed transracially in an area with predominately white British households. Sadly this placement broke down a few months later.

Fostering households 1st Year Reviews

Fostering 1 st Year Reviews	2020/21	2019/20
General fostering households	6	16
Connected Carers households	6	4
Family Link short break carers	2	2

It is a regulatory requirement that all foster carers' 1st Annual Reviews are presented to panel to consider their continued approval. Panel members must consider the review recommendation and the foster carers' ability to meet the National Minimum Standards (NMS). Panel will look at carers' progression; how they have used training to improve their skills and whether they have worked well with other professionals. Most importantly whether they have provided a secure base for the child in their care. Carers also have the opportunity to talk about their own and family members experiences during the first year, including the support they received from the local authority.

There have been 14 recommendations for continued approval following 1st year Annual Reviews. These have included 6 general fostering households; 6 Connected carers and 2 Family Link carers'. All were approved by the ADM. Although 10 foster carers from general households were approved during 2019/20, 3 have not continued to foster, 1 resigned before their 1st year review and 2 foster carer's approvals were terminated following Standards of Care concerns within the first year. All reviews were held within timescales apart from the additional Family Link carer reviewed outside of the required timescale. While the views of the child and those of birth children are usually provided, this is not always the case. Panel has also continued to raise concerns about the lack of feedback from social workers of children in placement about the care provided.

Three yearly reviews

Southwark has introduced three yearly reviews in order to provide an opportunity for a longer term reflection on foster carers' development and experience gained over the previous years. It provides the opportunity to praise Carers' for good practice as well as hold others to account.

All reviews have been chaired by Independent Reviewing Officers and the overall standard of review minutes have been good with careful consideration of the National Minimum Standards.

Return to Panel following Allegations, Standards of Care or other reasons

Reviews	2019/20	2020/2021
Standards of Care	5	3
Allegations	n/k	2
Failure to work in partnership	n/k	3

Panel was largely satisfied that the investigations that had taken place following allegations and Standards of Care concerns were properly investigated following consultation with the LADO. Panel considered 3 reviews following Standards of Care concerns; 2 following allegations against foster carers and 3 following when requested to do so for other reasons. These included 3 where termination of approval was recommended following foster carers' failure to work in partnership with the local authority.

The ADM upheld Panel's recommendation for continued approval in respect of all 3 Standards of Care cases presented to panel. The ADM also upheld the termination of approval recommendations in respect of the 2 cases where allegations had been made against foster carers as well as the 3 failure to work in partnership cases. These involved foster carers unwillingness to accept or respond to requests to discuss placements of children within their approval range over an extended period of time and failing to respond to contact from their supervising social workers, thereby failing to comply with the fostering agreement.

One case was presented to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) and the IRM agreed with the recommendation of the panel and the qualifying determination made by the Agency Decision Maker.

The Fostering Panel's role in Quality Assurance

The Panel Chair attends quarterly business meetings with the Fostering Service Manager, Head of Service and Agency Decision Maker as part of the fostering panel's quality assurance and monitoring remit. A recent addition to this remit now includes a six weekly 'touch base' meeting between the Panel Chair, Panel Advisor and Administrator. This is a brief meeting that has provided the opportunity to plan panel training, discuss changes to feedback forms and other issues following recent panels. This has proved very helpful.

Evaluation of reports submitted to panel

Fostering Panel Feedback Form

Feedback of assessments and reports	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Poor
	5 (11.6%)	32 (71.4%)	5 (11.6%)	1 (2.3%)

Panel members use the written assessments and reports to make judgements on the suitability of applicants to perform a role. Panel will deem an assessment report to be of sufficient high standard when it provides comprehensive details supported by clear evidence of the applicant's suitability to care for children. Panel members feedback on the quality of assessments and reports presented to panel are obtained and collated after each panel. Work is currently taking place to review the feedback forms to provide clearer and more detailed feedback that will better assist social workers and their managers to produce higher quality assessments and reports.

Panel have noted the continued improvement in the quality of paperwork over the last twelve months that is due to Managers and the Panel Advisor's quality assurance process. The majority of assessments and reports were deemed 'Good' with 5 achieving an 'Excellent' and recommended to be used as exemplars. There were 5 'adequate' reports where Panel members felt more analysis was needed, and typos and inaccurate spelling was a feature. Connected Carers often find the assessment process intrusive and are often reluctant to provide detailed information. This resulted in one assessment being categorised as 'poor' due to the assessor's failure to fully explore all information needed to make a recommendation. Panel sought the additional information during the meeting.

Foster carer and social worker feedback on the panel process

All prospective and approved carers' as well as their social workers are asked to complete feedback forms on their experience of the panel process. Feedback helps ensure the panel process remains robust and effective. Prior to virtual panels attendees would be asked to complete feedback immediately after panel, while in the waiting room. It has been difficult to obtain feedback forms following virtual panels, therefore Survey Monkey on line feedback forms will shortly be introduced to capture this information.

Foster Carer's Feedback

'My Supervising Social Worker is very helpful, and panel were understanding and appreciative of the job I am doing. I found panel to be considerate and fair.'

Social Worker's Feedback

'The Panel showed interest in the foster carers and considered that all the cases presented by me, which were approved. Panel was prompt to admit the foster carers and me to the online meeting. They were welcoming and demonstrated mutual respect.'

ISW

Team Manager's Feedback

'I did want to be able to contribute as I would like to say of all of the local authorities that I have worked for and also ones that I have been an ISW for and had to attend panel, Southwark's panel members are so welcoming and inviting and always are equipped with information, understanding the needs of the family and it is generally a very positive experience for the social worker, assessing social workers and the families.'

Team Manager

Development Plans

On line feedback forms will be introduced to enable Panel to learn from the experience of those attending panel in order to improve its practice and process. Panel has continued to review its feedback forms for social workers that not only provide more detailed feedback on assessments, but highlights good practice.

Panel will also look at introducing a tool to track the agency's response to panel advice or comments over the coming year.

The learning from disruption reviews/unplanned placement endings is important in informing panel practice. Panel will therefore like to routinely receive this feedback for discussion.

Panel will ensure its membership remains diverse and reflects the community and current practice.

Conclusion

The last twelve months has been very difficult for the fostering Service, however the standard of practice by social workers and supervising social workers, has remained high. Panel has noted that the voice of the child in the majority of cases has been clear and obtained through appropriate consultation.

The work to increase the number of children achieving permanency in foster care continues to prove successful with increases over the last three years. The increase in Connected Carers' enabling children to remain within their family network with support from the service is also very positive. The social workers and supervising social workers are to be congratulated for their hard work in helping children achieve permanency through long term fostering or within their family network.

There remain areas that are still in need of improvement to ensure that Panel has all the relevant information it needs to make sound recommendations. The views and feedback of Looked After Children and those within the carers' family should always be provided and depending on the age of the children direct feedback using the range of tools available is expected. Direct feedback from children's social workers' about the care provided by foster carers should also be an expectation. Children's social workers' have the ability to provide a view based on their observation of care provided over a period of time. This helps the Reviewing Officer for reviews and Panel with their deliberations before making recommendations.

The majority of Fostering reports produced over the course of the year have been good, particularly Form F assessments which generally contain more detail and analysis throughout. It is recognised that Connected Carers' assessments are often more challenging as those being assessed find the process more intrusive, however all areas should be thoroughly explored and analysed. The best of the reports should be used as exemplars for social workers.

Panel will continue to strive to improve its own performance, while ensuring it remains active in the development and continued improvement of the service, thereby fulfilling its quality assurance remit.

Independent Panel Chair

Southwark Fostering Panel