

FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23



**LONDON BOROUGH OF SOUTHWARK
CHILDREN & FAMILIES**

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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 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and sets out plans for service development until 31 March 2024.

KEY MESSAGES

A key objective in the 2022-23 report was for the Fostering Service to return to its previous position of a fully staffed service with a permanent workforce and this has been largely achieved.

The period of recovery and rebuilding that followed the COVID-19 pandemic has transitioned to a phase of development where some working practices have been reviewed and refreshed and the desire to improve outcomes for children and support for carers is continued to be driven forward with a renewed focus on growth, stability and impact.

Southwark Fostering Service's continued membership of the South London Consortium has enabled us to share ideas and working practices with other member boroughs. In addition to the sub groups for Special Guardianship and Fostering a new sub group has been created to address carer recruitment.

A separate Panel Advisor role has been developed and has had a significant impact on the improvement of quality assurance of the papers submitted to panel and along with the Service Manager has responsibility for promoting and developing good practice through the insights and advice given to the fostering panel, Agency Decision Maker (ADM), the Service Manager, Head of Service, and the Business and Performance Manager. In 2023-24 this will become a permanent role in the Fostering Service structure with line management responsibility for the Panel Administrator.

Southwark councils children's services were inspected by Ofsted from 26 to 30 September 2022 and was judged as Good in relation to all areas (impact of leaders on social work practice, experiences and progress of children, experiences and progress of care leavers and overall effectiveness).

The inspection report published in November 2022 commented that "Foster carers receive good-quality training and development opportunities that help them meet the needs of the children they care for".

However, a less positive observation from Ofsted suggested that an area of improvement related to foster carer recruitment as sufficiency of placements appeared to be a challenge and this area appeared to lack impetus and energy the approach to recruiting carers was not being delivered at the necessary pace.

Council leadership reacted swiftly to address these concerns. Firstly, the Carer recruitment team which was previously located with the Access to Resources function now forms part of the Fostering Service which has enabled them to work even closer with the Fostering teams to understand the needs and profile of our young people to ensure the right carers are recruited and firm relationships are formed and built early between the incoming carers and the fostering Supervising Social Workers to ensure positive partnership working and effective utilisation and retention of our internal fostering capacity.

Secondly, a specialist post of a Fostering Marketing Communications and Engagement officer has been developed which will be located within the Communications Team and serve as a link between them and the Fostering Service to develop and deliver a comprehensive marketing communications and engagement plan to support the council's fostering recruitment efforts, including a new web and social media presence. It is expected that recruitment to this role will occur in the summer of 2023.

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 or those connected to them, 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 Local Authority 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 fostering households in or close to the borough 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. 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.

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN SOUTHWARK

The National Fostering context

- 57,540 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2022².
- There are around 43,905 in England at 31 March 2022 down from 45,370 at 31 March 2021.
- Every year thousands of new foster families are needed in England however only a small number of enquiries translate into applications. In 2018, there were 10,520 applications across the UK and 8,280 in 2022. This is a 20% decrease.

Children in Southwark

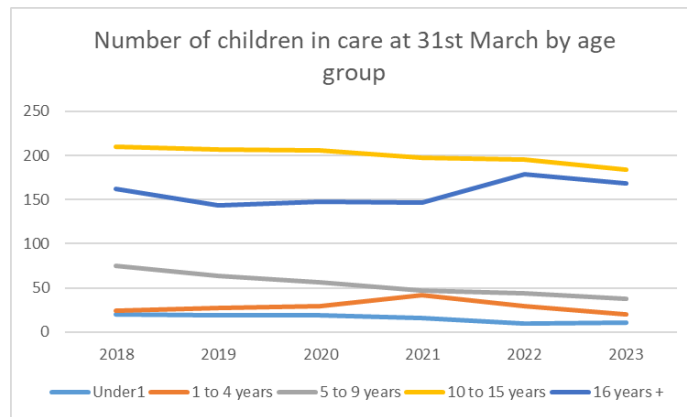
As at the 31 March 2023 there were 421 children in care to Southwark



There has been a national overall reduction of the number of children in Local Authority care and this trend of a reducing number of children from the local population needing to be in care is reflected in Southwark's data in 2023 (-7%) and also the number of children in foster care (-11%). There has been an increase in the number of children Southwark have been able to place in foster care with connected persons (also referred to as kinship carers).

The overall reduction of the number of children in foster placements has resulted in less use of both Southwark and IFA foster carers who have both seen 14% fewer placements.

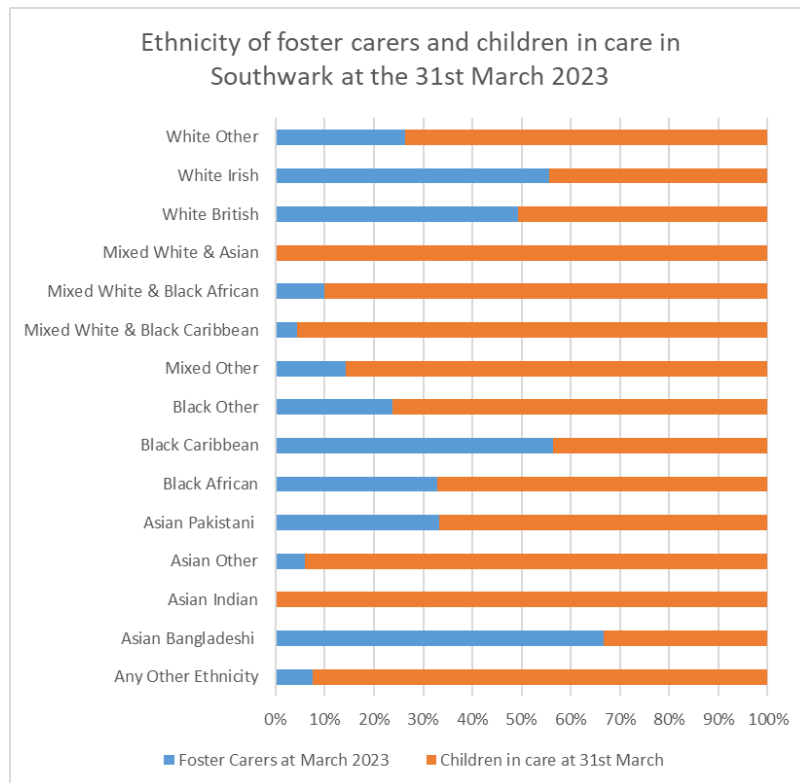
The number of children matched long-term was lower than the previous year this is due to a reduced number of children brought to panel for matching and this is a key indicator for monitoring over the next twelve months. The introduction of a dedicated Permanence Lead role in the LA in 2023-2024 will further ensure matching happens in the right timescale for every child where their plan is to remain in foster care.



The age profile of children and young people in care to Southwark has not changed significantly for the last three years. While the numbers have seen a slight variance over this period, the proportions in each age group have remained relatively stable. Any change to this has changed over a longer period.

Older children aged 10 to 16+ entering care has increased from 74% in 2021-22 to 84% in 22-23. Research has been conducted in this area by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and whilst they found that Contextual Safeguarding (or 'extra-familial' concerns such as gang involvement and exposure to criminal or sexual exploitation) were present for a quarter of the children in their study, children were not in care because of either contextual safeguarding or safeguarding concerns in the family. Children in this age group appear to be impacted by both the extra-familial concerns plus issues of neglect, emotional abuse, sexual and/or physical abuse. The cumulative trauma experienced by these children and young people has presented challenges to all fostering providers to find and train carers who are able to provide appropriate placements offering the right care for these children and young people.

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. Any change will require a change to central government policy.



Black/ Black British children make up the largest group of children in care despite being only the second largest group in the school population in Southwark. Southwark has a diverse cohort of carer's whose identities largely reflect the demographic of the children who require foster placements. 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. Southwark trains all foster 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.

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 Bed nights per month 2021/2022	Average Bed nights per month 2022/2023
	<i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	<i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	<i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	<i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	<i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>	<i>Average numbers of children in care type monthly</i>
Internal Fostering	5209 <i>173</i>	5019 <i>165</i>	4738 <i>156</i>	4269 <i>141</i>	4110 <i>134</i>	4406 <i>145</i>
Connected Carers (Regulation 24 and 27)	1027 <i>34</i>	1275 <i>42</i>	1561 <i>51</i>	1905 <i>62</i>	1976 <i>65</i>	2142 <i>70</i>
IFA Carers	5031 <i>149</i>	4816 <i>158</i>	4460 <i>147</i>	4365 <i>144</i>	4039 <i>133</i>	3737 <i>123</i>
Staying Put	1229 <i>40</i>	1244 <i>40</i>	1168 <i>38</i>	1353 <i>44</i>	1607 <i>52</i>	2015 <i>66</i>

SOUTHWARK'S PROVISION OF FOSTER CARERS

As at the 31 March 2023:



120 approved fostering households↓

31 connected carer households↑

26 vacancies

240 maximum number of places available

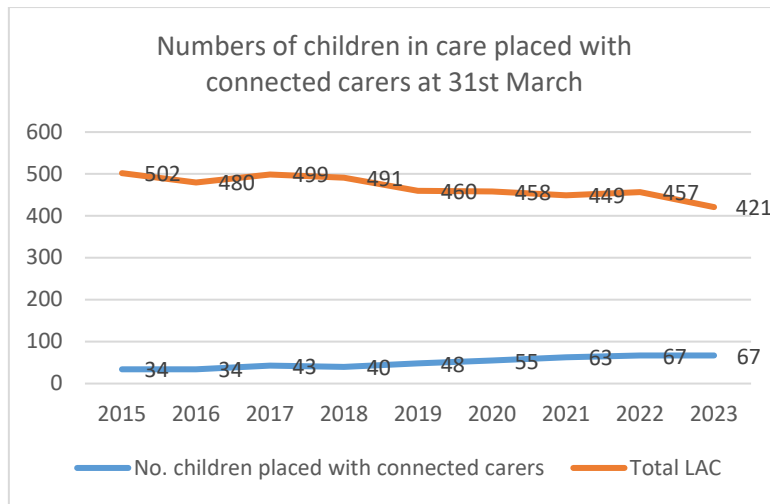


The number of children placed with Southwark foster carers has been variable this year and changes on a daily basis. The analysis of bed night's shows that a parallel trend of reducing numbers of children with Southwark foster carers and a fractionally greater reduction in the number of children in IFA placements. There has been an increase in the approvals of children being placed with connected persons. The maximum number of children that could be placed with Foster carers in Southwark in theory is 240 children. However, this is assuming that all carers are able to take the maximum number of children in their approval range. This is not always possible as the approval may be contingent on the children being siblings or the carer may not be able to take a placement for a range of other reasons related to their personal or household circumstances (including places being unavailable due to young people in 'staying put' arrangements after they turn 18).

Southwark has an aging population of Foster carers and many are choosing to end their fostering career following many years (and in some cases decades) of providing loving and supportive foster homes. At present approx. 49% of Southwark's in-house carers are 60 years old and over and a target for carer recruitment is to recruit more carers from a younger demographic.

Connected carers

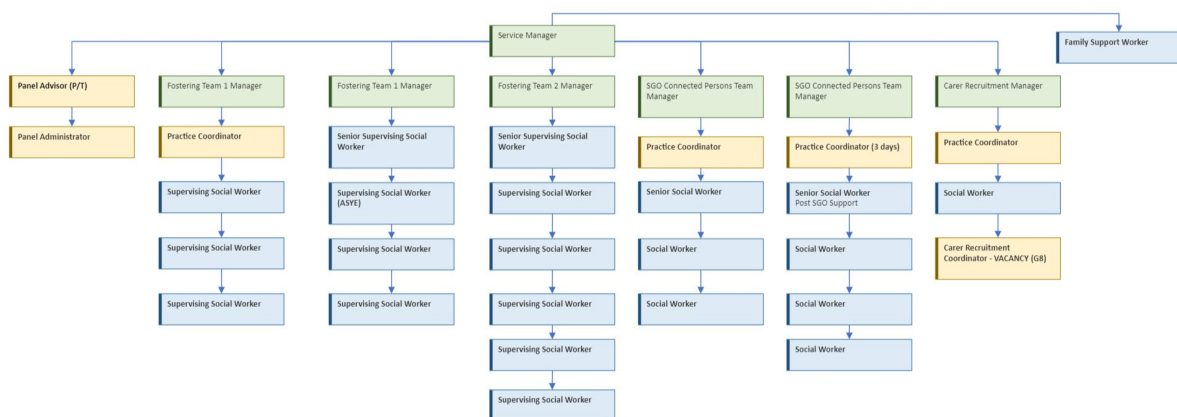
Analysis of the use of connected carers shows Southwark's Fostering Service has maintained its strong performance and the balance of support has shifted towards connected persons foster care. The number of children in care placed with family compared to the overall care population rose from 7 % to 15 % over the last 3 years. The number of connected persons carers varies weekly but as a proportion of children in care the proportion has broadly doubled over the last 5 years.



The Special Guardianship and Connected Persons team has a focus on assessing and supporting Special Guardians, as well as assessing kinship (connected persons) 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. The team receive over one hundred referrals annually but many assessments end where carers withdraw during the process or the end outcome may be a child returning home to parents. For 2021-2022 the team completed a total of 41 assessments. There were 18 Special Guardianship Orders granted in Care Proceedings during 2021-2022, enabling those children to leave care and 16 Connected Carers were approved at the Fostering Panel.

FOSTERING SERVICE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

The service comprises three teams providing supervisory social workers for all of our registered foster carers and a further two teams supporting Special Guardians. The carer recruitment team service has recently been incorporated into the service after it was managed through the Access to Resources team for a short period of time. There is also the Fostering Panel team made up of the panel advisor and administrator.



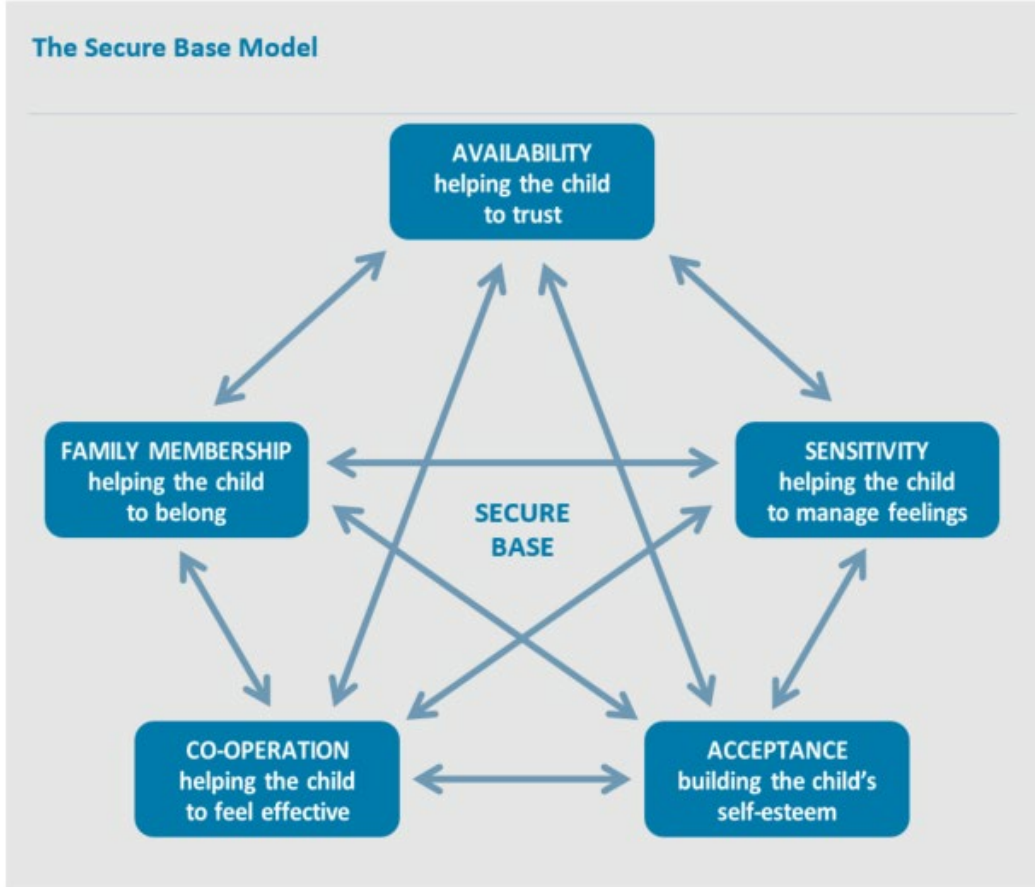
There are currently four positions covered by agency staff, two in fostering, one in the SGO/ Connected Persons team and the Panel Advisor. Otherwise the service is fully resourced with workers on permanent contracts.

SERVICE STRATEGY

The service currently operates a secure base model which is a simple approach, developed by Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek, which can be used with children and young people from different cultures and all age groups.

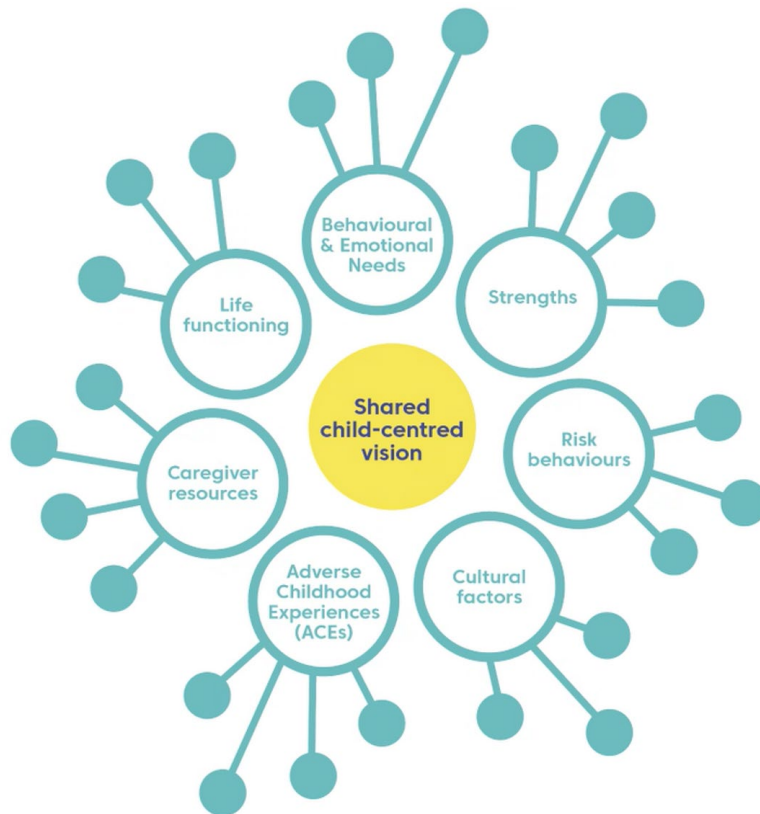
Many looked after children and young people have had painful experiences of separation and loss. As a result, they may feel insecure and may find it hard to trust other people, including their carers. The Secure Base Model helps carers offer them a positive experience of real care. As a child or young person learns to trust the carer, she or he may naturally become attached to them. This may be their first good experience of attachment to a care giver.

When children and young people feel insecure, they may behave in ways that leaves carers feeling anxious and stressed. The Secure Base Model helps carers think about why this behaviour developed – how it may have helped the child or young person to cope in the past. The model helps carers work out how to respond in ways that will help the child or young person feel more secure. As a sense of security grows, the problematic behaviour is likely to diminish.



The Secure Base Model provides a sort of 'scaffolding' that can support children and young people as they learn to trust you, to grow in self-esteem, and to come to feel increasingly effective.

Southwark is also launching the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment tool developed by Dr John Lyons of the University of Kentucky. CANS, will help the care services in Southwark guide and plan the treatment for children and young people and as it relates to Fostering will help carers in partnership with the clinical team focus on the needs of the child within the identified domain in order to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people in their care.



Core Domains of CANS

As mentioned in the introduction and as a result of Ofsted's observations we plan to increase our carer recruitment activity with the aim of attracting quality carers for our children alongside a schedule of other improvements to the service to ensure the highest quality care for children and the best support packages for our carers.

CARER RECRUITMENT

Activity Overview	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Foster Carers (general) recommended by panel for approval by Agency Decision Maker (ADM)	12	10	15 <i>*only 8 of the 15 had an ADM decision in 2020/2021 due to delays with medicals.</i>	8 <i>*14 ADM decisions were made due to delays in 2020/21</i>	6 <i>(*3 further Supported Lodgings carers approved)</i>
Foster carers ceased approval*	21	36	44	57	42
Connected carers approved by Panel (Regulation 27)	9	12	21	16	17
Family Link carers approved	3	1	1	1	1

**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	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Total enquiries	123	201	173	113	189
Assessments to Panel	12	10	15	8	6
ADM made	14	8	10	12	10

The Carer Recruitment team continues to advertise virtual 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 in partnership with the Communications team have also created new marketing materials, placed banners around the borough, and distributed newly designed leaflets. A number of community events were attended during the nationally recognised Foster Care fortnight to promote fostering for the council, as previously stated carer recruitment will be a key priority in 2023-24.

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 recognises 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 revised 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. Monthly support groups and coffee mornings are all now in person, 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.

The first Foster Carer's Ball since lockdown took place in February 2023 with over 60 carers in attendance. It was a fantastic event and opportunity for staff and carers to reconnect in person as a large group. There was amazing food, entertainment and there were awards presented to some foster carers for their long service. The inaugural annual awards were presented in the memory of colleagues and carers lost during the Covid-19 pandemic. A fitting tribute and aspiration to all.

Claudette Coke Award of Excellence – for carers who consistently meeting the needs of hard to reach children and young people. Providing a Secure Base and resilient caring for children

Pauline Lovelock Children's Champion Award – for carers who are committed to ensuring that all children and young people are listened to and who engage and build positive relationships with children and young people.

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 2021-22 five matches were made which was a reduction from the previous year. In 2022-23 there were two matches achieved through the fostering panel. Southwark will be able to report in next year's report a figure for matches at panel in excess of the combined figures of the last two years.

CARER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Carer Recruitment Team leads on the Skills to Foster course, an initial three day training course for Foster Carers. The Fostering Team Managers attend on the final day to answer any questions and provide a welcome to the service. The 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.

Each Senior Social Worker in the Fostering Teams have a specialist focus in addition to their Supervision of Foster Carers and support of colleagues. 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 a Supervising Social Worker facilitating.

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

The Service continues to offer a mix of virtual and in person/ face to face with more courses being offered in person as people have become more used to returning to the normality of this training post pandemic. The recent training programme has approx. a quarter of the training offered in person. Part of the challenge in increasing this number has been the ability to identify a suitable venue accessible to carers.

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

LEVEL TWO (Teenagers)

1. Preparing for independence and transition
2. Appropriate adult
3. Restorative justice
4. Sexual health and relationships

LEVEL THREE

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 with the clinical lead and other colleagues. This has provided a valuable addition to carers a more holistic understanding of the process and standards required of them by Southwark.

Foster Carers receive an increase in their allowances based on the Level of training they have achieved. Connected Person carers are only approved to level one. If the objective of providing a Therapeutic Fostering Service is to be achieved there will be a need to move mainstream foster carers from Level 1 to Level 3. At present there are five Level 3 carers in Southwark's Foster Carer cohort.

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.

SUPPORT FOR FOSTER CARERS

Foster Carer can be a very demanding vocation despite its many rewards. 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 in their fostering task and to maintain their wellbeing included the following:

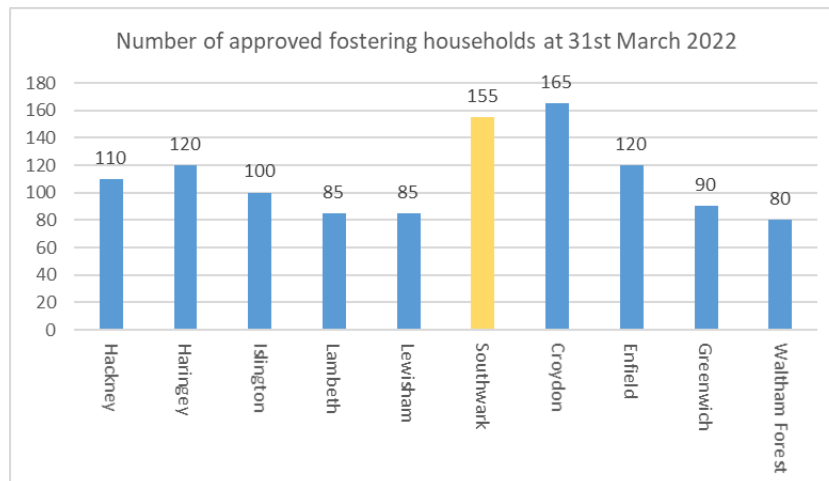
- Allocation and support of a dedicated supervising social worker during the working week and access to dedicated out-of-hours support 7 days a week.
- Foster carer induction for all newly approved households.
- A comprehensive post approval training programme that incorporates the therapeutic care giving 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.
- Membership of The Fostering Network for all Southwark foster carers, which offers independent advice and support with allegations.
- A Wellness programme that includes yoga classes, Zumba, meditation and mindfulness, and the opportunity to gain access to Southwark leisure centres for free.
- Face to Face supervisory visits in accordance with NMS.

PERFORMANCE

National Context

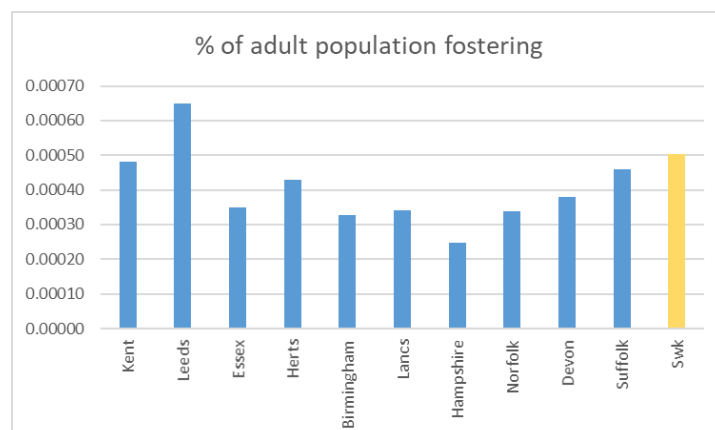
Households

Across statistical neighbours, Southwark has the second highest number of approved households at 31 March 2022¹:



Across the UK, there is a large variance in fostering households with some local authorities holding significantly larger numbers of approved fostering households:

While there are a number of larger authorities with significantly higher numbers of approved fostering households than Southwark, when expressed as a percentage of the adult population, Southwark has a comparable rate of fostering households. Southwark has 0.050% of the adult population approved as a foster carer which compares to Kent with 0.048%.

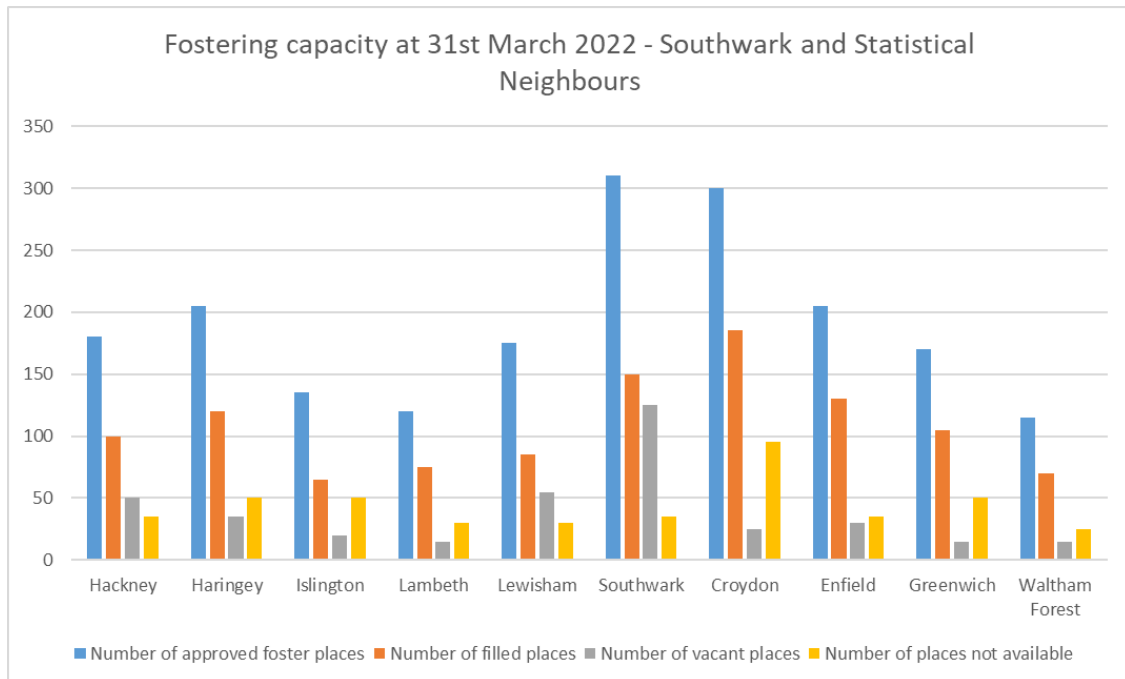


¹ [Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

While Suffolk is closest in size to Southwark, albeit with around double the population, the percentage of the population who are approved as a fostering household is similar to Southwark.

Capacity

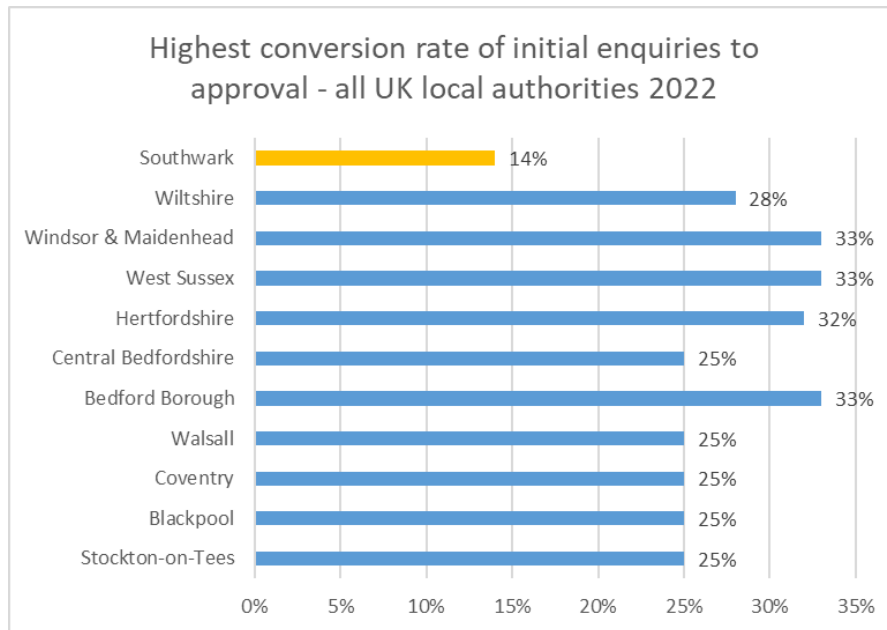
According to the last published data at 31 March 2022, Southwark has the highest internal fostering capacity across statistical neighbours.



Across the UK the top ten local authorities with the highest utilisation of their fostering places does not include any inner or outer London authorities. Southwark is developing the management reports and reviewing the approved carer list. There are carers who are in the process of resigning and others who have not been able to care for children. Work is being undertaken (as will be explained below) to ensure that the approved list and vacancy list reflects a true picture of households who are available and ready to take placements.

Recruitment activity

There is significant variance in the reporting of recruitment activity across the UK with some smaller authorities reporting low numbers of enquiries ranging to some larger authorities receiving more than 1,000 enquiries in the reporting year to March 2022.



The Local Authorities with the highest conversion rate of enquiries to approval range across the country. Southwark, with 14% of enquiries converting to approval could focus on increasing the quality along with the number of enquiries received to foster.

Local context

Over 2022/23 there has been a renewed focus and scrutiny on the performance of the Fostering Service. This has followed the introduction of a new PowerBI dashboard to monitor the performance of the teams in the service based on refreshed datasets and a focus on embedding a new process to tighten the tracking of the vacancy rate in our approved carer cohort.

Regular performance reporting in the service includes:

- Supervisory social work visits
- Unannounced visits
- DBS and medicals
- Vacancy rate and unavailable spaces
- Management supervision of cases

The addition of performance management tools for the service has created a significant increase in the performance of Supervising Social Workers to 78% in April 2023 in visits and for a similar amount in annual reviews.

Compliance in relation to annual reviews being undertaken and also those returning to the fostering panel has been a focus of performance over the last year. Challenges have included changes to the staff team, lack of a panel administrator and annual reviews being undertaken by an outsourced Fostering Reviewing officer service. There is confidence that the first two areas have been addressed and will show improvement in the next year. There is exploration on insourcing the Fostering Reviewing Officer

role to be located within the Quality Assurance Service to ensure independence. This is expected to occur in 2023-24.

STAYING PUT AND SUPPORTED LODGINGS

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 25 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 March 2023 there were 71 young people in staying put arrangements, this is an increase from 56 on the 31 March 2022. 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 Staying Put guidance and the Staying Put policy 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 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.

The assessment, training and support of Support Lodgings Hosts also became a responsibility of the Fostering Service in 2022-23 to provide accommodation and support to young people over the age of 18. Supported Lodgings Hosts are offered some of the Skills to Foster to understand the context of the young person and will support them to develop their practical skills and emotional maturity to move on to independent living as a young adult.

It is important to note that although supported lodgings in some ways is similar to fostering, the important difference is it is intended to meet the needs of young adults, with the focus being more on living an independent life and the young people being placed will already have been assessed as having reached a level of maturity to manage in a setting where they will be expected to mainly take responsibility for themselves. As they are over 18 they do not fall under the fostering regulations, however as good practice Southwark has decided that supported lodgings placements are supervised at the same frequency as Staying Put arrangements.

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 Corporate Parenting and the Director for Children and Families.

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

REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR 2021-22

This section reviews the commitments to improvement within the service stated in the Annual Report 2021-22 and reflects on the progress made during 2022-23. A new Service Manager joined the Fostering Service in 2022. They have been on maternity leave since September 2022 and will return in September 2023, the interim Service Manager has taken the lead role in developing and driving the plan together with the team managers, supervising social workers and other internal stakeholders, plus foster carers in the Service.

SERVICE PRIORITIES 2023-24:

Ensure that the voice of children is heard in all cases brought to the fostering panel and that this is also present in the notes of Supervisory Visits.

Feedback from 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.

Regularly audit cases within the Fostering Service to understand and improve the service. Including deep dive audits of cases of a particular theme (such as teenagers or placements with unplanned endings). An audit tool specific to fostering cases has been developed and auditing has commenced.

Exit interviews to be introduced for all foster carers upon resignation. This is a responsibility of the carer recruitment manager who will be best placed to consider the learning from these interviews and use this knowledge to develop the recruitment approach.

Exit interviews have not always been undertaken, however, systems have been developed to systematically follow up when resignations occur to ensure that the interview is undertaken, the Fostering panel notified 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.

The service is using Microsoft Forms more frequently in its day to day operations to capture feedback, measure quality, progress and experience. These are widely used in foster carer training, panel attendance will be introduced into Annual Review of Approval processes.

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.

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 and has been achieved for a majority of the established workforce and will continue in 2023-24.

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

The fortnightly group supervision sessions, also referred to as Practice Group Meetings have become an established integral feature of the Fostering Team's schedule. They offer an opportunity for reflective supervision and feedback and is a key forum for the exchange of ideas and dissemination of information from the management to the teams.

The policy of ensuring 1-1 and group supervision is embedded in practice.

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

Short-term placement stability has increased by one percentage point to 11%, which is two percentage points higher than 2021-22. When looking at the comparison of data in Q3, children with an open episode of care at the end of the quarter with three or more placement in the last 12 months for London and our statistical neighbours was 8%. The range from 2% to 19% (excluding City of London), would place Southwark 23rd in London, 10th (out of 11) in our statistical neighbour group.

Long-term placement stability (children looked after aged under 16 looked after for 2.5 years and have been in the same placement for 2+ years) decreased by four percentage points to 65%. This is two percentage points lower than the Q3 London comparator data, and six percentage points lower than our statistical neighbours (71%). The range from 33% to 100% (excluding City of London), would again place Southwark 23rd in London and 9th (out of 11) in our statistical neighbour group.

Work is ongoing with the clinical, care and Fostering services to improve the practice in relation to placement stability meetings including a review of the processes. In addition to this the Access to Resources Team (ART) is working with Social Workers across the service to improve the timing and quality of referrals to ensure that there is sufficient time and information to identify the best foster carer to be matched with the child.

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.

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.

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 March 2022 and improvement from 31 March 2021.

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

Continue to embed the Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving across children's services

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, there is now an established procedure of referring to the connected persons team that ensures that checks are undertaken promptly and that QA of work is able to be undertaken routinely.

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.

The referral system and processes implemented within the Fostering Panel have ensured that assessments are tracked closely to ensure that extensions are able to be listed at panel prior to the placement becoming illegal that assessments are completed and presented to panel within timescale.

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 is happening more frequently for both connected persons and kinship carers, however it is acknowledged that there are still cases in backlog that will need to be presented at the fostering panel. There has been improved management reporting and oversight which has identified case and this is expected to consistently happen from 2023-24.

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.

There are a number of themes identified as reasons for non-completion of some TSDs

- **Language:** English not being first language is a barrier to some of the carers completing their TSD
- **Connected carers:** appear to struggle to complete in given timescale or attend training
- **Employment:** Foster Carers working status can sometimes appears to be a barrier
- **Not engaging in training:** A number of carers have not engaged with training

It is expected to improve TSD completion through the following means;

- *Reiterate the importance of the TSD at the recruitment/ assessment stage.*
- *Supervising Social Worker to better support Foster Carers in their visits to complete their standards (and utilise the Family Support Worker if necessary).*
- *Highlighted TSD progress in Annual reviews and reports when the carer returns to the fostering panel.*
- *Timescales have been given to carers to complete the training*

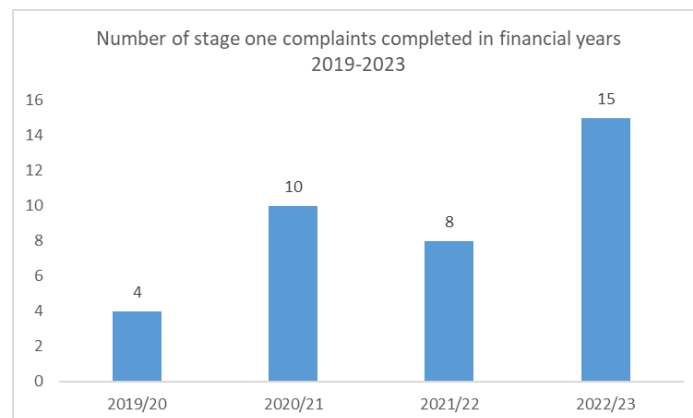
The Service continues to address this with carers on a group and individual basis. Some of the connected carers have been resistant to undertaking the TSDs and need specific support to encourage their participation.

Implement the Life Story app CaringLife app and programme across the services.

The timeliness of life-story work for children was an area that the 2022 Ofsted inspection commented on as needing to improve. Following a pilot of the CaringLife app, a programme that enables the easy and safe storage of memories of children this will be introduced as standard practice for all looked after children. Work will be undertaken to train and support Foster Carers to fully utilise this service for the benefit of children and young people in their care.

COMPLAINTS

The Fostering Service reviews complaints received about the service and uses these to inform service development. Over the last four financial years there has been a varying number of stage one complaints with an increase in these in the last year:



The complaints received over 2022/23 mostly relate to either decisions made by the service or wider Children's Social Care or are financial in nature.

Of the fifteen complaints made in the last financial year, ten were upheld or partly upheld. Learning for the service includes ensuring adherence to internal policies and procedures as well as clear, open communication with carers.

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.

Southwark Fostering Panel Annual Report

April 2022 – March 2023

Introduction

This report covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, providing details of the Fostering Panel activity over the twelve month period. The primary functions of the fostering Panel is to:

- Recommend the approval of prospective foster carers including the terms of their approval, i.e. the type of foster care they can provide.
- Recommend the approval of foster carers after the foster carer's first and third annual review, or after a review following complaints having been expressed, or allegations made, about the quality of care provided by foster carers.
- Provide a quality assurance role.

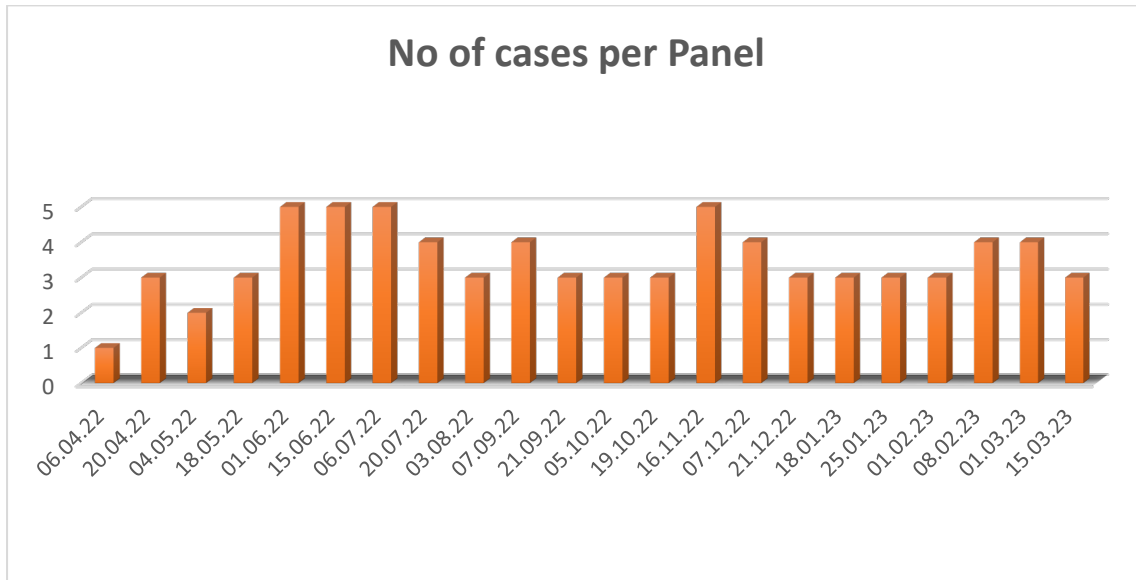
This period has seen a new Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator appointed in quick succession. These were major changes presenting some hiccups, however the Service did not falter in ensuring Panel continued to function in line with Regulations and National Minimum Standards. Panel Members have remained committed to ensuring Southwark children receive the best care possible from those charged with delivering their day to day care.

Panel meetings and membership

Fostering Panels sit twice per month, on the first and third Wednesday, with the availability to add or cancel panels as required. Panels continue to be held virtually and more recently transitioning from Zoom to a Microsoft Teams platform. Panel Members and attendees are now used to the virtual process, which is much in line with a number of other local authorities as virtual panels are regarded as cost effective and convenient. A number of Supervising Social Workers (SSW) take the opportunity to join the meeting from the Foster Carers' homes, so they are supported throughout the process. Feedback received from attendees has been positive.

The introduction of a reflective period at the end of each Panel has provided a safe space to discuss any feelings or issues about the cases presented to panel that day. Panel Members make good use of this period and discussion often continue for longer than the allotted time.

There have been 22 panels held over the reporting period out a potential 23 (excluding Christmas) hearing 76 cases with an average of 3 cases per panel. The average number of cases that could be held on a virtual panel largely depends on the type and complexity of cases as some require more discussion time than others. This is to ensure Panel has sufficient time to carefully consider each case with a suitable break in between cases and screen time during the course of the day.



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. Panel require 5 members to be quorum, however, 6 members sit on each Panel to ensure quoracy is maintained if a Panel Member cannot attend on the day, or the internet fails.

There are currently 15 Panel Members on the central list. Although recruitment took place last year circumstances changed for two of the newly recruited members who were then unable to join the panel and two members had to take a break for personal reasons. Availability of agency members has been a challenge at times as Panel cannot sit without a social worker with three years' experience. It is therefore now likely that recruitment will need to take place in the near future.

Panel Advisor

The Panel Advisor role is not a requirement under current Regulations, but is an asset to Panel. The Panel Advisor provides advice when needed, which is always much appreciated by Panel Members. The current Panel Advisor has been in post since July 2022, and is responsible for quality assuring all paperwork to be presented to panel ensuring the right information is available. She takes a strengths based approach when providing direct feedback to Social Workers, which is well received and has also served to increase their understanding of Fostering Regulations and report timescales.

Panel Administrator

The Panel Administrator is a crucial role as is responsible for the effective functioning of the Panel. This includes organising the panel rota, agenda, paperwork and minute distribution, as well as managing the virtual panel and minute taking on the day. The previous Panel Administrator, left at the end of December for pastures new and after a difficult few months where other minutes takers filled in our current Administrator was recruited to the post. The fact that Panel has been able to function as efficiently as it does, is due to our Administrator who hit the ground running and has remained calm throughout.

Panel Members Appraisals

Panel Members appraisals were completed in January 2023. Panel Members feedback is that they continue to enjoy sitting on panel and remain fully committed to their role. They commented positively on the diversity of the Panel and how its members work well together. Examples provided were that all voices were heard and even if they disagree everyone remains respectful. They were open to attending any training that would benefit their role, but all felt that joint training with social workers would increase understanding of each other's roles.

Panel training

Kinship Care and LGBTQ+ training were the most requested amongst Panel Members. The latter in the form of an introductory workshop was delivered in April, however not everyone could attend. Based on recent cases Panel is of the view that more in depth LGBTQ+ training would be important for the service as well as Panel Members. It would improve assessments and increase awareness, particularly for foster carers in order to support young people around sexuality and gender identity, including non-binary. Panel would also like to see the provision of a booklet with information and support organisations for Social Workers and Foster Carers around key issues that impact young people today.

Panel Members were provided with login details to access the on line training portal used by Foster Carers, where they can access GDPR and Safeguarding training. Learning material in the form of articles continue to be shared with, and between Panel Members as part of their ongoing development.

Panel activity throughout the year

The Fostering Panel met on 22 occasions out of 23 expected, between April 2022 and March 2023. One panel was cancelled as only one case was listed, which was moved to the next panel. Panel activity highlighted that cases were sometimes withdrawn after being booked for Panel as paperwork was not ready. An example involved five additional panels were arranged to hear a backlog of reviews, however these did not take place for a variety of reasons including late papers and internal service changes.

The table 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.

Type of cases presented	2021-2022	2022-2023
Reg 27 Kinship Approval	16	17
Reg 25 extension	12	16
Family Link Approval	1	1
General Household Fostering Approval	8	6
Review Following Standard of Care	3	5
Return to Panel at Panel's request	0	7
Return to Panel Following First Review	5	8
Return to Panel Following First Review – Kinship	1	7
Fostering Match	5	2
Return to Panel Following First Review Family Link	0	1
Three Yearly Annual Review	2	6
Deregistration	0	0
Total	53	76

Fostering approvals

There has been 6 general fostering household assessments presented to panel compared with 8 presented in 2021/22, and an increase of 1 Kinship Care assessments from 16 in 2021-22 to 17 during this period. Kinship Care assessments have been the highest number of assessments completed over the course of the year.

Some of the temporarily approved Kinship Carers presented to panel seeking full approval do so in order to ensure placements remain regulated while awaiting Court dates for SGO hearings, which are often delayed. Panel is required to ensure that those temporarily approved as Kinship Carers understand the role when seeking full approval. Due to the recent workshops assessing social workers are now consulting with Supervising Social Workers who become involved at an earlier stage, ensure checks are started and that they fully understand the requirements of the role.

Family Link

Only one Family Link short break carer was assessed for approval this year, which is surprising due to the level of need. It is possible that alternative means of providing this service is now in operation, but Panel has not been made aware of this. The provision of short breaks for children with a high level of complex health and disability need, not only provides parents with the chance to recharge their batteries, but the opportunity for children to attend a range of activities and socialise in a way they may not normally.

Fostering Matches

Unless adoption is the care plan for a child, children can achieve permanency through placements with Kinship Carers and long term matching with Foster Carers. Young people over 14 year olds are matched with carers via the Statutory Review process and younger children are presented to the Fostering Panel. It is therefore very disappointing that only two children have been presented to be matched with their Foster Carers this year. A 7 year old was matched with a Southwark foster carer who had cared for her for year and the other an 11 year old placed for just under two years with an independent fostering agency carer. It is unclear why only 2 children have achieved permanency 5 matches took place in 2020-2021, during the pandemic when there was a shortage of staff.

Fostering households 1st Year Reviews

It is a regulatory requirement that all Foster Carers 1 Annual Reviews are presented to Panel for consideration of their continued approval, following their first year of practice. There has been a slight increase in the number of 1 Reviews presented to Panel for general fostering households from 5 to 8, as 3 were out of timescale reviews. Likewise 7 Kinship carers returned to Panel following 1st reviews, 6 of which were outside the required timescale.

Southwark commissions an independent agency to conduct its Foster Carer Reviews, which provides an additional level of scrutiny of Foster Carers practice. The overall quality of reviews have been graded as 'Excellent' and 'Good'. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) noted the reviews completed outside the required timescale in the review minutes. The reviews were conducted by different FIRO's, however they all provided sufficient information to support Panel's understanding of the key issues. There are areas that Panel believe warrant fuller discussion with both Foster Carer and SSW. These include Training and Development Plans, which are often not presented with the paperwork for the review and may be the reasons there is often no real challenge when minimal training has been attended. Focus generally appears to be on the TSDs rather than on what core training should be completed within the first year. Similarly, a question on record keeping takes place, however Panel has noted that not all Foster Carers are completing either regular logs or using the on line system. When Foster Carers do provide logs they appear to be given the opportunity to do this in different ways with no clear plan of how they will progress to completing electronic logs.

The majority of the reviews in terms of the overall quality and analysis was either 'excellent' or 'good'. This is because of the detailed discussion around the care of children placed and a clear action plan and recommendation. An example of Panel feedback can be seen below:

'The ARA was well-written and not repetitive. It was shorter than other ARAs but there were fewer issues. Everything was addressed.'

'This was a comprehensive review and covered the challenges for the FC and risks for the child. It was very open and honest.'

Two were 'adequate' with Panel feedback stating:

'The report was devoid of professional curiosity. It covers all the areas but in a superficial way. There was no challenge of the SSW.'

'The lack of (named child's) voice was a matter of concern. His views were not reflected. The Child's Social Worker could have provided information for the review.'

Foster Carers have generally provided positive feedback following their annual reviews.

All returns to Panel 1 year reviews were recommended for continued approval during this period, and ratified by the ADM.

Three Yearly Fostering Reviews

During this reporting period 6 cases returned to Panel following their 3 year reviews. This presents an opportunity to praise Foster Carers for their service to Southwark children, ensure they are receiving the support they need to fulfil their role and challenge those Foster Carers who have not attended training or worked well with professionals. Panel was pleased to meet some excellent Foster Carers, who were clearly committed and had successfully cared for a number of children since approval. These carers were confident, nurturing and able to advocate for children. They also worked well with professional. Panel discussed gaps in training and highlighted its importance.

Regulation 25, Extensions

There has been a steady increase in Regulation 25, requests for an 8 week extensions. This continues to largely be due to outstanding checks, primarily medical and DBS checks. There have been 16 during this period, an increase of 4. It is clear that Social Workers have a better understanding of the timescales and the requests are made to prevent placements becoming unlawful. Unfortunately it has not completely eradicated unlawful placements as some final reports for approval are still presented to Panel outside the 24 week timescale. It is hoped that now SSWs are involved at any earlier stage there will be fewer such requests. The quality of the Regulation 25 reports are generally good.

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

Panel has heard 5 Standards of Care cases concerning Foster Carers practice. These cases have ranged from concerns about a Kinships carer's ability to care for her very vulnerable granddaughter as the carer was not working with professionals, to shouting at a child, swearing at a child, restraining a child and a dispute between two Foster Carers aired publicly. All carers attended Standards of Care meetings and an action plan was completed. The Local Authority has generally recommended continued

approval and panel has felt able to support this recommendation, On two occasions Panel deferred making a recommendation in order to obtain more information.

During the course of the year Panel also requested 7 Foster Carers return following specific action. This was usually in relation to a failure to attend training or the need for more information such as health information. Panel was able to recommend continued approval following their return to Panel.

Fostering Panel's role in Quality Assurance

Panel provides feedback on the quality of reports presented to Panel. The quality has continued to be variable ranging from 'excellent' to 'Adequate'. "Excellent' and 'Good' reports provide a clear account of the applicant, their abilities and motivation. It makes clear their strengths and vulnerabilities, and provides an analysis leading to the recommendation being made.

A number of Form F and Kinship Care assessments have contained detailed information that provide a clear history of the carer and skills they will bring to the caring role. There often needs to be more detailed information about how carers will manage challenging behaviour, their support network and how they will promote an understanding of difference and diversity, including sexual orientation and gender identity. There continues to be gaps in relation to direct feedback from children within households and children being cared for. Although there are more Child Social Workers providing feedback for Foster Carer reviews, there is an absence of direct feedback from children themselves, despite the tools available to gather such information.

Standards of Care investigations are generally thoroughly investigated, however there is a delay in returning such cases to Panel, often resulting in anxiety for carers when returned after a long gap.

Foster Carers feedback on the Panel process

Foster Carers and Social Workers attending Panel are asked to provide feedback on their experience. Foster carers can find attending Panel daunting and need to be prepared by the SSWs. When asked whether they felt adequately prepared for panel, 17 responded 'yes' 4 'no' and 3 'somewhat'.

- No paperwork was received in advance of Panel.
- I wasn't expecting the questions I was asked were the same as in the assessment.
- I felt as though this time round we weren't prepped enough through no fault of our new SSW but there were many things we weren't aware we had to do/ get organized and feel that might have reflected us poorly on the panel.
- The time to be prepared for panel felt rushed to me. This was because I had moved and was getting over Covid. In the event of a move it would be good to

allow carers to feel settled in their new homes and have time to adjust to the changes for at least six months.

The majority of Foster Carers have provided positive feedback on their Panel experience and continue to find Panel Members welcoming and their views are heard. Overall experience of attending Panel resulted in 10 carers describing their experience as 'excellent' 8 'good' and 2 'adequate'.

- 'The panel was receptive and warm. It felt like a positive experience. I was nervous going into the Panel, but I was calmer than I thought I would be.'
- 'It's a worrying time going to Panel, but I was put at ease and it went well.'
- 'There were courteous and polite and explained who they were to me. The Chair explained everything very clearly.'

Some Foster carers found the process difficult:

- 'My question at the beginning is, I understand this is the LA and they have a process to follow, but there are areas of that process that do not concern the client. It was like a template that was already in place, and some of this was useless. This was my concern throughout the whole process. The Panel was Chaired well and Panel were respectful, however the process was poor because the reasons for going to Panel were not properly explained to us.'
- 'It was an uncomfortable situation. We were discussing allegations and to things do with my children. I feel completely unsupported and Panel contributed to that. It felt as though they were suspicious and I felt awful. I feel bitter about how I was treated.'
- 'The assessing Social Worker (ASW) was quite supportive. When Panel is online it is very different from in person; it is harder to judge the mood and it is very clinical. It was fine. I wasn't nervous as I have been to Panel before. They made me feel welcome.'

Social Workers Feedback

There has been limited feedback from Social Workers, despite best efforts by the Panel Administrator to obtain it.

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

- 'The Panel Members ask good questions which are appropriate.'
- 'Some questions asked are covered in the report.'

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. Quality assurance feedback themes are discussed and action assigned and reviewed at the next meeting. An example is how the LA had followed up Panel's concern about the increase in Reg 25s and unlawful placements due to outstanding medical and DBS checks. The Service Manager and Panel Advisor had met with Social Workers to confirm the Regulations 27 process and timescales. Action was also being taken to ensure checks were started earlier and allocation to Supervising Social Workers. The Panel Advisor also meets with individual Social Workers to provide feedback on their report and/or presentation at Panel.

Areas for development in 2021-2022. Response to areas for development

<p>Kinship Care assessments should be presented to Panel within the 16 week timescale rather than requiring an additional 8 week extension. Panel would like DBS and medical checks to begin earlier, before transfer to the Fostering Service to prevent delay.</p>	<p>The Service Manager and Panel Advisor have delivered workshops for Social Workers on the Regulation 27, process and timescale and the importance of alerting the Fostering Service at an early stage so that checks can begin. A system is now in place to involve SSW at an earlier stage so checks can be started.</p>
<p>A plan in place to increase the numbers of return to Panel following Foster Carers' First Annual Review during. (actioned)</p>	<p>There has been a 40% increase in cases returning to panel following the first review compared with the previous year. It is also acknowledged that some of these carers will have become Special Guardians therefore not need to return to Panel.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>It is clear that Supervising Social Workers are becoming involved at an earlier stage and these discussions are beginning to take place.</p>
<p>Where applicable, matching reports need to clearly state that funding has been agreed.</p>	<p>Southwark has made it clear that funding will never prevent a child achieving permanency.</p>
<p>Foster Carers ability to prepare a young person for independence, and what this</p>	<p>Foster Carers are preparing young people for independence, but young</p>

will mean to a young person remaining out of borough.	people are also choosing to remain with Foster Carers under 'Staying Put' arrangements.
Children's views should be 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.	There has been a slight increase in this area, but remains an area for development.
All reports should provide sufficient detail and evidence an appropriate level of analysis and clear recommendation.	The data has clearly shown that the majority of reports were rated 'good'.
Relevant ex-partners are consulted, or reasons why not stated and information about them triangulated from other sources.	The need for this consultation and triangulation is better understood.
All children's Social Workers' contribute to Foster Carers reviews, as this is still not universal and should be.	There is still minimal progress in this area, even though SSW seek this information early.
All Learning & Development profiles need to be fully completed with detail of learning from training attended and presented to Panel.	This is still a work in progress with a limited number of reports completed and shared with panel.
Health Disclosures were commonly used during the pandemic, where appropriate Foster Carers should be asked to attend their GPs for medicals.	There are still some carers with outstanding medicals.
Family Link assessments can prevent the need for a child to be Accommodated.	There have been no Family Link assessments, so it is unclear whether this support is being provided in another way.
Panel to ensure it seeks information about Foster and Kinships Carers understanding of equality, diversity and identity, including sexual orientation and gender identity.	Social Workers are now including more detailed information in their reports, but panel needs to ensure these questions are asked if the information is missing.
Panel will work to ensure it remains non-judgemental in discussion and when considering recommendations.	Panel is focused on remaining non-judgemental during discussion and

	is unafraid to challenge if this is observed in others.
Panel to seek confirmation that the local authority will support Kinship Carers to meet the needs of children in their care where the NMS would suggest there is a gap.	Panel is aware that the Local Authority is providing additional support for Kinship Carers, including training to help them meet the needs of looked after children.

Areas for development in 2023-2024:

SSW to ensure all Foster Carers have an updated Learning and Development Plan, with Core training and relevant training to support the care of children in placement, together with learning outcomes.	
FIROs should be provided with Learning and Development profiles prior to Foster Carer reviews. Southwark's training programme should be made available to FIROs in order for more meaningful discussions on training can take place and new training added to the action plan.	
Southwark to clarify expectations around the method and frequency of recordings for all Foster Carers', though the latter may vary, it should be clearly understood. Foster Carers' who struggle with the on line system should be supported in learning how to use this.	
A clear timescale should be expected for all Standards of Care investigations, that does not involve the police. These cases should be presented to Panel no later than 8 weeks after the Foster carers Review.	
All Foster Carers Reviews should be presented to Panel 8 weeks after completion.	
Panel would welcome support plans in relation to matches to help identify current and future support needs.	
All reports should clearly state the Local Authority's recommendation.	

Conclusion

Panel continues to applaud the hard work of the Fostering Service, particularly as it is aware of the many changes in staffing. Despite some cases being withdrawn it is clear that all staff are working hard to ensure Foster Carers are supported to care for the children entrusted in their care. It is clear that Foster Carers appreciate the support they receive from their SSW, even those returning to Panel under Standards of Care.

Panel continues to be satisfied with the standard of practice and the quality of the majority of reports presented to it. It is pleasing that the areas of development raised during the previous year has been satisfactorily followed up. The increase in understanding of the Kinship Care process will hopefully lead to fewer requests for Regulation 25 extensions and unlawful placements. It is hoped that the new areas for development will be discussed and addressed in due course.