

**Fostering**

makes an extraordinary difference

2021/2022

# Fostering Annual Report



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## **KEY MESSAGES**

In 2021/22 the Fostering Service continued to be impacted by the Covid- 19 pandemic which had a huge impact on foster carers and staff. The service, and in particular the managers and supervising social workers, remain ambitious for children but in this year it was a time of recovery and rebuilding and so some of the ambitions from the last year are carried forward to 2022/23.

The long-term health impact of the pandemic led to increased absence in the workforce leading to greater reliance on agency staff to provide cover. A key priority for 2022/23 will be returning to the previous position where the Fostering Service is fully staffed with a permanent workforce.

Positives for the Fostering Service are that despite many challenges there has been continued good use of Southwark foster carers for Southwark children, compared to those from independent fostering agencies (IFAs). Positively data shows 21% of children are placed more than 20 miles from Southwark as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 a reduction from 23% from the same time last year. An analysis of placements made from May 2021 and October 2021 showed children placed with Southwark carers resided on average 5.6 miles from their home address, where as those children placed with an IFA carer were on average 23 miles from home. Placing children closer to the communities they were raised in often reduces social isolation and increases future life chances.

Southwark Fostering Service are members of the South London Consortium. The Consortium was formed from the former South London Adoption and Permanence Consortium. Currently there are five members - Bromley, Southwark, Lambeth, Royal Borough of Greenwich and 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.

### **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 the council'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 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

## **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, The 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 placements<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide high-quality care for children and young people in safe, secure and nurturing families. 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 2021.
- This is 71 per cent of the 80,850 children in care looked after away from home.
- There are around 45,370 foster families in England.
- Every year thousands of new foster families are needed in England.

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1. [Ofsted annual fostering data collection - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ofsted-annual-fostering-data-collection)

## CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN SOUTHWARK

Data at snapshot date of 31<sup>st</sup> March

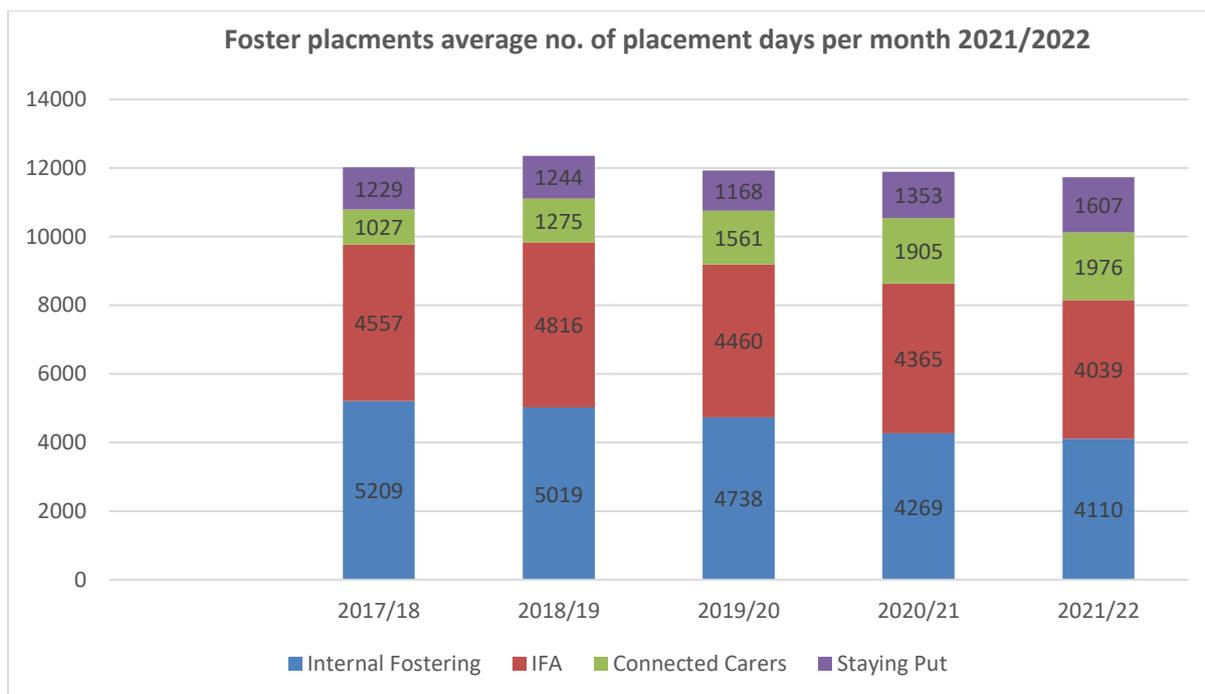
<b>Activity Overview - children</b>	<b>March 31<sup>st</sup> 2017</b>	<b>March 31<sup>st</sup> 2018</b>	<b>March 31<sup>st</sup> 2019</b>	<b>March 31<sup>st</sup> 2020</b>	<b>March 31<sup>st</sup> 2021</b>	<b>March 31<sup>st</sup> 2022</b>
<b>Children in care</b>	498	491	459	458	449	457
<b>Children in foster care</b>	381 (77%)	381 (78%)	385 (84%)	356 (78%)	343 (76%)	327 (72%)
<b>Children with Southwark registered foster carers</b>	231	204	178	156	133	135
<b>Number of Children with Connected Carers (Regulation 24 and Regulation 27 Carers.)</b>	41	39	47	57	69	65
<b>Total number of children in Southwark foster placements (Registered carers including Reg 24 and 27)</b>	272	243	225	213	199	200
<b>Children with Independent Fostering Agency carers</b>	109	138	159	144	139	127
<b>Matches for Long Term Foster Care during the year</b>	3	15	16	22	41*	19*

\*Matches 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 - 26 Matches were via Fostering Panel and 15 were via the 14 plus IRO recommendation and agreed by the ADM.

\* Matches 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 – 6 Matches were via Fostering Panel and 13 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 <i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	Average Bed nights per month 2018/2019 <i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	Average Bed nights per month 2019/2020 <i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	Average Bed nights per month 2020/2021 <i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	Average Bed nights per month 2021/2022 <i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>
<b>Internal Fostering</b>	5209 <i>173</i>	5019 <i>165</i>	4738 <i>156</i>	4269 <i>141</i>	4110 <i>134</i>
<b>Connected Carers (Regulation 24 and 27)</b>	1027 <i>34</i>	1275 <i>42</i>	1561 <i>51</i>	1905 <i>62</i>	1976 <i>65</i>
<b>IFA Carers</b>	5031 <i>149</i>	4816 <i>158</i>	4460 <i>147</i>	4365 <i>144</i>	4039 <i>133</i>
<b>Staying Put</b>	1229 <i>40</i>	1244 <i>40</i>	1168 <i>38</i>	1353 <i>44</i>	1607 <i>52</i>



## Changing Age Profile

The chart below shows how the age profile of children and young people in care has changed year on year, with an increase in the number of young people aged 16 and over. The chart below shows the council has a significantly higher rate of children 16 plus entering care and this has increased as a percentage in the last year. For 2021/22 it is significant that 74% of those entering care are 10 and above and that 40% are 16 and over. The rate of children in care is now at 68 per 10,000. The rate of children entering care is significantly higher than statistical neighbour comparisons due to the influx of unaccompanied asylum seeking children following the Home Office opening three initial accommodation centres at hotels in the borough from June 2021.

	England	SNs	London	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/ 22
<b>Under 1</b>	19%	12%	12%	13%	15%	12%	8%
<b>1 to 4</b>	17%	11%	11%	13%	10%	13%	8%
<b>5 to 9</b>	16%	13%	12%	14%	10%	10%	10%
<b>10 to 15</b>	27%	31%	31%	28%	31%	28%	34%
<b>16 and over</b>	20%	33%	34%	31%	33%	37%	40%

## 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 is not 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.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Foster Carers at March 2021</b>	<b>Foster Carers at March 2022</b>	<b>Children with Southwark Foster Carers at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021</b>	<b>Children with Southwark Foster Carers at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022</b>
Any Other Ethnicity	3	4	8	16
Asian Bangladeshi	5	7	0	2
Asian Indian	0	0	1	1
Asian Other	1	2	10	6
Asian Pakistani	1	2	2	1
Black African	52	57	48	48
Black Caribbean	87	89	30	23
Black Other	7	7	15	18
Chinese	0	0	1	0
Mixed Other	2	7	25	23
Mixed White & Black Caribbean	3	3	15	12
Mixed White & Black African	2	2	4	4
Mixed White & Asian	0	0	3	1
White British	78	84	35	35
White Irish	6	6	0	0
White Other	9	12	4	9
Unknown/Not Stated	0	1	0	0

## **FOSTER CARERS**

Overall there is gradual trend of a reducing number of children from the local population needing to be in care. The number of children placed with Southwark foster carers has been variable this year and changes on a daily basis. The analysis of bed night's shows that a parallel trend of reducing numbers of children with Southwark foster carers and an even greater reduction in the number of children in IFA placements. The key reasons for this appear to be: a reduction in the number of children from the local population entering care; a consistent and sustained increase in children being placed with friends and family foster carers; and also the increasing age profile of children entering care. This last factor means 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**

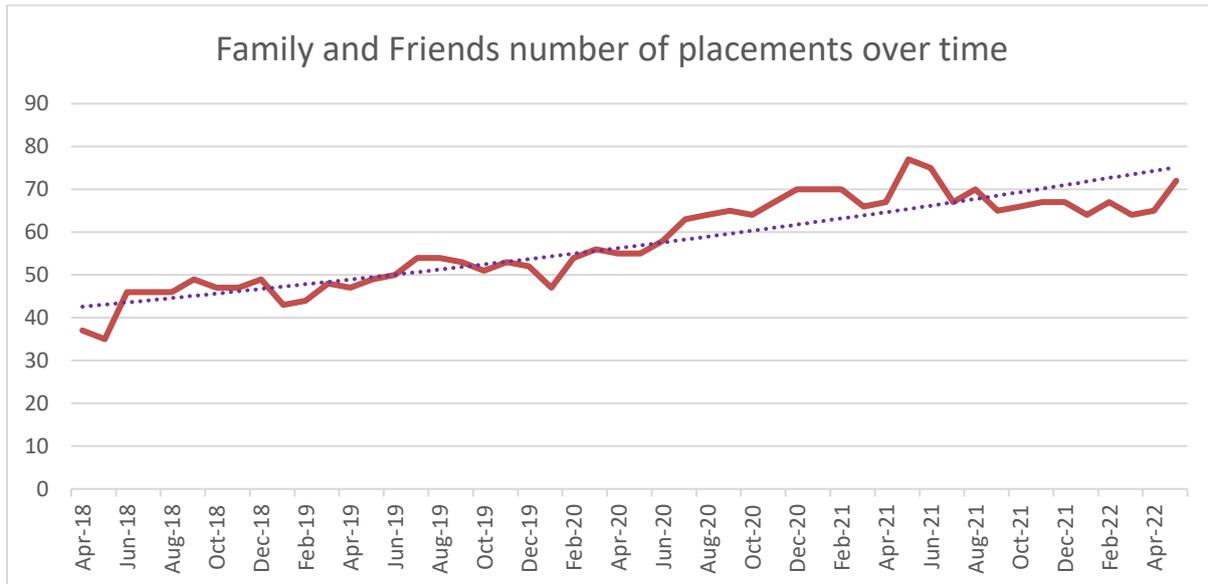
The Access to Resources Team (ART) works closely with the Fostering Service and continues to strive to unify and strengthen the placement finding process, increasing the shared focus on improving placement stability and getting the right placement for children as soon as possible. The joint collaboration 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. The sufficiency of placements for all types across London and nationally is very challenging. For some children requiring residential care where this could not be found Southwark foster carers have provide interim respite support with assistance from support workers to support children in care with very complex needs.

Long-term placement stability rose significantly during 2020/21 and has sustained during 2021/22 and was at 76% as at this 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. This measures children who have been in care at least 2.5 years who have been living in their current placement for at least 2 years. Short-term stability measures children looked after with 3 or more placements for 2020/21 this was 10 % and positively by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 this had reduced to 8.5%.

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 2021/22 the Clinical Service continued to attend placement stability meetings, and consulted with foster carers about strategies to better support the children in their care and provided some intensive support including out of hours to placements.

## Connected (sometimes called Friends and Family) Foster 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. The number of children in care placed with family compared to the overall care population rose from 7 % to 15 % over the last 3 years. The number of friends and family carers varies weekly but as a proportion of children in care the proportion has broadly doubled over the last 3 years.



The Special Guardianship and Connected Persons team has a focus on assessing and supporting Special Guardians, as well as assessing friends and family foster carers and presenting them to fostering panel to consider recommending their approval as foster carers. 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 a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) to secure permanence for the child/ children outside of the public care system. There were 116 referrals received in the team by March 31<sup>st</sup> 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.

## Recruitment of foster carers

Activity Overview	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18
Foster Carers (general) recommended by panel for approval by Agency Decision Maker (ADM)	8 *14 ADM decisions were made due to delays in 2020/21	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*	57	44	36	21	16
Connected carers approved by Panel (Regulation 27)	16	21	12	9	5
Family Link carers approved	1	1	1	3	3

*\*The number ceasing approval includes friends and family carers who may care for a short period before children return to parents or may cease as foster carers when they become SGO Carers. It includes retirement, deregistration via panel, foster to adopt carers who go on to adopt children.*

Year	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
<b>Total enquiries</b>	113	173	201	123
<b>Assessments to Panel</b>	8	15	10	12
<b>ADM made</b>	12	10	8	14

In 2021/22 the number of non-friends and family foster carers presented at panel and recommended by the panel for approval was 8 and this was a reduction from 15 the previous year. Delays with medicals being reviewed by the Agency Medical Advisor which caused a delay in some approval decisions being made in 2020/21 so 6 carers approved at panel in 2020/21 were approved by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) in 2021/22. One carer presented in 2020/21 withdrew as they decided during the Covid pandemic to leave the UK.

The Recruitment team advertise ZOOM recruitment events on the council website where prospective carers can hear more about from council staff and most critically hear directly from an experienced Southwark foster carer. The team have also attended community events to promote fostering for the council. It is recognised that new publicity materials are needed in 2022/2023 and a greater investment in both physical in borough advertising and having a modern approach to maximise online advertising and use of social media. The recruitment strategy has been refreshed and will be a key priority in 2022/23.

### **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 varies between face-to-face and virtual, 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.

### **Matches for Long Term Foster Care**

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. 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 2020/21 there were 26 approved at panel and 15 via the 14 plus matching process and agreed by the Agency Decision Maker. In 2021/22 a further 19 matches were made. The reduction was impacted by the previous 2 years addressing historic delays, an increase in connected carers where matching happens at the same time as approval and some delays due to high staff sickness in care and fostering in 2021/22 which is actively being addressed in permanence planning and tracking panels.

## **TRAINING AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

The Recruitment Team lead on the Skills to Foster initial training for Fostering. The Fostering Team Managers attend on the final day to answer any questions and provide a welcome to the service. 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 Senior Social Worker who leads on training provides bi- monthly post approval training to support new foster carers completing their Training and Development Standards portfolios. This support is striving to improve compliance and meet its targets and responsibilities in this area. Reflective Group supervision sessions are held by invitation to enable foster carers to discuss a theme and learn from each other, with Supervising Social Worker facilitating.

The Fostering service have contributed to focus groups around the development of residential provision in Southwark, and are committed to work closely as this develops. This close working is as both have the shared aim of providing more local homes for Southwark children. It is envisaged some children who spend time in residential care in Southwark will be linked with foster carers for respite and where children have plans to move from residential to a family setting. Previous work to develop a more intensive fostering hub with the Clinical Service stalled in 2021/22 due to changes in the leadership team and completing priorities but there are plans to resume this work in Q3 of 2022/23.

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.

During Covid periods training adapted to being delivered virtually. This provided some benefits in terms of greater accessibility to foster carers. The Service have decided based on foster carer feedback to continue a hybrid training programme where some training is virtual and some is face to face. The move to more face to face training has been happening incrementally.

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.

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. Child Protection and Safer Caring - accessed online via KCA training associates
3. Attachment - accessed online via KCA training associates.
- 4 Child Development - accessed online via KCA training associates
5. Secure Base
6. Managing Behaviour
7. Supporting your child with Education and PEP's
8. The Role of the LADO and Allegations
9. Promoting the Health of Looked After Children
10. Emotional, Physical Well-Being for Foster Carers
11. TSD Workshops

**LEVEL TWO**

1. Life Story Work
2. Resilience
3. Self-harming behaviour - accessed online via KCA training associates.
4. Suicide Prevention
5. Mental Health and Well-Being
6. Gangs Awareness
7. Substance Misuse
8. R.A.C.E.R training

**LEVEL TWO (Parent & Child)**

1. Working with Parents to Assess Attachment
2. Child Observation
3. Advanced Safeguarding
4. Legal Process & Report Writing
5. Roles & Responsibilities
- 6.

**LEVEL TWO (Teenagers)**

1. Preparing for Independence & Transitions
2. Appropriate Adult
3. Restorative Justice
4. Sexual Health & Relationships

### LEVEL THREE (Specialist Therapeutic Carers)

Therapeutic carers will complete Empathic Behaviour Management training, Advanced Safeguarding and Mentoring training 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 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. The Training and Development Coordinator provide post-approval training for carers on a bi-monthly basis to ensure they are able to submit their Training and Development Standards portfolios.

#### **Shared training through the South London Consortium**

We continue to be an active member of the South London Partnership consortium. 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 during 2022.

## **TAYING PUTUPPORT 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 carers ball is held to thank carers for their commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and young people in Southwark. This has not happened in the Covid period but a Winter Ball is planned for the winter of 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 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and potentially up to the age of 21 years if they are in education. This is a welcome development for young people many of whom are not ready 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 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 there were 56 young people in staying put arrangements, this is an increase from 45 on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. 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 analysis of bed nights shows young people stayed put more in 2021/22 than in any previous year and it is thought this is due a real focus on achieving permanence and stability in foster care.

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 was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021. The new policy offers increased financial support to Staying Put Carers as well as an excellent package of support so Carers can continue to provide emotional support in term time and staying support in holidays for children who go to university in term time.

## **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 audit programme in 2021/22 remained focused on monthly audits of children's case files undertaken 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.

In 2022/2023 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.

## **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.

A report detailing the activity of the Fostering Panel is included as Appendix 1.

## **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 2019/20 there were four complaints relating to fostering. In 2020/21 there were 10 complaints made about the Fostering and SGO Service. In 2021/22 there were 8 complaints made about the Fostering and SGO Service.

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

in group supervision. Learning from complaints is shared with senior management in a quarterly and annual report to embed learning across Children and Families.

## REVIEW OF FOSTERING SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2021/2022

This section reviews the commitments to improvement within the service stated in the Annual Report 2020/21 and reflects on the progress made during 2021/22. The Service Priorities from 2021/22 will continue into 2022/23 as all remain relevant. A new Service Manager is due to join the Fostering Service in Q1 of 2022/23 and will have the lead role in developing and driving the plan together with the team managers and supervising social workers and foster carers in the Service.

### 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.

**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.

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)

*This work has begun in 2021/22 but needs to be consolidated and changes made in 2022/23.*

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

*Exit interviews have been undertaken and in one instance led to a carer seeking to change their mind, requiring an updated assessment and return to panel. Further work is needed so the exit interviews are systematically undertaken and the learning from these is analysed by the Fostering Service Manager to inform service improvement.*

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

*This did not happen in 2021/22 but has been undertaken Q2 of 2022/23.*

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

*Foster carers continue to encourage children in their care to participate in the fantastic activities offered by Speakerbox. These activities are also advertised in the monthly magazine to all foster carers.*

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.

*This work has started but instability and staff absence has met this is not fully embedded for every staff member. This will continue in 2022/23.*

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

*Feedback from the workforce supports the benefits of group supervision and how highly this support is valued by Practitioners.*

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.

*The new policy is embedded.*

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

*The skills audit was completed and is informing the development of the Fostering Service in 2022/23.*

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

**Long term placement stability** (high is good) is at 76% in the DfE 901 provisional data return for 2021/2022 compared to national and comparator averages of 70% and 72% respectively. This is an improvement from the 2020/2021 figure of 71%.

**The number of children with 3 or more placements** (low is good) is at 8.5% (2021/22 DfE 901) down from 10% in 2020/21. In line with national and comparator averages of 9%

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.

*The Fostering Service continue to offer a responsive high quality training offer with a lead team manager and dedicated Senior Social Worker.*

Development of Fostering Therapeutic Hub.

*This was not achieved in 2021/22. This will be continued in 2022/23.*

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

*This continues to be closely monitored, areas needing ongoing approvals are dental checks post pandemic and ensuring Initial Health Assessments are done as quickly as possible.*

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.

*An area of improvement for 2022/23 will be to ensure permanence tracking includes tracking life story work and to ensure even more robust challenge on ensuring all children achieve permanence in the timescale that is right for them.*

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.

*The data shows 21% of children were living 20 miles or more from Southwark as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 and improvement from 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.*

*In March 2021 there were 36 children (excluding those in All Age Disability) in residential care and as at the 31<sup>st</sup> March there were 33 children in residential care.*

6. Continue to 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.

*This will continue throughout 2022/2023.*

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.

*This work began with joint work on viability assessments in 2021/22. Due to a high number of staffing changes in the Connected Person's Team including a change of Team Manager further work is needed to develop in 2022/23.*

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.

*There continues to be too many assessments where the 8 week extension is sought. Further work is needed in 2022/2023 to track and ensure checks are done early and assessments are completed and presented to panel within 16 weeks.*

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

*This continued throughout 2021/22 providing dedicated support work to kinship 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.

*This work needs to continue in 2022/23.*

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

*This framework is set out in the Payments to Carers Policy.*

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

*This has happened for a small number of carers and been seen as really helpful. Much greater management oversight is needed to ensure that first reviews and returning to panel every 3 years is embedded and consistently happening.*

Ensure carers complete their Training Support and Development standards (TSDs)

*Oversight from Panel shows a high proportion of carers are not completing their Training Support and Development standards in the required timescale of 12 or 18 months. The Service are addressing with sessions led by a Senior Social Worker and the training lead to support completion. An audit is being undertaken by Q3 of 2022/23 to ensure all foster carers have a plan in place to complete their TSDs and understand the reasons for delays and proactively address these going forward.*

## **Appendix 1**

### **Southwark Fostering Panel Annual Report**

**April 2021 – March 2022**

#### **Introduction**

Southwark's Fostering Panel functions under Regulations 25 of the Fostering Service Regulations (England) 2011. This report covers the year from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022, providing details of the Fostering Panel activity and range of assessments on which Panel were asked to make a recommendation over the twelve month period. The Fostering Panel provides a quality assurance role concerning practice and the quality of reports presented to panel. It has the ability to challenge practice that falls short of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) or is not in the interest of children.

#### **The Panel**

Following the successful implementation of virtual panels introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Panels have continued to be held virtually and are likely to be so for the foreseeable future. Occasional connection problems continue to lead to delays when applicants are joining but the undoubted logistical and cost savings benefits are clear. There is a noted reduction in anxiety for the majority of applicants able to join from their homes, as well as greater flexibility for Panel Members and Social Workers who are able to access the meeting from their home, or office in a more convenient and time efficient way. As Supervising Social Workers are regular visitors to Foster Carers homes, a few have chosen to join Panel from the Foster Carers homes to help with connection and support their Foster Carers during the Panel process.

The concerns about reduced opportunities for social interaction between Panel Members have lessened over time as they have become used to meeting virtually. Panel Members have taken the opportunity to have informal discussions before Panel begins and in between cases. A brief period for discussion and reflection is now built into the end of the agenda.

Panel Members remain diligent in their task of holding Southwark children in mind when considering the suitability of those wishing to care for them as unrelated foster or Kinship Carers.

#### **Panel meetings and membership**

Fostering Panels are held twice a month, on the first and third Wednesday of the month with the possibility of adding or cancelling Panels if required. Panel Members are

notified of their Panel dates well in advance so any changes can be made well before Panel dates. There were 21 Panels held over the reporting period out of a potential 24, as there were 3 occasions when no meetings were held.

Panel lost 5 members from the central list during this reporting period. Four resigned as one moved abroad, while another accepted a post in the Southwark's Fostering Service. One of the two agency LAC specialist nurses retired and her colleague took up a new post in another local authority. We also lost one of our newer independent members who sadly died.

Two new Panel Members were recruited during November and at the time of writing a further 5 new Panel Members have been recruited, ensuring the level of diversity, skills and knowledge is maintained.

While Panel has always maintained quoracy, there have been times where it has been a challenge due to difficulties securing Agency Social Work representation for the central list because of their workload. Those already on the central list are only able to commit to a few Panels each year. While Supervising Social Workers have often been willing to sit on Panel, conflict of interest can arise due to their involvement with Foster Carers, thereby limiting their ability to sit when needed. It was necessary for the Panel Advisor to act as the Agency Social Worker representative on two occasions to prevent cancellation of the Panel and placements becoming unregulated.

### **Fostering Panel Central List**

The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 require the agency to maintain a "central list" of Panel Members with a range of relevant skills, knowledge and experience, from which the membership of any Panel meeting can be drawn. The quorum for Panel is a minimum of 5 central list members, however 6 members sit on each Panel to ensure Panels remain quorate if a Panel Member cannot attend on the day.

There are currently 14 Panel Members on the central list, which will increase to 19, following recent appointments of 2 Care Experienced, 2 Agency Social Workers and 1 independent Social Worker. Southwark has worked hard to ensure its Panel remains as diverse as possible to reflect that of the wider community.

### **Panel Advisor**

This reviewing period has seen the loss of the temporary Panel Advisor, who accepted a permanent post elsewhere and the welcoming in of another. Panel Members greatly appreciate the substantial knowledge and experience of fostering practice a Panel Advisor can provide. More importantly, however is their quality assurance role in gatekeeping reports to ensure they are fit for purpose and referring those with gaps or queries back to the authors for correction.

## **Panel Administrator**

The Panel Administrator is responsible for the effective functioning of the Panel. Her role include planning Panel dates throughout the year, managing the agenda (in distributing the Panel papers on Egress secure platform a week before Panel, liaising with applicants before Panel day to ensure they are able to log onto the virtual platform, managing the virtual waiting room, minuting the meetings and distributing the minutes for approval. The administrator also keeps the central list records and collects data relating to Panel activity. She is always available to Panel Members to troubleshoot any issues they may have. The fact that Panel functions as efficiently as it does, particularly since becoming a virtual Panel is due to the Panel Administrator.

## **Panel Members Appraisals**

Panel appraisals were completed for all Panel Members in December 2021 and January 2022. Panel Members have all remained positive about their roles and despite only meeting during virtual Panels felt that they were a part of a committed and diverse group that worked well together in the best interest of the children. They all felt listened to, not only by Panel Members but those attending Panel and a new Panel Member stated that they felt very welcomed by existing Panel Members. Panel Members have continued to struggle with Kinship cases (more below) and enjoy matching Panels, and welcomed the opportunity to meet with more children and young people through the virtual platform, though fewer matching cases have been presented.

## **Panel training**

Panel Members were invited to attend a workshop on recruiting and assessing Foster Carers to help inform their understanding of the assessment process. New Panel Members were also provided with an induction on the current legislative framework, research and Case Law. They also attend two Panel observations before sitting on Panel. Learning material in the form of articles is shared with, and between Panel Members as part of their ongoing development.

## **Panel activity throughout the year**

The Fostering Panel met on 21 occasions out of the 23 expected, between April 2021 and March 2022. There were 3 cancelled Panels due to insufficient paperwork within the required timescale or withdrawn. An additional Panel was held to hear a Kinship Carer assessment and Reg. 25 extension request to prevent the placements becoming unregulated.

The tables below provide data on Panel activity for the review year. Where available, data on activity in the previous year is included to allow some comparison.

<b>2021-2022</b>	
<b>Type and number of cases presented</b>	
General Fostering Household approvals	8
Kinship Carers approvals	16
Family Link approvals	1
Return to Panel following 1 <sup>st</sup> Year Annual Reviews	6
Return to Panel following 3 year Review	2
Regulation 25 Extension	12
Deregistration	0
Matches	5
Review following Standards of Care	3

Total number of cases presented: 53

### **Fostering approvals**

<b>Fostering Approvals</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
General Fostering Households	8	15*
Kinship Carers Households	11	20
Family Link Short Break Carers	1	1

There has been an almost 50% reduction in the number of assessments presented to Panel during this period when compared with 2020/21. It is likely that recruitment and a number of assessments were already underway during the 2020/21, when Covid-19 led to periods of lockdown. The reduction in assessments during 2021/22 may therefore be due to limited interest linked to the pandemic, difficulties holding recruitment sessions and continued delay and backlog of checks and medicals preventing their presentation at Panel.

Although 15\* households were presented to panel in 2020/21 due to delays with medical reports required by the ADM to ratify the recommendations 6 of these were approved and ratified by the ADM in 2021/22 and 1 household left the UK in the Covid period and withdrew from seeking to foster so was not ratified. The ADM ratified the 8 recommendations made by the Fostering Panel involving General Fostering Households in 2021/2022, one of the recommendations was not to approve the carer which was ratified by the ADM. Six out of the eight households presented to panel in 2021/2022 live in Southwark which means more children can remain in borough.

In relation to the 16 Kinship Care cases heard 4 were deferred due to insufficient information including Medical Advisor reports. This raised the possibility that some would become unregulated as a result. An issue that has presented a number of local authorities with difficulties due to the continued pressure on medical staff. 12 cases were recommended for approval and 11 were ratified by the ADM. Kinship Carers remain the highest number of assessments completed during this period.

The majority of Kinship Carers are dual purpose and only presented to Panel to ensure placements remain regulated while awaiting Court dates for SGO hearings. These hearings are rarely completed within 24 weeks allowed for the Kinship Care assessment. The majority of these assessments presented to Panel made no reference to the applicant's suitability to foster. If an SGO is not granted it would be helpful to know whether they are able to work with the local authority, attend training and provide reports.

Credit must be given to the assessors as these remain the most challenging assessments for both assessor and carer. Carers are often suspicious and reluctant to provide personal information about pre-existing and often complex family relationships during assessments. Panel has also struggled with recommending some carers due to health, age and accommodation leading to uncertainty about their ability to care for a child to majority. A number of these carers will choose to become Special Guardians, even though they may need ongoing support. The 2021 Kinship Survey found that 62% of the 1,651 carers caring for 2,538 children, believe that their children have long-term physical and mental health needs. It also found that 70% of those carers do not receive the support they feel they need from their local authorities. Panel has remained reassured by Southwark's Special Guardians team's feedback during Panel about continued advice, support and training available for all Kinship Carers who have become Special Guardians.

This is the second year where only one Family Link carer has been assessed and approved to provide short break care for a child with a disability. This is a much needed respite service for families with children with disabilities, as can help prevent family breakdown and children coming into care. Panel is therefore keen to see an increase in such assessments.

### **Fostering Matches**

<b>Fostering Matches 2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	
Total number of children matched with permanent Foster Carers	6	26
Children matched with Southwark Foster Carers	3	8
Children matched with Independent Fostering Agency Foster Carers	3	18

Total number of children matched as part of a sibling group	2	11
Children matched as part of a sibling group with Southwark Foster Carers	2	4
Children matched as part of a sibling group with Independent Fostering Agency Foster Carers	0	7
Total Number of fostering households	5	20
Number of Southwark fostering households	2	6
Number of Independent Fostering Agency households	3	14

There were only 6 children matched via panel, 1 of whom was part of a sibling group in 5 fostering households. All of the children were already living within general fostering households.

2020/21 saw a significant increase in the number of children matched to address historic delays in the process for some children. The decrease in numbers of children matched during this period is understood to be due to staff absences and time off work with Covid-19 and other health issues that have had a significant impact on the Care Service.

It is however positive to note that there has been a gradual increase in the number of children achieving permanency through placements with Connected Carers. Older children, aged 14 and over are also matched during their Statutory Reviews where reports are presented directly to the Agency Decision Maker for ratification.

The child's voice is actively encouraged and Panel is always pleased to hear or read the direct feedback about the match from children in matching households, including those of carers own children. As previously stated children regularly attended panels with their carers, however it has been noted that fewer have attended despite it being easier to attend virtual panels.

### **Fostering households 1<sup>st</sup> Year Reviews**

<b>Fostering 1<sup>st</sup> Year Reviews</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2020/21</b>
General fostering households	5	6
Kinship Carers households	1	6
Family Link short break carers	1	2

It is a regulatory requirement that all Foster Carers 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Reviews are presented to Panel for consideration of their continued approval, following their first year of practice. Panel Members take note and comment on the Independent Reviews and recommendations made outlining the foster carer's approval number, age range and ability to meet the NMS.

A number of children's Social Workers contribute to Foster Carers reviews, although this is still not universal and should be as it is key to Fostering reviewing Officers (FIRO) assessment of the Foster Carers ability to meet the needs of that child.

Southwark commissions an independent agency to conduct its Foster Carers Annual Reviews. This provides an additional level of independent scrutiny of Foster Carers practice and the local authority's monitoring and support role. Overall Panel have rated the quality of the Annual Review reports as 'Good' with full reports outlining details of the discussion held, whether Foster Carers meet the NMS and provide a clear action plan and recommendation. An example of Panel feedback can be seen below:

*'The ARA was very thorough, fair but sensitive. Did not shy away from addressing issues. Covered the issue of housing and corporate parenting, the differences between domestic violence and domestic abuse including intimidation. It looked at FC's not only with the looked after children but with her own children as well.'*

Foster Carers have generally provided positive comments about the annual review process.

The 7 Cases presented to Panel following their 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Review include 5 General Households, 1 Kinship Carer and 1 Family Link carer. All were recommended for continued approval during this period, and ratified by the ADM.

There were 36 approvals during 2020/21, therefore at least 15 general fostering household's should have been returned to Panel following their 1st Annual review as well as those Kinship Carers who had not gone on to become Special Guardians. There was a delay in obtaining 6 reports from the Medical Advisor towards the end of the financial year therefore these carers reviews were held during 2021/22, and one carer left the UK and did not return. It is also possible that some of these carers have already attended their annual review and there has been a delay presenting them to Panel, but unlikely that this is the case for all. As Panel's role is to consider continued approval and comment on the Annual Review these cases are now overdue their return to Panel.

### **Three Yearly Fostering Reviews**

Two cases returned to Panel after three years, one involving a same sex couple who have been fostering since 2011, and the other a single carer who had been fostering since 2006, and had also adopted 3 children previously fostered over the years, the youngest now aged 12. When asked what it was about fostering that made her wish to continue she said '*she loved doing something that improved someone else's life.*' When she attended Panel she was about to return to fostering after major renovations to increase the number of bedrooms to enable her to continue fostering. In the interim she was helping to facilitate the 'Skills to Foster' training.

The same sex couple had been approved for a long term transracial match with a sibling group of 3 children who had been in their care for over 9 years. Two are now young adults but have remained under 'Staying Put' arrangements. These carers had advocated for the children over the years, ensuring their educational needs were fully met, promoted safe contact with family members, some in another country and were meeting the young people's cultural and identity needs.

Panel was impressed and agreed that the benefit of the 3 year return to Panel provided the opportunity to acknowledge the positive work of committed carers, as well as discuss and offer Panel advice about gaps in Foster Carers practice and/or support from the local authority.

### **Regulation 25, Extensions**

The majority of Regulation 25, requests for an 8 week extension are prompted by delays in outstanding checks, primarily medical and DBS checks. There have been 12 such requests during this period. While such requests should be the exception, Panel have noted there is often a 3-4 week delay in seeking checks as this is left to Fostering Service after the case has been transferred. Supervising Social Workers have no choice at that stage but to seek an extension to prevent placements becoming unregulated. There have nevertheless been 3 cases where continued delay in receiving these checks have led to placements becoming unregulated by the time the final report is represented to Panel. While Panel is able to provide a view about the carers ability to care for children in such cases, it cannot make a recommendation on unregulated placements as different arrangements should, in such cases be made for the child concerned.

This is an issue discussed in Quality Assurance meetings. A potential solution would be for checks to begin as soon as viability assessments are signed off, including medical appointments. Social Workers completing viability assessment could request sight of relevant documents for DBS checks to ensure they are available. Two cases presented to Panel have found applicants did not have the appropriate documents to obtain DBS' which led to further delay. If this process starts earlier it will prevent, or reduce extension requests, delay in care planning and unregulated placements.

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

Panel heard 3 Standards of Care cases concerning Foster Carers practice that led to Standards of Care investigations. Two involved complaints from children where their carers have raised their voices, one mirroring the child's use of bad language so the child could experience how this felt, while another spoke negatively about a child in earshot, causing upset. The third case involved an altercation outside of the home between neighbours who were both Foster Carers while children were in the household. Panel agreed with Standards of Care action plan and recommended continued approval in all 3 cases, that was ratified by the ADM. There have been no de-registrations recommended by Panel during this period.

## **Fostering Panel's role in Quality Assurance**

### **Evaluation of work submitted to Panel (measured through Panel feedback forms)**

<b>Feedback of assessments and reports</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Poor</b>
Form F	2	4		
Form C		4	1	
Family Link		1		
Annual Review		1		
Matching Reports	1	2	1	

Reports presented to Panel are fundamental to Panel's judgement of the quality of the assessment or review. They are supplemented by information from the assessing social worker at the Panel meeting. Panel's judgement can also be influenced by relevant comment made by the prospective foster, Kinship Carers during the meeting.

Panel will regard an assessment report to be of sufficient quality to be 'Good' when it provides comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the applicant, their abilities and motivation. It identifies their strengths and vulnerabilities, and provides a clear analysis leading to the reasons for the recommendation and matching considerations. This will also apply to Kinship Carers, continued approval and long term matches.

As in previous years, a small number of reviews were prompted by Standards of Care concerns, in the cases presented Panel was satisfied that the investigations had been correctly conducted and the conclusions justified.

Feedback from Panel Members is a standing agenda item and is recorded by the Panel administrator at the end of each Panel. The feedback relates to individual cases, noting for example Foster Carers and Social Workers presentation as well as assessments.

The majority of reports presented to Panel have been graded as 'Good' and the quality has remained consistent. While it is acknowledged that feedback is subjective, Panel ensure each is discussed before reaching a consensus with evidence. There have been 3 'Excellent' reports presented to Panel, 2 Form F assessments and 1 matching report.

A minority were noted to include factual errors, but in most cases, the errors were minor such as the use of different dates in different parts of the report. Although there has been an improvement over the review year in children's Social Workers contributing to Foster Carers reviews, this is still not universal. In addition when present some children's views are reported second hand in Social Workers report, for example '*Susan and Troy said they are happy in the placement.*' Feedback forms are available for different ages, so it is unclear why these are not regularly used.

There is evidence that issues of equality and diversity are being addressed in reports, but more so in assessments and matching reports. As well as discussions about food, skin, hair and taking them to faith meetings more insight into the carers ability to understand how the lack of both can impact the child in order to support them would be helpful. Similarly greater knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity would be beneficial for Social Workers and applicants as are rarely discussed in any depth. Training for Social Workers and Panel Members would be beneficial.

Panel tries to provide additional information on well written areas as well as those that would raise the quality of reports in the feedback it provides.

*'The Form F reads very well. The analysis was very thorough of all the key areas. It was well written, easy to read, and it provided a good understanding of the couple's history.'*

*'The whole report was excellent and gave a rounded view of the applicant. The report flowed well, it was an easy read, had good analysis and included excerpts of the applicant's own comments.'*

*'The FC was well prepared for Panel and supported by her SSW in her presentation which was excellent, as was the presentation of SSW and CSW. Very clear, knowledgeable and all knew the child well. The Annual Review minutes included by the IFA was excellent.'*

*'It would help if the Matching Report had considered questions about preparing for independence; e.g. what would need to happen if child were placed and to remain out of borough. Carer's thoughts on what they would need to do to prepare child for independence.'*

*'How the carer would help the children understand the difference of ethnicity within the family in the outside world was not explored.'*

*'There were a number of gaps in the report: lack of information about children, adult children and extended family; no information about male FCs job and what this means in terms of his involvement.'*

Foster carers training moved from face to face to virtual due to the pandemic. This does not appear to have increased the numbers attending training as gaps remain. The Training & Development plans are not always presented to Panel and sometimes not fully completed with carers learning.

*'It would have been helpful to have read about what FC learned from training on autism. However it was positive to hear the SW updates to Panel about recent progress, and to see what FC has learned from training.'*

### **Foster Carers feedback on the Panel process**

Foster Carers and Social Workers attending Panel are asked to provide feedback on their experience. There have been fewer responses, as it is harder to encourage completion of electronic forms. Moving forward the Panel Administrator plans to obtain phone feedback after Panel. Those that have responded 13 have reported their experience to be 'excellent' 5 described their experience as "good' 2 'adequate' and 1 'poor'.

The majority felt the Panel Members to be welcoming and they felt they were listened to and questions appropriate:

*'Everybody was really nice. I was really nervous but they put me at ease. It felt they really listened to my answers to their questions.'*

*'I cannot add any suggestion as I feel the Panel handled my individual case with care and understanding. All concerns on both parts addressed and fully explained.'*

This was not the case for the two 'adequate' responses, one returning following a Standards of Care concern and the other a new applicant:

*'I understand why I came to Panel but I didn't feel I had done anything wrong to necessitate coming to Panel. It made me feel in the wrong. I was nervous about coming to Panel, but after talking a while I relaxed. The questions gave me a chance to explain myself.'*

*'Some of the questions that were asked were asking about things that I would not be able to answer until a child is in place, so it was difficult to answer without the experience. Other than that it went well.'*

The 'Poor' feedback involving an applicant who had previous fostering experience, however the former agency had raised some practice issues:

*'I answered all the questions well because I have done fostering before. The Panel questioned me about my past – I have moved on. I have fostered with an agency. I am in contact with the children I cared for. It's a job I love. I tried to convince Panel but they were not listening to me. I was not happy about it.'*

## **Social Workers Feedback**

There has been limited feedback from Social Workers, despite best efforts by the Panel administrator. Feedback received has however largely been positive. All have confirmed that they and their Foster Carers/applicants have been warmly welcomed:

*'I have attended the Southwark Fostering Panel on a number of occasions. At every Panel my applicants have received a warm welcome from all the Panel Members and all Foster Carers have reported that any anxieties they had were allayed.'*

Social Workers feel the questions are appropriate as can be seen from the comment below:

*'The Panel is well organised, the Panel Members are diverse and they are keen to know and understand the motivations to foster and cover a range of questions with the applicants and all the while ensuring that the applicants are put at ease.'*

*'The Panel Members have asked a good range of questions which were appropriate and whenever the applicants have struggled to answer they have re-phrased and clarified.'*

There has also been positive feedback on how well the Panel Administrator manages the Panel process:

*'The timing of each case is thoughtfully scheduled and I have received regular updates prior to the Panel date.'*

There has been some verbal comments from Social Workers and a written comment from a foster carer that questions on diversity have not featured during Panel.

*'Diversity didn't come up even though it was a transracial placement, it wasn't an issue.'*

If sufficient relevant information is contained in the reports presented to Panel questions on diversity are not routinely asked. Nevertheless, in view of the concerns Panel will ensure that diversity remains in focus by asking relevant questions, or confirming during Panel that it has been noted in the report.

Of particular concern to Panel was the comment from one Social Worker who felt that Panel seemed more critical of Kinship Carer applicants. This prompted Panel to consider the reasons for this and wondered whether Social Workers thought Panel had a greater expectation of Kinship Carers than unrelated applicants. On reflection

the questions may have been more focused as they already had a child in placement, unlike unrelated Foster Carers. It however led to the recruitment of two Kinship Carers as Panel Members who have provided good feedback and helped Panel consider some of the issues for Kinship Carers. Panel Chair also circulated a court judgement where the judge had reminded a local authority that the NMS applied to the agency and not the carer, it was therefore the agency's responsibility to help the carers meet the standards. This has helped focus Panel's questions on support the local authority can provide Kinship Carers in particular to meet children's needs and minimise any concerns Panel may have.

### **Quality Assurance Meetings**

The Panel chair, Head of Service, Service Manager, Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator meet four times a year with the Agency Decision Maker. These meetings are particularly helpful as address any concerns about paperwork and process, including any concerns about Panel practice or process. A discussion about increasing Social Workers understanding of Reg. 24 and Reg. 25 timescales resulted in the Panel advisor and Service Manager providing information for managers and Social Workers on the Kinship Care process and looking at how it could be added to the Mosaic system workflow to prevent placements becoming unregulated. Quality assurance feedback themes are discussed and action is assigned and reviewed at the next meeting.

### **Conclusion**

Although Covid-19 presented a number of continuing challenges for the Fostering Service it also highlighted the level of commitment and resilience in Foster Carers. They accepted new placements, or provided respite support and continued to provide the same level of care throughout, with support from their Supervising Social Workers. The Fostering Service has struggled due to depleted numbers as a result of loss of staff and sickness, but have continued to present cases to the Fostering Panel, albeit at a reduced number as evidenced by the data.

Panel continues to be satisfied with the standard of practice and the quality of the majority of reports presented to it. There is also evidence of improving practice, for example children's Social Workers now have a better understanding of Regulation 24 and timescales and are working to meet them. More Training & Development plans are being presented to Panel and the SGO team offers ongoing support to Special Guardians. The majority of reports presented were 'Good' and where minor gaps are present Social Workers an applicants are usually able to provide missing information during the Panel discussion.

When considering areas for development, Panel would like to see:

- Kinship Care assessments presented to Panel within the 16 week timescale rather than requiring an additional 8 week extension. Panel would like consideration given to DBS checks and medical's beginning earlier, before transfer to prevent delay.
- A plan in place to increase the return to Panel of Foster and Kinship Carers following their First Annual Review during 2021 -2022.
- Kinship Care assessments should always include information about the applicants ability to foster the child in question whether or not an SGO is being sought, as may not be granted.
- Where applicable, matching reports need to clearly state that funding has been agreed.
- Information on Foster Carers ability to prepare a young for independence, and what this will mean to a young person remaining out of borough.
- Children's views are expressed by the children and young people themselves, rather than through Social Workers in their reports. There are plenty of tools and materials to enable/empower children to provide their own feedback.
- All reports need to provide sufficient detail, evidence, an appropriate level of analysis and clear recommendation.
- Any relevant ex-partner has been consulted, or reasons why not and information about them triangulated from other sources.
- All children's Social Workers' contribute to Foster Carers reviews, as this is still not universal and should be.
- All Training & Development profiles need to be fully completed with detail of learning from training attended and presented to Panel.
- Where Health Disclosures were commonly used during the pandemic, where appropriate Foster Carers should be asked to attend their GPs for medicals.
- An increase in Family Link assessments as such links can prevent the need for a child to be accommodated.

#### Areas for Panel development:

- Panel to ensure it seeks information about Foster and Kinships Carers understanding of equality, diversity and identity, including sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Panel will work to ensure it remains non-judgmental in discussion and when considering recommendations.
- Panel is to seek confirmation of how the local authority will support the Kinship Carers to meet the needs of a children in their care where the NMS would suggest there is a gap.