

Fostering Annual Report 2023/24



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Purpose of the Annual Report

Southwark Fostering Service’s Annual report provides an overview of the functioning of the service from 1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024; the assessment, supervision and support provided to carers, and the impact this has had for the children and young people in our care. The purpose of this report is to inform the Public, Elected Members and the Council of progress and developments during this period and considers the strategic development plans for the year ahead.

Background

Southwark’s Fostering Service operates within the regulatory framework provided by The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 made under the Children Act 1989 and Care Standards Act 2000; and the National Minimum Standards (2011) for Fostering Services. The service also takes account of other childcare legislation such as the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 that underpin our practice.

Southwark Council is committed to creating a fairer future for our most vulnerable children and families. Our mission is to *Put Children First* and *Keep Families Strong*. However, for 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. We understand that when a child enters care, it is one of the most important and significant changes in their life and it is crucial that their needs are met and that we offer safe, stable and loving care in a family environment that they feel a part of. Our overarching aim is to give children and young people the best possible childhood, where their voice is heard, and as a network, we empower them to maximise their life opportunities and become valued members of society.

Through our Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2022-24 we have sought to increase placement choice and stability for children to ensure that we are able to offer individualised and reparatory care. We aim to recruit 15 extra carers per year and increase our in-house placement offer in or as close to Southwark as possible, reducing the need for external providers and residential settings. For our existing carers, we offer robust support and development from a dedicated supervising social worker offering support, reflection and challenge where needed to enable high quality care. Our extensive training offer provides a range of mandatory and specialised courses and workshops to develop carers through three distinct levels to become experienced carers providing therapeutic care. Our Fostering Panel provide review and quality assurance of our work, making recommendations to our

Agency Decision Maker and remain our critical friend, providing feedback to support and develop practice.

Southwark's Fostering Service includes our Special Guardianship and Connected Carers team. The Department for Education paper 'Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love', published in 2023 highlighted the need to support both children and families particularly in kinship care. Southwark has committed to this and continues to develop this team, the assessment and long term support offer to children remaining within family and friend care.

Southwark's Sufficiency Strategy 2023–26 noted our fostering service generally has sufficient capacity to meet the needs of the under 10s locally but we need more capacity for older children, especially; unaccompanied asylum seeking young people, children on the autistic spectrum, children who are vulnerable to exploitation and may present a risk to themselves or others, children who require placements in an emergency and sibling groups of more than 2 children, in addition to older children who require more complex care when coming into care and when stepping down from residential care settings. Furthermore, we need parent and child placements that can take couples, fathers and allow fathers access.

Children in Foster Care in Southwark

On a national level, as of 31st March 2023 there was a 2% increase in children looked after from 2022 – 23 to 83,840 and a 29% increase in Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).¹ There were 57,020 children living with 43,405 fostering families, accumulating 68% of children looked after by Local Authorities². The national crisis requiring more foster families to care for our children remains.

As of the 31st March 2024, there were **397** children in Southwark's care in contrast to the national increase this is a reduction from **421** on 31 March 2024; **167** children were placed in foster care placements, **94** placed with a friend or relative, **102** in IFAs and **34** in other settings, including; independent fostering agencies, residential settings, foster to adopt placements, placement with parents, semi-independent provisions, as well as children on remand or in NHS settings.³

¹ Government Paper 'Children Looked After in England, November 2023. [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/adoption-reporting-year-2023)

² Fostering Statistics, Fostering Network. 2023. [Fostering statistics | The Fostering Network](#)

³ Fostering Data Returns. Southwark. 2024

The below table shows the comparison between March 2023 and 2024 annual reports:

	2023 ⁴	2024 ³
Children in Care	421	397
Children placed with foster carers (IFA + in-house)	291	272
In-house Foster Placements	115	107
Placed with Family and Friends	67	63
Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)	109	102
Long Term Matches	2	8

This shows a decrease in children coming into care, a decrease in placements with in house foster carers and a decrease in placements with Family and Friends Carers, however an increase in percentage of our placements with Family and Friends Carers. In 2023, in house foster placements nationally made up 46%, 19% were Family and Friends Carers and 35% IFAs. As of 31st March 2023, Southwark had 40% in house, 20% family and friends and 37% with IFAs. As of 31st March 2024, Southwark had 39% in-house placements, 23% family and friends and 38% with IFAs. Whilst there are a lower total number of children placed in IFA's than the previous year, the percentage remains high. We are striving to increase our in house placement capacity and sufficiency.

Long Term Matches:

Creating stability and permanency for children is a key priority for Southwark. Last year we aimed to complete more matches than the two previous years combined, which was achieved. Southwark Fostering Service work closely with the Safeguarding and Support and Care Service to complete matching reports that are presented to our independent Fostering Panel for quality assurance, scrutiny and recommendations before finally being presented for approval to our Agency Decision

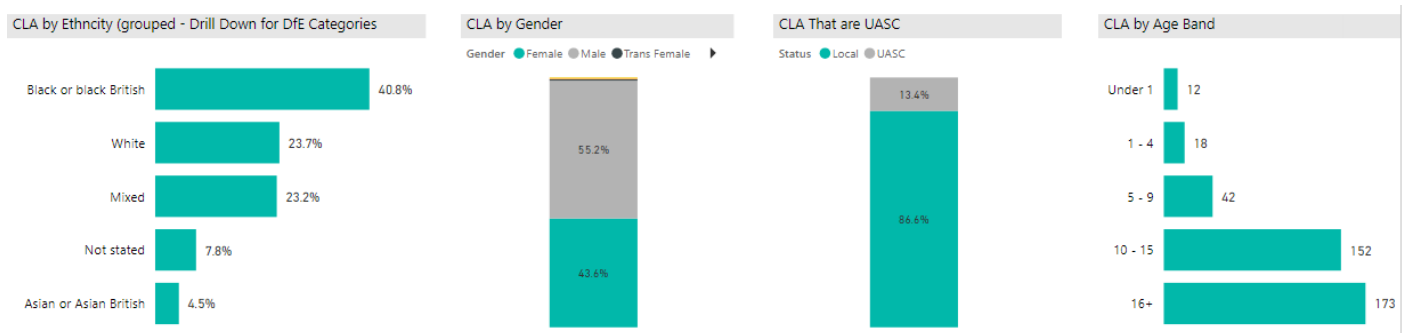
⁴ Fostering Annual Report 2023

Maker (ADM). Children over 14 years require a report and support plan to be completed which is presented to our ADM however do not need to attend panel. A new support plan has been developed to consider children's needs now and in the future, which can be consistently reviewed to ensure adequate, relevant and timely support to avoid difficulties and breakdowns, and increase the likelihood of permanency and stability.

Southwark have recruited a Service Manager Permanency Lead role to improve practice, ensuring greater permanency, stability and outcomes for children. It is expected we will see a greater number of long term matches next year.

In the Fostering Service, the duty team works hard to consider matching at an early stage, and by appointing a dedicated in-house Fostering Placements Officer, alongside our supervision and support, we hope to continue increase placement stability and permanency for children and young people at an early stage.

Demographics of Children in Care:



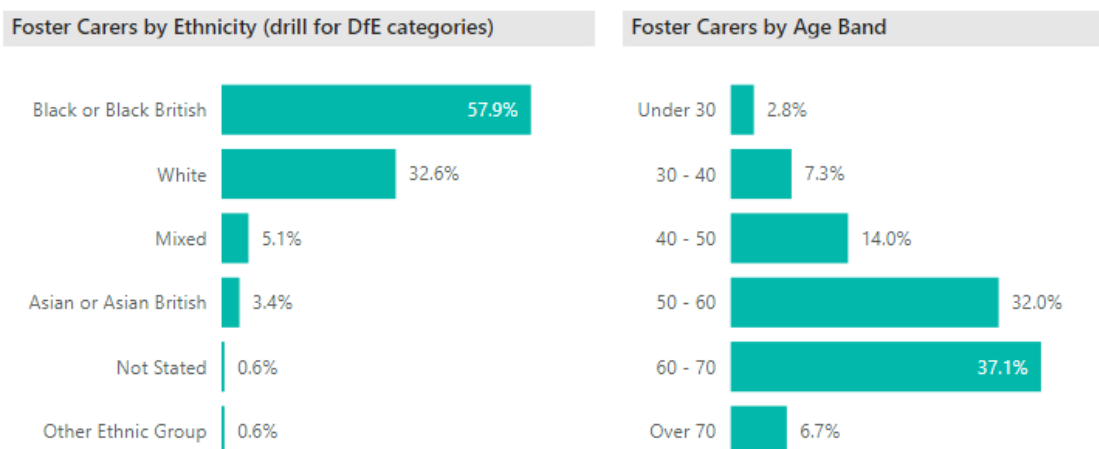
Southwark's Provision of Foster Carers

As of **31st March 2024**, Southwark had **167** fostering households with up to **304** placements available, which is a decrease in both areas since **2023**. This includes a decrease in all placement types offered to children, including those placed with family and friends, which was **44**. There were **5** newly recruited carers showing an increase from last year and **49** deregistration's, showing a small decrease in those leaving³. This is not sufficient however to support the needs of the children and young people in our care and therefore greater recruitment and retention of carers is necessary. The majority of registrations ending are kinship carers who care for children for a short period who then return home.

The 304 figure advising of placement availability assumes 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 who can share a room 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). Our return data shows we have **73** vacant spaces and **64** unavailable³. These include 15 spaces within the Family Link Team which is located with the All Age Disabilities Service. These figures rely on social worker's accurately recording and consistently updating foster carer files. Further analysis and staff training is required in order to accurately reflect and record placement capacity and sufficiency, to consider discrepancies in reporting and any changes required in our current carer cohort and approvals to ensure we have a fully functioning service responsive to the needs of our children and young people.

Demographics of carers:



5

This highlights diversity in our carer group that largely reflect the demographic of White and Black or Black British children that require foster placements. It identifies a smaller number of mixed carers, however this is not a reflection of our capacity to match children of mixed heritage with a caring household with mixed ethnicity, as the data shows individual ethnicity of carers, rather than the household. It identifies less Asian and Asian British carers than the population of children in care, suggesting a need to recruit a greater number of Asian and Asian British carers.

Care is taken to meet the needs of children by matching them with foster carers of the same ethnicity or a household that is reflective of their cultural and ethnic heritage however 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. As a service, we are learning more about the impact of intersectionality and the compounding disadvantages that people experience, and we are aware of

the need to consider this in the support we offer children and carers in our work and matching considerations.

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 approximately 44% 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.

Southwark's Special Guardianship and Connected Carers

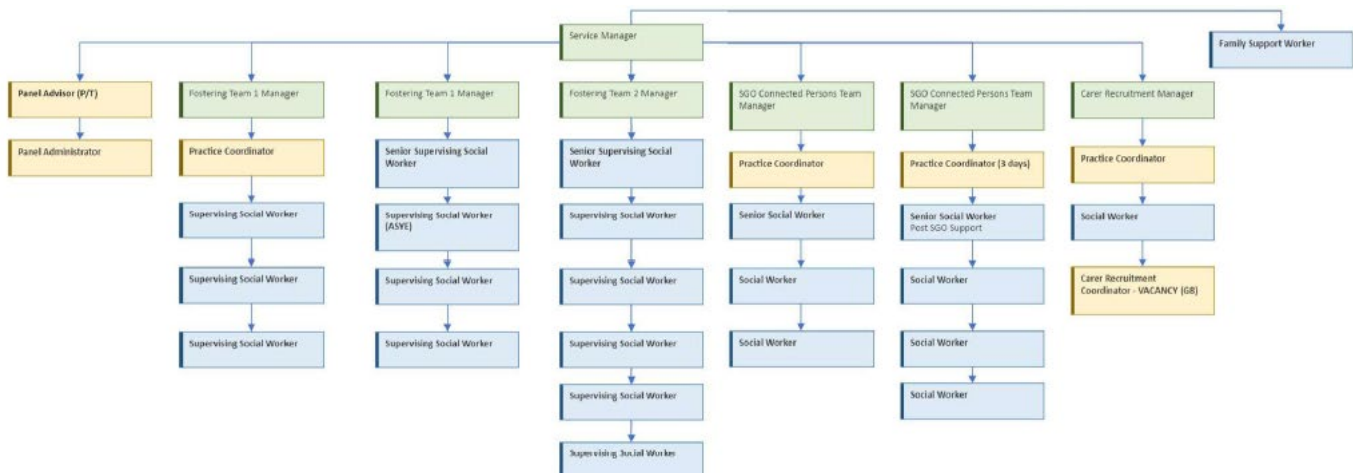
Southwark have a dedicated Special Guardianship (SG) and Connected Carers (CC) assessment and supervisory support team. Wherever possible, Southwark will assess and support children to remain within their families, when they may not be able to remain with their birth parents. The team works alongside the children's social work teams, assessing wider family and connected persons and offering supervisory social work support to temporary Regulation 24 and approved Regulation 27 carers. The team also provide advice, guidance and support to case work teams with Regulation 24/Viability assessments.

We received **81** enquiries between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. **54** assessments were completed in house and **27** outsourced to Independent Social Workers. **14** assessments did not progress due to the applicant withdrawing. There were **26** Special Guardianship relationships recorded as of 31 March 2024.³ **7** Special Guardianship Orders were made via care proceedings and **6** through private applications³. We sought **12** regulation 25 extensions and approved **8** Regulation 27 Connected Carers. This is a drastic reduction from last year, where there was a total of **41** assessments with **16** requests for extension and **17** approved as connected carers. A greater number of assessments were either negative, positive but completed of multiple family members, or the care plan for the child changes, including returning to birth parents. Continuing our positive relationship and joint working with our Safeguarding and Family Support and Assessment and Intervention colleagues is essential to share best practice during Regulation 24 and Viability assessments and feedback regarding assessment outcomes.

Fostering Service Structure and Function

The Service is comprised of:

- Recruitment Team (1 Team Manager, 1 Social Worker and 1 PT Practice Coordinator, plus access to Form F ISW assessors),
- 2 Fostering Supervisory Support teams (3 Team Managers - two job share, 2 Senior Social Workers, 11 Social Workers)
- a Family Support Worker
- Special Guardian/Connected Carer team, including assessment, support and post SG support (1.5 Team Managers, 2 Senior Social Workers, 6 Social Workers).
- The Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator support our Independent Fostering Panel (see appendix 2)



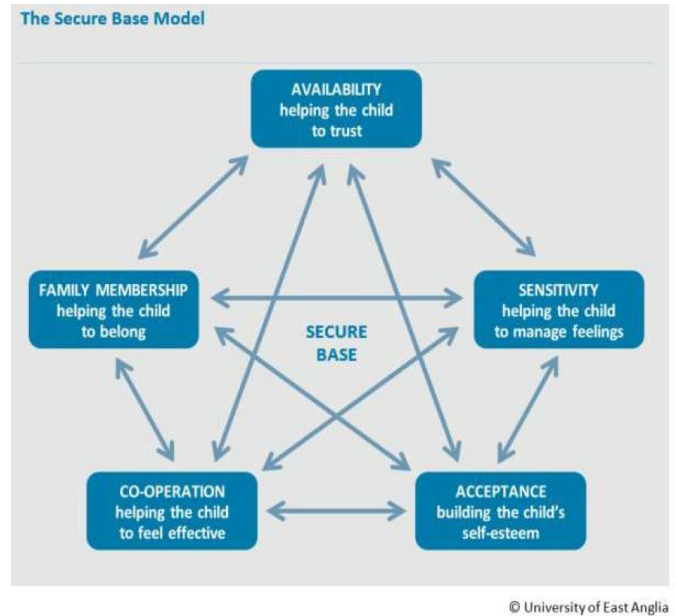
There are two positions in the Special Guardianship Team being covered by Agency staff, one covering a secondment and another we have been unable to permanently recruit to. We have an agency Marketing Officer that is co-managed across the Fostering and Communications Services in order to support our Marketing and Recruitment Strategy.⁸ A permanent Panel Advisor has been recruited to start in July 2024. Otherwise the service is fully resourced by workers on permanent contracts. Recruitment of a permanent Placement Officer is to be prioritised in the coming year to support increasing our in-house placement offer.

The Fostering service have contributed to the development of Southwark’s residential provision and recruitment of staff. We continue a close working relationship with our Access to Resources Service sharing the aim of providing more local homes for Southwark children. It is envisaged some children

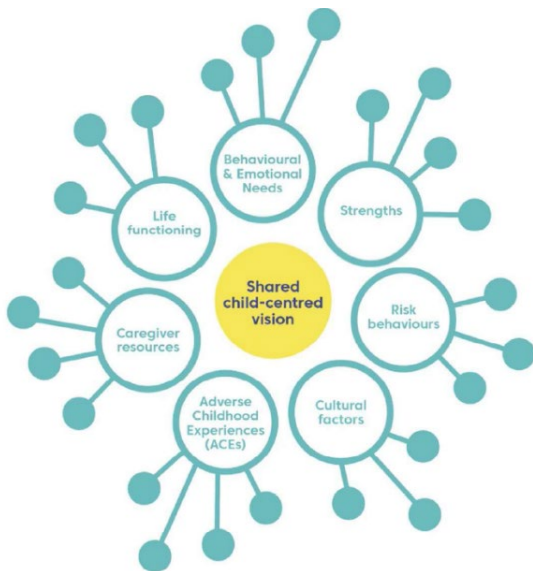
who spend time in residential care in Southwark with be linked with foster carers for respite and where children have plans to move from residential to a family setting.

Practice Framework

Southwark uses The Secure Base Model, developed by Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek that can be used with children, young people and carers with diverse needs, cultures and age groups. Many children coming into our care have had painful experiences of separation and loss, and as a result may feel insecure and find it hard to trust people, including their carers. The Secure Base Model help carers to offer individualised care and scaffolding, focusing on natural attachments, that may lead to a child’s first experience of attachment to a care giver. There may be behaviours that carers and professionals worry about and require significant understanding and considered responses to promote a sense of security, trust, support and belonging within the family unit.



This runs alongside training on Emotional Behavioural Management and Trauma-Informed Care for both staff and foster carers to ensure supervision and support to upskill carers who can provide reparative care to children.



Southwark has this year started implementing the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment tool, developed by Dr John Lyons. The multi-purpose tool enables a comprehensive assessment of needs, risks and strengths within the household, considering the whole system and outcomes to be achieved to help decision making. Our staff and foster carers have been trained in the model and have detailed guidance in considering how the differing factors and agency of those in the network can share and develop the child-centred vision, to promote and achieve positive outcomes. We plan to fully embed this in 2024-25.

Southwark has additionally adopted the Caring Life app that supports an online portal for photos and memories that can support Life Story Work and a ‘scrapbook’ for children, especially if they have experienced placement moves and changes in workers. Our Family Support Worker is supporting to implement this and ensure all foster carers are set up and able to use the technology.

Southwark is additionally developing its Life Long Links program, to support the networks of care leavers. Our Service Manager, Team Manager and a volunteer foster carer are part of the steering board to support its implementation.

Carer Recruitment and Marketing

Our Carer Recruitment team is responsible for the marketing, assessment, training and recruitment of foster carers and supported lodgings hosts. Supported Lodgings are a form of supported accommodation for young adults who are not ready to live independently for a variety of reasons. The scheme provides places for care leavers aged 18 to 25 years, they have their own room in a family home and are supported by the adult or adults in the home. They offer support and guidance to the young person where required and help them towards independence.

We recruited 6 foster carers this year, which is the same as 2023 however not in line with our target of 15 carers per year⁵, therefore increasing the number of carers recruited is a key priority for the service this coming year.

We recruited 2 further supported lodging hosts and now have 5 available to support the opportunity for children to transition into adulthood and have independence with the greater support from a family setting and environment. We seek to increase our provision of supported lodgings hosts this year and update our policies and procedures to support them.

	2023 ⁴	2024
Number of Enquiries	189	123
Number of approvals of foster carers	6	6
Number of approvals of supported lodgings hosts	3	2 ¹³

⁵ Southwark’s Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2022-24

We have improved our reporting and analysis of our carer recruitment process which has shown a significant number of enquiries that do not progress to initial visits. 48% of our initial visits progress to assessments this year, and 33% of those in assessment were approved as foster carers. On average, initial visits are made within 6 days of enquiries being made and assessments commence within 8 working days of visits being undertaken. Some assessment appear to be taking longer than the recommended 6 month timeframe, which needs greater analysis and improved practice, alongside an understanding of the reasons of those concluding at Stage 1 & 2.

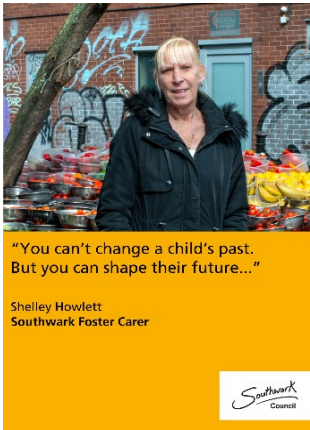
Reasons for assessments concluding without approval:

Reason	Ended	%
Health issues	1	10%
No spare room	2	20%
No response or Relevant information not provided	3	30%
Decided to go with another agency	1	10%
Progressed to Adoption	1	10%
Not ready to Foster	1	10%
Change in Circumstances	1	10%
Total	10	

Further analysis of our data, recording, reporting and practice is being undertaken, with our data transformation and service development team in order to ensure that we are maximising conversions between enquiries, visits, assessments and approvals in the coming year. We receive enquiries via our website, facebook, information meetings, from existing carers via word of mouth and follow attendance at community and council events. We run an incentive scheme for current carers and staff.

With the addition of the Marketing Officer, we have implemented a new Marketing Strategy. We completed a period of online testing with our existing and prospective marketing material to consider the style, target audiences and re-targeting methods that provided greater interest and enquiries. As a result, we have updated physical and social media marketing material, including films involving our current care leavers, carers and staff to accurately represent their voices, the service and support we provide. We hope to reach a larger number of prospective foster carers and grow our in-house fostering capacity and community.

New marketing material:



Alongside our regular recruitment information sessions, we have attended a greater number of events to promote visibility and actively recruit carers within the council and local area.

Lambeth Country Show



Goose Green Fair



Southwark Staff Expo



Fostering Fortnight stand at Tooley Street



Retention of Foster Carers and Support

Retention of foster carers is critical to the functioning of the Fostering Service. We acknowledge there will be an annual loss due to retirement, adoption, change of circumstances and de-registration.

Southwark provides a strong offer of support to carers including;

- Council Tax Relief for foster carers living in Southwark
- Monthly visits and dedicated Social Worker support and supervision
- A range of relevant, specialist and mandatory training alongside support with learning and development plans
- Monthly coffee mornings and support groups including therapeutic massages and key speakers
- Family Support Worker to offer activities, emotional support, life story work or bitesize training reminders
- Coaching and peer support from experienced carers
- Training pathway for Foster Carers and Connected Carers to enhance professional development and quality of placements linked to the opportunity to develop through 3 Levels to become therapeutic foster carers with increased financial benefits
- Support packages for complex care needs including; respite, clinical and financial support
- Annual Ball and award ceremony
- Therapeutic intervention and support from a lead clinician, medical advisor, education, and Carelink service to support children in placements and the fostering household
- Regular communication and information sharing via emails and quarterly fostering newsletters

Our Foster Carers are kept up to date with changes and developments in the service and council and have been involved in development council-wide initiatives and most recently our marketing and recruitment campaigns.

We plan in 2024 to re-establish and support the Southwark Council's Fostering Association, run by foster carers to provide a forum for support, discussion and feedback.

The Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy will be updated this year, with Marketing, Recruitment and Retention as key priorities for 2024-25.

Carer Training and Development

The Recruitment Team offers a 3 day Skills to Foster initial training course for prospective foster carers with support from the Fostering Supervising Social Workers and Team Managers. Observations are shared for reflection and analysis within their assessments. The Fostering Service Manager attends 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 and care experienced people 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 and develops our training program (Appendix 1) additionally provides bespoke one-to-one training where required alongside post approval training to support new foster carers completing their Training and Development Standards portfolios. This support is striving to improve compliance and meet targets and responsibilities in this area which is highlighted as crucial for the coming year.

Our training programme continues to assist foster carers in developing the understanding and recognition of trauma informed practice. From Skills to Foster, Emotional Behavioural Management, 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. In addition to our core program, we run training on: Appropriate Adult Roles and Responsibilities, Caring for Unaccompanied Minors, Restorative Practice, Transitions, and Transracial Placements and Trans and LGBT+ Placements. We continue to develop links with other services and can offer training with our LADO, providing a valuable addition to carers understanding of both process and standards required of them by Southwark.

For 2024, we have extended our training, development and progression through Levels 1-3 to our Connected Carers, to recognise the care they provide and support and training they need.

We continue to be an active member of the London Permanency Partners, sharing training and development opportunities for all levels of staff and foster 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.

We plan to bring back the reflective group supervision sessions that were previously held by invitation to enable foster carers to discuss a theme and learn from each other, with Supervising Social Worker and clinical practitioner facilitating.

Our Special Guardianship and Connected Carers team provide monthly support groups to Special Guardians and a duty support helpline during working hours however the service is developing, alongside our clinical practitioners, a rolling training offer including; Emotional Behavioural Management, Attachment/Secure Base and Trauma-Informed Care. This is aimed at supporting and enhancing the assessments of Special Guardian's as well as offering support and training post order to avoid difficulties and breakdowns, and increase stability and permanency for children within their families.

The Service is reviewing our post-Special guardianship support offer alongside our current Special Guardianship cohort via focus groups to identify support specific to collective themes based on their experiential feedback.

Southwark also support Connected Carers to apply for Special Guardianship Orders if appropriate to support greater permanency and stability for children with less intervention from the Local Authority. The Fostering and Special Guardianship teams are continuing to work together, alongside the children's social work teams to consider the long term support plans required for children and carers in these circumstances.

Staying Put & 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 21 years if they are in education, employment or training. 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. Southwark's Staying Put Policy and Procedures were updated in September 2021 providing 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. This offers a secure base to young adults so they can continue to benefit from full family membership and remain in a family setting until they are ready for independence.

Southwark introduced a Supported Lodgings Scheme in 2022-23 and the Carer Recruitment Team became responsible for assessing, training and approving Supported Lodging Hosts. From 2024, the service has assigned a dedicated Supervising Social Worker to review and support all Staying Put and Supported Lodgings hosts alongside the duty service. Whilst this sits alongside the Fostering Service, it does not fall under Fostering Regulations and the focus is to support young adults, who will have already been assessed to have a level of maturity and independent skills, to live independently with the support of a key adult, within a homely setting.

Throughout 2023-4 we have had 75 children in Staying Put arrangements, a slight increase from 71 last year and 7 in Supported Lodgings arrangements.

Performance and 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 Fostering Service use Power BI for reporting and oversight on frequency of; visits, unannounced visits, DBS, medicals, annual reviews and case supervisions for foster and connected carers. Performance in these areas are largely consistent to last year fluctuating between 70 – 80% and is a continued area for improvement over this year to meet the 95% expectations. Performance meetings are held on a monthly basis with team managers.

Completing reviews and getting them to panel in a timely manner is still a focus for the service, which is considering the loop of good practice and quality assurance to reduce unnecessary removals from panel alongside extra panels to reduce the current backlog of cases returning. Southwark continue to consider bringing Independent Reviewing Officers in house to the Quality Assurance team to support timelines whilst maintaining independence.

The reporting system additionally helps to identify vacancies and unavailable spaces, however further analysis is required to ensure these are reflective of available spaces and sufficiency of carers, and that plans are in place where any gaps remain to be confident in our carer cohorts capacity and availability. Additionally we are reporting on training and development plans and progress, as these remain a standard and requirement that need improving, similarly to last year.

The Carer Recruitment and Special Guardianship and Connected Carers team managers complete monthly reports on performance, good practice and areas of development, which are reviewed within

meetings with the Service Manager and shared with the Head of Service. We are in the process of both teams' workflows to be updated on our mosaic recording system in order to have Power BI reporting functions to better support oversight. Over the next year, the Carer Recruitment team are focusing on improving oversight and effectiveness in marketing and recruitment in order to recruit, assess, train and approve high quality foster carers. The Special Guardianship team are ensuring that good quality timely assessments are completed, with relevant checks.

Audits have looked at the quality of assessments, visits, supervisions and timeliness of reviews. Other themes have included the quality of relationships, communication and children's/carer's experiences. An audit review was completed in February 2024, including a comparison from 2023 – 2024 audits, highlighting an improvement in the number of 'good' outcomes, one with outstanding features, a decrease in aspects requiring improvement and none reviewed as inadequate. The current audits are looking at anti-racist practice.

At least three times a year Southwark have a 'Learningfest' where audits are completed across Children's Services based on a theme, alongside a whole week of themed learning and training for staff to develop knowledge and practice. This approach has positive feedback and enables feedback and learning loops across services and the system. It is planned for foster carers to be invited to future 'Learningfest' events.

Southwark's Fostering Panel

Fostering Services Regulations (2011) and National Minimum Standards (2011) require a Fostering Panel to be constituted, chaired by an independent person. Southwark's panel advisor offers quality assurance and scrutiny on papers prepared for panel and supports the feedback loop alongside the Service Manager. Panel members include representatives from Children's Social Care and independent members with a range of experience. The panel makes recommendations about the initial and continuing approval of foster carers, reviews Standards of Care, resignations and deregistrations and matches of children for long-term foster care. They additionally have oversight over Regulation 25 extensions. Final decisions, based on the panel's recommendations, are made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADMs), Assistant Director Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting. A report detailing the activity of the Fostering Panel is included as Appendix 2.

Complaints

The Fostering Service reviews complaints received from foster carers, and uses the learning to inform service improvement and development.

Year	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Number of complaints	10	8	15	5

The number of complaints reduced this year in comparison to previous years. Out of **5** complaints, **1** progressed to stage 2. The learning from these involved prompt reimbursement of finances, ensuring standards of care processes are provided in writing, prompt multiagency meetings are held following children moving from placements and clear actions provided as well as accurate information being present in children's placement referrals.

The learning from complaints, as agreed with the complaints team, is always shared with those involved alongside managers to consider learning and development which is encouraged for discussion within group supervision settings. It is also shared with relevant services and senior management in quarterly performance meetings and annual reports to embed learning across Children and Families.

Review Service Priorities, progress through 2023/4 and plans for 2024/25

The current Service Manager returned from maternity leave in September 2023 and is tasked with developing the service, alongside the team managers, social workers and practice coordinators.

<p>Service Priority 1</p>	<p>To ensure that the voice of children is threaded through all aspects of our work to improve their experiences of care.</p> <p>To ensure families and carers are heard, so that their views shape and improve our services to support a continuous learning journey.</p>
<p>Progress through 2023/24</p>	<p>Exit interviews to be undertaken by Fostering Recruitment Team Manager and feedback shared with staff and panel for service development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Limited exit interviews completed and change of team manager delayed progress in this area.</i> <p>Microsoft Forms were introduced across the service to capture feedback, measure quality, progress and experience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Approx. 30% carers provided feedback from panel, an area for improvement</i> <p>Foster carers to support the young people in their care to participate in Speakerbox (Children in Care Council) activities and campaigns, and these to be promoted in Fostering newsletter.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Ongoing, newsletter has been revamped and shared on a 3 monthly basis to include communication about any changes, developments and activities.</i> <p><i>A new audit framework was developed specifically for fostering with the requirement of speaking to carers, social workers and reviewing recording systems. Levels of practice have seen an improvement.</i></p>
<p>Plans for 2024/25</p>	<p>Exit Interviews to be progressed by new Fostering Recruitment Team Manager and feedback shared with staff and panel for service development.</p>

	<p>Service to continue to capture feedback, measure quality, progress and experience across multiple avenues including;</p> <p>For carers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Within visits, supervisions, reviews, and panels (by allocated workers, team managers and panel chair) - Independent feedback sought following panel (via microsoft teams form), exit interviews and audits (independent TM) - Learning and outcomes from complaints to be shared with the service - Feedback from training to be shared for service development <p>For children:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supervising social workers to evidence discussions with children in visits and alongside child's social worker seek feedback for annual reviews and panel, inviting children to attend where appropriate <p>Foster carers to continue to support young people in their care to participate in Speakerbox (Children in Care Council) activities and campaigns, and these to be promoted in Fostering newsletter.</p> <p>Southwark Foster Carers Association to be set up to support reflection, support networks and communication with the service.</p> <p>Southwark foster carers and care experienced young people to continue to be part of recruitment of staff members via experienced interview panels, and considered in Skills to Foster training and support the assessment of foster carers.</p> <p>Ensure learning from complaints, feedback and reviews actively inform service delivery and continued communication of service development via email and newsletters. Ensure placement referrals are relevant, timely support packages put in place, all carers have relevant policies and procedures in writing and plans and decisions are shared in writing in a timely manner.</p> <p>To continue developing audit processes and programs with Audit Lead to exploring practice standards, quality assurance, support feedback loops and ensure consistency across the service</p>
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Service Priority 2	Maintain and further develop a stable and high-quality workforce.
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<p>Progress through 2023/24</p>	<p>Ensure all staff receive regular one-to-one management support, have a work plan, learning and development plan and have an annual appraisal.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>121 and practice group supervision is embedded in practice. Team Managers are undertaking management and coaching training to support reflection, learning and practice within supervision settings with access to clinical support in group supervision. These also support peer learning and opportunities to share service developments.</i> - <i>Social workers have access to learningfest training programs twice yearly and ongoing training via 'My Learning Source'.</i> - <i>We have had various development opportunities including Practice Coordinator, ASYE, Social Worker, Maternity and Secondment covers, Senior Social Worker and Team Manager positions available</i> - <i>Confidential Counselling service extended to panel members</i> <p>Feedback sought from social workers and supervising social workers via forms and consultation following panel and during audits.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Due to low uptake of staff members completing feedback, panel advisor also seeking and offering debrief sessions</i>
<p>Plans for 2024/25</p>	<p><u>For Staff:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review and update skills audit and training needs for the service, ensuring all new members have completed training in key practice areas - Learning, development and support plans reviewed via appraisals and monthly supervision - Continued offer of a range of training and development courses plus consideration of specialist training and support where relevant - Continued feedback sought from panel experiences - Panel Advisor to continue to offer preparation and debrief sessions where required - Panel Advisor to share learning and feedback for team managers and service manager within management meetings which are disseminated in group supervision settings <p><u>For Panel Members:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Annual Appraisals to be completed and appropriate training identified - Feedback sought following panel and training - Joint meetings with Team Managers to be introduced to share learning and expectations

	<p>All Staff and panel members to continue to have access to confidential counselling services.</p> <p>To embed our STAR adopted five pledges within the service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to promote an open and transparent culture where employees who experience/see racism or discrimination are able to raise it and expect the issue to be dealt with swiftly and fairly. • to listen to and amplify our diverse voices within our organisations on how we create an inclusive, fair and representative workplace at all levels • to work to address and prevent structural racial inequalities and structural racism within our organisation, the organisations we partner with and within the service we deliver • to champion organisations that address racial injustices and organisations that promote equality and diversity • to ensure that people of all backgrounds can rise to the top of the organisation. <p>To ensure anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice is at the heart of our practice and consider carers, children’s and staff’s experiences of intersectionality and any support required.</p> <p>Recruitment and development opportunities for staff to continue to be considered, alongside continued support and assessment of ASYEs throughout the service.</p>
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Service Priority 3	Improve placement stability of children both short and long term
Progress through 2023/24	<p>Southwark’s Long Term Stability for children currently sits at approx. 63% and children with 3 or more placement moves is approx. 13%. There is a small decline in long and short term stability for children since 2023 which was 64% for long term and 12% 3 or more moves. National averages cited in 2023 were 69% and 6% respectively , highlighting the need for greater placement stability for children.</p> <p>There has been increased joint working between ART-Fostering services including a daily morning meeting to consider all referrals, ensuring they are of sufficient quality to support a timely match to in house foster carers with any extra support packages required. Service Manager or Head of Service reviews searches completed before agreeing to external search.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>There are a greater number of children in in-house foster care</i> - <i>New placement recording system put in place for duty and anonymised searches evidences on child’s and foster carer’s files.</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>There is better recording of placement searches completed and reasons for unavailability noted</i> <p>Placement stability and support meetings have been introduced to consider challenges and support at an early stage and avoid placement breakdown</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>This has been implemented across services and are reviewed by Heads of Services prior to agreement of placement moves to increase placement stability and support with moves only taking place where necessary</i> <p>Foster carers have access to general and specialist training and support to meet the needs of our children.</p>
Plans for 2024/25	<p>Recruitment of Placement Officer to support Fostering Duty and Placements Service, alongside ART, to promote consistency and scrutiny over placement referrals, matches and ensure creative support plans available were required.</p> <p>Duty Placement Service to continue to record searches undertaken and reasons for unavailability or incapacity to support placements. Children in residential or independent placements that do not have a permanency plan to remain on fostering search list and reviewed by Fostering and Care Service Managers to support permanency planning.</p> <p>Methods of data analysis to be set up to understand limits to capacity and support/training required to support matches alongside foster carers progressing through Levels 1-3.</p> <p>Further analysis and staff training is required in order to accurately reflect and record placement capacity and sufficiency, to consider discrepancies in reporting and any changes required in our current carer cohort and approvals to ensure we have a fully functioning service responsive to the needs of our children and young people.</p> <p>Continue Placement Support Meetings, chaired by TM from Fostering or Children's Social Work teams, involving all relevant professionals and clinical support to consider expectations, challenges and support packages that are reviewed regularly to prevent breakdowns.</p>

Service Priority 4	Improve permanence outcomes and practice , particularly through long-term foster care, placements with friends and families and life story work
Progress through 2023/24	<p>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.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Fostering have continued to work alongside children’s social work teams to increase the number of children matched long term to foster carers and been successful in securing a greater number of matches this year.</i> - <i>A Matching Support Plan has been developed to consider children’s needs over the long term and how carers can meet them in order to review support required and promote permanence</i> <p>The timeliness of Life Story Work was noted as an area of improvement required in the 2022 Ofsted Inspection and the Caring Life application introduced to support gathering and storing photos.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Caring Life app rolled out across Services, with the Life Story social worker in Care alongside their practice coordinator and Fostering’s Family Support Worker to ensure all children and foster carers are linked and can upload photos and memories</i>
Plans for 2024/25	<p>Fostering Service to work alongside Permanency Leads to ensure best practice and plans for permanency are identified and progressed in a timely way.</p> <p>Matching Support Plans to be completed, alongside matching reports to be reviewed at permanency meetings and updated throughout the child’s journey, considering care required and carer’s capacity.</p> <p>Connected Carers to be provided the full training and support package available to progress through Levels 1-3 and be financially remunerated alongside this scheme.</p> <p>Supervising Social Workers and Team Managers to regularly review matching considerations in visits and through supervision, considering children’s current and future needs and carer’s current and future capacity to provide reparative care, including any support required, and professionals reviews undertaken to put this in place.</p>

	<p>All foster carers to be signed up and using Caring Life App with every child to support photos, memories and life story work, alongside contributing to children's social worker's life story work.</p> <p>Service Manager, Team Manager and volunteer foster carer to continue to be part of the steering board to support the implementation of Southwark's Life Long Links program to improve the support network for care leavers.</p>
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<p>Service Priority 5</p>	<p>Improve placement choice and sufficiency to reduce the number of children placed in residential and independent care, and those living more than 20 miles away by increasing the number of foster care placements available locally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To continue with recruitment and marketing strategy to recruit 15 additional foster carers annually and, alongside this, ensure attention is given to retention and incentives/barriers for carers to care for older children and those with more complex needs. • To grow our own fostering service to create the range and types of fostering placements required for children of all ages including; babies, complex needs, older children, respite, crisis intervention, siblings, and parent and child placements, as well as ensuring a supply of step down placements for our residential provisions.
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<p>Progress through 2023/24</p>	<p>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 2022-24 and Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2026.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>We recruited 6 foster carers this year however, which is the same as 2023 however a greater focus is required to increase our number of foster carers</i> - <i>We created a new marketing strategy that has generated more leads and enquiries</i> <p>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.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Fostering duty continue to seek in house foster placements for children in residential homes</i>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Data shows that 19.6% of Southwark's children were living more than 20 miles away, which is marginal increase from 19% in both 2023 and 20223.</i> - <i>Fostering are actively supporting the recruitment of staff for Southwark's Residential fostering home</i> <p>Consideration to the development of a Therapeutic Fostering Hub or Mockingbird model to support carers and placements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>These were considered and Mockingbird identified to pursue</i>
Plans for 2024/25	<p>The Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy will be updated this year, with Marketing, Recruitment and Retention as key priorities for 2024-25.</p> <p>Continue to implement Marketing Strategy and analyse the impact of Recruitment and Marketing campaigns to evaluate whether the increase in enquiries are converting to an increase in initial visits, assessments and approvals.</p> <p>Ensure marketing strategies focus on recruiting carers who can offer the range and types of placements required including targeted campaigns for the particular carer cohorts required and those that have the expertise required to meet the needs of our children and young people.</p> <p>Continue close liaison with Family Link services to support marketing, recruitment and development of training and practice standards.</p> <p>Streamline carer recruitment assessment process including implementing response timelines and better recording of information to improve reporting, oversight and applicant experiences in the recruitment process.</p> <p>Ensure assessments are completed within the recommended 6 month timeframe, with high quality oversight, supervision, access to skills to foster training and panel dates adhered to, in order to approve more carers. Ensure delays are in exceptional circumstances. Continue monthly reports to analyse process and practice, and reasons of those concluding at Stage 1 & 2 to consider where support, training or development may be necessary.</p> <p>Work with the Data Team to ensure workflows are on the recording system and produce a dashboard that accurately reports on recording, to understand, analyse and maximise conversions between enquiries, visits, assessments and approvals in the coming year, and help oversight and service development.</p>

	<p>Increase our recruitment, assessment, training and provision of Supported Lodgings hosts and update our policies, procedures and practice framework to support them. Improve the support and review provided to Supported Lodging Hosts and Staying Put carers.</p> <p>Implementing Mockingbird to be further explored to increase support package and incentives/offers to carers and improve retention, alongside increased placement options for siblings and children coming out of residential care whilst building a culture of support and familial models within our carer cohort.</p>
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Service Priority 6	Continue to embed the Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving across children's services
Progress through 2023/24	<p>Evaluate the implementation of the Secure Base model by measuring the impact on children, YP and foster carers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>This has progressed alongside implementing the CANs framework</i> <p>Foster carers to continue to be involved in the Secure Base training of social workers across children's social care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>This has not progressed in 2023/4</i>
Plans for 2024/25	<p>Evaluate the implementation of the Secure Base model and CANs framework by measuring the impact on children, YP and foster carers and seeking feedback, in consultation with clinical services.</p> <p>Ensure all supervising social workers have completed Secure Base training and program is developed for social workers across Children's Services</p> <p>To continue our 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.</p>

<p>Service Priority 7</p>	<p>Develop high quality support for connected (Kinship) carers and SGO carers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue to build a strong family and friends fostering offer in order to maximise our opportunities for children and young people to remain within their networks.
<p>Progress through 2023/24</p>	<p>Continue to develop SG and CC team in their remit of assessing and supporting prospective SGO and friends and family carers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Increased capacity within the team and decreased ISW assessments</i> <p>Ensure there are a robust quality assurance mechanism in place for all special guardian and connected person (Kinship) fostering assessments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Team Managers provide quality assurance and supervision</i> <p>Ensure Safeguarding and Connected Persons teams are supported to work more closely together in respect of Regulation 24 assessments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>New referral mechanism and advice and support in place</i> <p>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.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Tracking system is in place to prepare and book panel at required dates however some extensions are still being requested alongside placements becoming unlawful with risk assessments completed.</i> <i>Timescales for Medicals and DBS checks often impact on requests for extensions</i> <i>Monthly meetings with Health established to consider delays in medicals</i> <i>Liaison with Police established to consider delays in DBS'</i> <p><i>Post SGO offer of duty line, support groups and training has been implemented alongside applications to the Adoption Support Fund and annual financial reviews with a dedicated Senior Social Worker leading this area of practice.</i></p>
<p>Plans for 2024/25</p>	<p>Team Managers and Service Manager to continue current tracking and reporting system alongside monthly reporting on performance, team capacity and functioning. Further work to be completed with Data Team to ensure workflows are on recording</p>

	<p>systems and dashboards accurate report on performance for greater oversight and service development.</p> <p>Further oversight needed from Team Managers and Service Managers to track and ensure checks are completed at the initial stages of assessment to avoid delay and understand any other issues to reduce the need to request Regulation 25 extensions and ensure placements do not become unlawful.</p> <p>Service Manager to continue to track, monitor and review with Health and Police Services progress with DBS and Medical checks.</p> <p>Service Manager and Team Managers to continue to meet with Legal and Safeguarding Services to review and support feedback loops to improve practice standards and timescales to ensure high quality assessments and support plans are presented to court.</p> <p>Post SG Team alongside Development Team to complete focus groups with current SGO carers to consider support offer to Special Guardians, alongside annual financial review.</p> <p>Team Managers to develop alongside our clinical practitioners, a rolling training offer including; Emotional Behavioural Management, Attachment/Secure Base and Trauma-Informed Care, aimed at supporting and enhancing the assessments of Special Guardian's as well as offering support and training post order to avoid difficulties and breakdowns, and increase stability and permanency for children within their families. Ensure feedback is sought from support groups and training to evaluate service delivery.</p>
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<p>Service Priority 8</p>	<p>Develop a responsive and professional Foster Carer cohort in Southwark</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build a resilient and expert foster care community able to support and care for the older cohort of young people
<p>Progress through 2023/24</p>	<p>Foster carers to return to panel every three years to ensure they continue to provide good care for Southwark children who are looked after.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Improved management reporting and oversight, with increased number of carers returning to panel however there remains a backlog to ensure consistent return to panel and oversight.</i> - <i>Improved feedback from children in care and foster carers birth/other children within the household</i> - <i>Improved feedback from children’s Independent Reviewing Officers</i> - <i>Children’s social worker feedback needs to be routinely provided for annual reviews and panel, this is a gap in feedback from a key professional required to review approval</i> - <i>Standards of Care process and timelines reviewed with the service to improve timeliness of review</i> <p>Ensure carers complete their Training Support and Development standards (TSDs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Oversight from Panel and data collection shows a high proportion of carers are not completing their Training Support and Development standards in the required timescale of 12 or 18 months. Whilst a greater number have been completed this year, this is an ongoing issue.</i> - <i>The Service have been addressing this with additional sessions led by a Senior Social Worker and the training lead to support completion.</i> - <i>Themes identified in 2023 included lack of completion due to english not being their first language, connected carers struggling to complete logs and attending training, and some carers being in employment. Plans were put in place to reiterate importance of TSD’s in recruitment assessment stage, social workers to provide 121 support during visits with the support of the family support worker if needed, to be reviewed at annual review and panel and timescales to be given to carers.</i> - <i>All new carers will have separate training documents on recording system, rather than joint for accurate reporting (and identification where secondary carers have not completed training but primary carers have)</i>
Plans for 2024/25	<p>Continued performance meetings and learning sessions with Team Managers and Social Workers to ensure that carers are visited and supported in line with expectations, social workers are adequately supervised, DBS and Medicals are completed in a timely manner, high quality reports are provided, with feedback from all relevant professionals, carers and children for timely reviews and panel papers quality assured to provide overviews of the work undertaken and recommendations for approval, including learning, training and development plans.</p> <p>Service Manager to track and monitor Standards of Care processes and timeliness.</p>

	<p>Service Manager to continue to track, monitor and review any challenges with Health and Police Services and across the Directorate, to ensure importance of feedback is shared and provided to review placements and carers approvals.</p> <p>Service Manager to work alongside Panel Advisor, Chair and Administrator to review functioning of panel to increase timely panel capacity and running order. Learning and review meetings set up between panel members and team managers</p> <p>Southwark to consider bringing Independent Reviewing Officers in house to the Quality Assurance team to support timeliness of reviews, improved practice and service development whilst maintaining independence.</p> <p>Carers to ensure they are completing their Training Support and Development standards (TSDs). Supervising Social Workers to continue to review in visits and Team Managers within supervision, alongside signposting to training offered. Clear expectations of Training and Learning and Development are detailed with dates to attend for the Annual Review and Panel paperwork, and Team Managers to quality assure this paperwork to ensure standards are upheld or plans in place to address them. If lack of compliance impacts on Standards of Care then procedures to be followed.</p> <p>Senior Social Worker to continue to provide sessions to support completion of TSDs, including prospective connected carers in assessment.</p> <p>Supervising Social Workers to review the importance and capacity of carers to provide electronic logs, and Family Support Worker or local resources to be sought to improve access to technology and completion of logs.</p> <p>Service to review Training Offer to consider training outside of working hours to support carers in employment alongside any additional training required to meet the needs of carers and our children and young people.</p> <p>Carers to be offered support and training in English courses specific to fostering requirements.</p> <p>For out of borough foster carers, requests to be made to local provisions to consider training on offer and methods/agreements to attend and provide feedback/assessment of engagement.</p>
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	<p>Develop further clinical support and possible specialist training that is needed to support carers to take on more challenging placements at edge of care, or residential including step down from residential.</p> <p>Reflective practice group meetings for carers to be set up alongside a Team Manager and Clinical Practitioner.</p>
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Appendix 1 – Southwark’s Training Program

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.

Appendix 2 – Southwark’s Fostering Panel Report

Southwark Fostering Panel Report for the period April 2023 to March 2024

1. Introduction

This report covers the period from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, providing details of the Fostering Panel’s activity over the twelve-month period. The primary functions of the Fostering Panel are 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 continued approval of foster carers after their first and third annual reviews, or following complaints or allegations made about the quality of care provided.
- provide a quality assurance role.

The Agency Decision Maker either ratifies or rejects panel recommendations, thereby making a decision.

2. Panel meetings and membership

Panels continue to be held virtually on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Virtual panels work well and is convenient for panel members, foster carers and social workers alike. The reflective period at the end of each panel continues to be a safe space to discuss any feelings about the cases presented to panel that day.

It is important that the panel’s composition reflects, as far as possible, the diversity of the wider local community. Therefore, the central list includes members of different ages, genders, sexualities, heritage, and ethnic backgrounds.

3. Fostering Panel Central List Membership:

Role	Background
Independent Panel Chair	Fostering Panel and RAA Panel Chair
Independent Vice Chair	Educational Psychologist
Independent Panel Member	Foster Carer, Adopter and Independent Social Worker
Independent Panel Member	Adopter
Independent Panel Member	Foster Carer and Adopter

Independent Panel Member	Care experienced person
Independent Panel Member	Care experienced person
Independent Panel Member	Independent social worker
Agency Panel Member	Qualified Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Care Proceedings Case Manager
Independent Panel Member	Foster Carer and Adopter
Agency Panel Member	Clinical Practitioner
Agency Panel Member	Qualified Social Worker
Agency Panel Member	Team Manager
Agency Panel Member	Team Manager

There are currently 15 Panel Members on the central list. A panel member taking a break has now resigned for personal reasons. Availability of agency social workers has been a challenge at times, as the Panel cannot sit without a social worker with three years of experience. Recruitment to identify agency social workers, Kinship Carers and care-experienced young people has continued and will aim to ensure its members reflect the diversity of the wider community.

4. Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator

Panel members greatly appreciate the support they receive from the panel advisor, particularly the quality assurance role in gatekeeping reports to ensure they are fit for purpose. Reports, particularly those with gaps, are expected to be referred back to the authors for correction before they are shared with panel members.

The efficiency of the panel is largely due to the panel administrator who is responsible for the effective functioning of the panel. The role includes planning panel dates throughout the year, managing the agenda, the virtual waiting room, minuting the meeting and distributing the minutes for approval. They also keep the central list records and collect data relating to panel activity. There was a mid-year change in panel administrator during this period, which can often be unsettling in terms of the process; however, the new administrator has settled well and the panel continues to function well.

5. Panel Members' Appraisals

Panel appraisals are due to be held in June 2024.

6. Panel training

There has been a delay in arranging annual training for panel members, which is now due to take place in July 2024, following the recruitment and onboarding of new panel members. Learning material in the form of articles continues to be shared with and between Panel Members as part of their ongoing development.

7. Panel activity throughout the year

Between April 2023 and March 2024, the Fostering Panel met on 22 occasions out of an expected 23, with one panel cancelled. The number of cases presented to virtual panels largely depends on the type and complexity of the case as some require more discussion time than others. The panel heard 88 cases during the reporting period. The table below provides data on Panel activity for the review year. Where available, data on activity in the previous two years is included to allow some comparison.

Number and type of cases presented to panel

Type of cases presented	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Reg 27 Kinship Approval	12	17	8
Reg 25 extension	12	16	12
Family Link Approval	1	1	0
General Household Fostering Approval	8	6	6
Return to Panel follow an Allegation			1
Review Following Standard of Care	3	5	9
Return to Panel at Panel's request	0	7	1
Return to Panel Following First Annual Review	6	15	15
Fostering Match	5	2	7
Return to Panel Following First Review Family Link	0	1	0
Return to Panel Following Three Yearly Annual Review	2	6	19
Resignations	0	0	8
Total	53	76	86

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

Fostering Approvals

Fostering Approvals	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
General Fostering Households	8	6	6
Kinship Carer Households	16	17	8
Family Link Short Break Carers	1	1	0

There were six general fostering household applications presented to the panel, the same as the previous year. However, there was a marked reduction in Kinship Carer approvals, with eight presented to panel, representing almost 50% fewer households than in the previous two years.

No Family Link assessments were presented to panel during this reporting period.

All recommended approvals were ratified by the Agency Decision Maker.

Fostering Matches

Fostering Matches	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Total number of children matched with foster carers	6	2	8
Number of children matched as part of a sibling group	1		2
Children matched with Southwark foster carers			2
Children matched with Independent Fostering Agency foster carers			6

Unless adoption is the care plan for a child, children in care should be expected to achieve permanency through placements with kinship carers or foster carers. As IROs are responsible for developing children's care plans, permanency planning should be discussed during children's Looked After Reviews and considered for inclusion in their care plans by their second review.

Young people over fourteen have the opportunity to be matched with carers via the Statutory Review process, while younger children are presented to the Fostering Panel. It is positive to note the increase in the number of children matched during panel during this period is the highest it has been since 2020/2021 when 13 children were matched with their foster carers. The majority of children matched (5 households involving 6 children) were with Independent Fostering Agency carers.

All recommended matches were ratified by the Agency Decision Maker.

Fostering Households 1st Year Review

1 st Year Reviews	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
General fostering households	6		15
Family Link short break carers	1		1

It is a regulatory requirement that all foster and kinship carers' 1st Annual Reviews are presented to panel to consider their continued approval following their first year of practice. Panel members consider and comment on the quality of Independent Annual Reviews and recommendations made outlining foster carers' approval number, age range and ability to meet the NMS. Southwark commissions an independent agency to conduct its foster carers' Annual Reviews, providing an additional level of independent scrutiny of foster carers' practice and the local authority's monitoring and support role.

The reviews are chaired by different reviewing officers and all provided sufficient information to support panel's understanding of the key issues. There are areas that panel believe warrant fuller discussion during the meeting. These include Learning and Development Plans, which are often not presented with the review paperwork and may be the reason there is often limited 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, although record-keeping is discussed, it is not discussed in detail. Panel has noted that few foster carers are using the online system to record. A number of foster carers record use different methods to record with no clear plan of how they will progress to completing electronic records.

All recommended continued approvals were ratified by the ADM.

Three Yearly Fostering Reviews

3 Year Fostering Reviews	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Return to Panel Following Three Yearly Annual Review	2	6	19

While there is no requirement for foster carers to return to panel every three years, it is regarded as good practice for the panel to have some oversight of foster care practice over a period of time and the support carers receive. Following their third annual review, nineteen cases were presented to panel, which is by far the highest number to date. Panel was able to acknowledge good practice and discuss required action where carers fell short of expectations.

Reg 24/ 25 Kinship Extension

	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Kinship Carer Extension	12	16	12

Kinship Carer assessments must be completed and ratified within 16 weeks; otherwise, their temporary approval ends and the placement becomes unlawful. In exceptional circumstances, an additional 8-week extension can be granted (Regulation 25 of the Care Planning & Placement Review (2010)) to complete the assessment.

These requests are usually made when there is a delay in the return of a DBS or medical due to late submissions. Twelve requests were made, which is a welcome reduction. It was hoped that by involving Supervising Social Workers at an earlier stage these delays could be prevented. However, obtaining the appropriate paperwork from carers when requested has also led to delays. The quality of the Regulation 25 reports are generally good with clear information on carers' ability to meet the child's basic needs and safeguard their welfare.

Panel did not recommend the extension for one case as felt the carer was unable to meet the children's needs. The Agency Decision Maker did not uphold panel's recommendation and granted the extension.

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

Standards of Care	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Standards of Care	3	5	9
Allegations			1
Panel Requested Return to Panel			1

Nine carers have returned to the panel following Standards of Care investigations. These included a lack of transparency, allowing a child to see their mother while in the park, delays in reporting incidents, operating outside a care plan, and an altercation with another foster carer. All were investigated, and training, additional support, and monitoring were put in place.

Panel requested the return of one case following panel recommended action.

Resignations and Termination of Approval

Resignations and Deregistrations	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Resignations	0	0	8
Termination of Approval			0

Panel acknowledged eight resignations during this reporting period. The majority were due to retirement after many years. Three foster carers had been approved since 1992, 1998 and 2006. A Kinship Carer was able to resign when her grandchildren were successfully transitioned back to their mother's care.

The panel has not recommended terminating the approvals of any carers during this period.

8. Fostering Panel's role in Quality Assurance

Assessments: Panel recommendations are based on the quality of the assessments and other paperwork it receives. Panel will regard an assessment report as of sufficient quality when it provides comprehensive information about the applicant, their abilities and motivation. It should identify their strengths, any vulnerabilities and provide a clear analysis and reason for the recommendation that is made. This process also applies to Reviews for continued approval and long-term matches. Fostering Assessments during this period were generally of a high standard. Direct feedback from children within households and children being cared for has also improved, with the majority now included in panel paperwork.

Feedback from children's social workers: Children's social workers do not routinely provide written feedback for foster carers' Annual Reviews. This is a gap in key information, as they have regular contact with foster carers and their households and, therefore, are best placed to provide feedback on how well the carer is meeting the child's needs. This has been raised within the department, and there has been some improvement.

Standards of Care investigations: Standards of Care concerns are thoroughly investigated; however, there is often some delay in returning such cases to the Panel, which can frustrate foster carers. They should be returned within eight weeks of the review following the investigation.

Fostering matches: Permanency matching reports are generally of good quality, outlining children's needs and the carer's ability to meet them to majority. Support plans would be a helpful addition to these reports.

Training: It is positive to note that more Training, Support, and Development Standards are being completed, though not always in the first year of approval. A number of foster carers' attend very few training sessions each year, stating they could not see the value in attending training they have

previously attended. This is an area that will need further work. Learning and Development Plans are also not routinely completed and included in Annual Review and panel paperwork, making it difficult to identify training attended and learning outcomes.

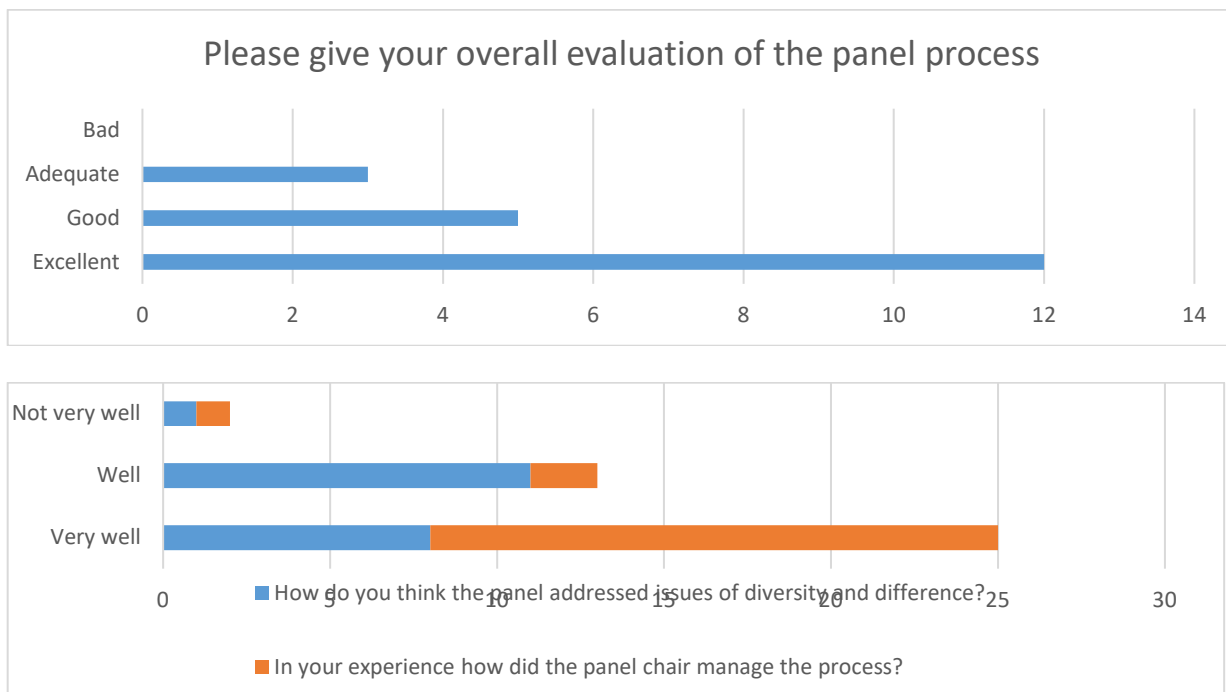
Recording: Many foster carers continue to use their own methods of recording, usually in diaries. This works well for them; however, there appears to be no clear method to help them transition to the online system. This will need further discussion to ensure they can be supported to make this transition.

9. Quality Assurance Meetings

Quarterly Quality Assurance meetings are attended by the Agency Decision Maker, Fostering Head of Service, the Service Manager, Panel Advisor and Panel Chair. The meeting provides the opportunity to discuss quality assurance feedback from the panel and panel advisor, issues raised in feedback forms and any departmental or panel issues. Follow-up action is assigned and reviewed at the next meeting.

10. Foster Carers feedback on the Panel process

Foster Carers and social workers attending panel are asked to provide feedback on their experience. Feedback was sent to new applicants, those returning for reviews and seeking matches. Out of the 67 feedback forms distributed, 20 were returned (29.8%). Of those, 12 described their overall experience as 'Excellent', 5 as 'Good', and 3 as 'Adequate'.



It was positive to note that 12 of those attending panel felt it was an ‘Excellent’ experience, 5 described it as ‘Good’ and 3 as ‘Adequate’.

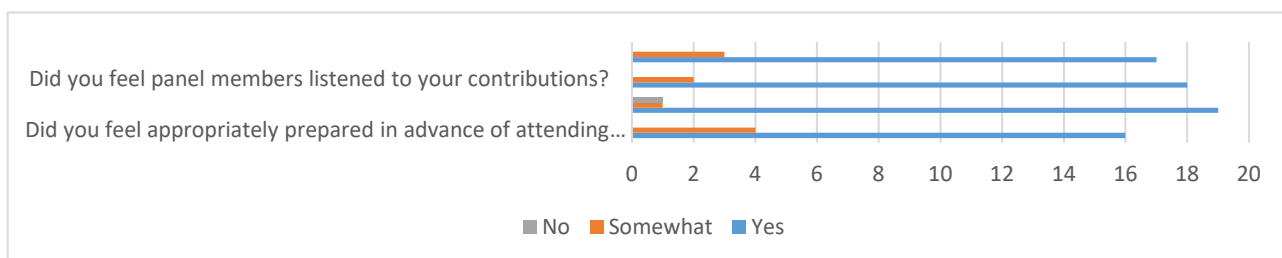
Those who felt their experience was ‘Excellent’ (12) also felt the process was ‘very well managed’ by the chair, while 2 felt it was ‘well managed’ and 1 ‘not very well managed’. Only 8 attendees felt ‘difference and diversity was ‘very well managed’, while 11 felt it was ‘well managed’ and 1 thought it was ‘not well managed’.

The panel generally ask questions concerning ‘difference and diversity’ if these areas have not been discussed in the paperwork. However, this feedback referred to the attendee’s view of the lack of diversity of panel members on that day. *

Additional comments about panel and suggestions for changes support the feedback includes:

- *They made me feel at ease.*
- *I was very impressed by the panel. The panel was very diverse and very inquisitive and welcoming.*
- *Panel itself was good but the prework was awful. If my husband and I were not experienced in the field (teacher & nurse) we would have struggled. I feel for others who may be put in this situation.*
- ** As Southwark is a multicultural and diverse borough I would have expected to see this reflected on the panel.*
- *To all the members who were on my panel. Keep up the good work.*
- *A smooth process.*
- *It was a positive experience.*
- *Plans need to be made to move panel sessions from virtual to face to face meetings.*

- *The chair was very good and very professional, we felt confident in the process but felt under pressure making it difficult to answer the questions. It is important that if a virtual member has difficulty with their camera they should be excluded from the meeting as this comes across as passive aggressive. We were pleased with the outcome!*



The majority of those attending panel felt they were ‘asked appropriate questions’ (17), ‘listened to’ (18) and ‘treated with courtesy and respect’ (19) by panel members. However, two felt that their contribution was ‘somewhat’ listened to:

'Whilst answering Panel questions about Fostering TSD's/regulatory requirements a Panel Member made a sound like a guff, this was off-putting to both SSW and the foster carer.'

Those who felt the questions were only 'somewhat' appropriate (3):

'I feel a lot of it was not understood on a cultural level as I felt this was not reflected on the panel.'

Most concerning is the feedback from attendees who felt they were 'not treated with courtesy and respect':

'We felt that one particular panel member was very aggressive'.

The panel member concerned later reflected on their style of questioning and apologised.

It is important that attendees are provided with information about the panel process to help prepare them for panel. It is positive to note that the majority (16) felt appropriately prepared, however 4 only felt 'somewhat prepared':

'Because of the poor preparation and communication of the social workers there were personal questions that should have been in the report and not asked during the panel.'

Panel members and social workers will learn from the feedback provided, so those attending future panels have a more positive experience.

11. Social workers feedback on the panel process

What is the most helpful thing that happened when you attended the fostering panel recently? In addition, why?

- *The family being granted a positive outcome! This was because they have worked so hard to provide a secure base for the child, and have ensured he has consistent love and support.*
- *Carer had already been presented for her annual review to panel shortly before our request for Reg. 25 extension, so panel did not need much details from us.*
- *The panel members exhibited a supportive attitude toward the FC. They asked pertinent questions and provided guidance when it was necessary.*

What do you think about the questions the panel ask? Are they relevant? Was it clear why they were asking?

- *The questions were relevant on the whole, and it was useful for us to reflect and consider the journey for the child and his carers over the years.*
- *There were some very interesting questions that were raised, but not seen as relevant for this session. However, there was a reason and it would have been great to have had further discussions. There were others that were not appropriate in the manner in which they were raised.*
- *Relevant and appropriate.*
- *The panel's questions pertained directly to the matter at hand and the stated objectives. The questions carried weight and substance, digging deeper to uncover significant insights and information.*

Is there anything at panel you would like more of, or less of?

- *I would like a prompt start as we were left waiting for quite some time before being admitted to the meeting. I would have enjoyed further discussions where we were not so rushed and restricted by time.*
- *None – panel were professional. Took it in turns to ask questions – I attribute this to a good chairing.*

What do you do to prepare yourself for panel?

- *I pray! I was very nervous as I had never presented a match report before. I did not have my manager there either, which left me alone, but I think I managed okay. I relied on supporting and encouraging the network and we worked effectively as a team, and this was demonstrated in the way we all stepped in with excellent knowledge of the child's journey.*
- *I write all the documents that I sent and I read them before Panel.*
- *Read over what has been presented and seek any updates since paperwork was collated and sent to fostering panel admin.*

What are the best ways that panel ask questions to carers?

- *In my view, the panel members demonstrated an effective approach when questioning the foster carers. They communicated in a polite and empathetic manner while also exhibiting resilience.*
- *I think it is putting them at ease and not feeling as if there is a power dynamic. The Chair was very good at spotting issues, but at times struggled to keep one member under control. At the time there was no more that the Chair could have done to curtail this member's approach.*
- *No carer present as it was a Reg. 25 panel.*
- *It was enjoyable.*

Is there anything in particular about panel on this occasion that you would like to feedback on?

- *Questions regarding identity and the manner in which the carers were addressed, was not appropriate. It was not at all helpful for carers to feel under attack. This ruined the experience for them in what should have been a period of critical reflection and learning. Instead it ended up being a barrage of questions, and criticisms, leaving the carers feeling they had to defend themselves.*

If you were chairing the panel is there anything that you would do differently.

- *I think it was difficult as we started very late. I felt the chair did very well in getting through the questions. She was very firm with the panel member in question, yet they did not seem to acknowledge her curtailment and instead pursued an unhelpful line of questioning.*

Do you have any other feedback?

- *The panel member did not have their camera on, and I felt that this underpinned a passive aggressive onslaught putting carers at a disadvantage*

The feedback from social workers confirms that their experience and that of the applicants they supported were, for the most part, positive. A late start was a hinderance for one social worker, which on that occasion was caused by technical difficulties of an attendee on a previous case. Attendees are usually notified of the likelihood of a delay; however, it is acknowledged that a delay of even 10 minutes can seem much longer in such circumstances.

The more concerning feedback from social workers relates to a particular line of questioning by one panel member, whose camera was not on the day in question. This, along with the type of questions asked, was unhelpful, particularly as the applicant could not be seen. The panel member apologised after panel as realised their approach had been unhelpful.

There has also been an increase in feedback forms from children placed with foster carers

12. Conclusion

The fostering panel has functioned well during this period, which has seen a change in the panel administrator. The support of the new panel administrator together with the panel advisor has ensured consistency. Feedback from those attending the panel suggests that panel members are welcoming and ask relevant questions, though recent feedback suggests some areas for review. This includes panel diversity, which is being addressed through recruitment to ensure panel reflects the diversity of the local community.

Social workers continue to work hard to increase the quality of reports presented to panel, though the majority are already of a very good standard. Annual reviews are also of a high standard, with many providing detailed information that the panel has found very helpful. More in depth discussion around the gaps in training and recording during annual reviews would be beneficial, together with timescales set for improvement that can be monitored. The panel will also need to ensure action is being taken to address these areas when foster carers return to the panel.

There is evidence that Southwark supports its foster carers well to meet the needs of children placed in their care. However, foster and kinship carers need to be returned to the panel in a more timely manner following Standards of Care investigations as this can cause some frustration.

It is good to note that the number of matches for children in foster care has increased. However, more work is needed in this area. The IRO's role in ensuring the adherence to permanency timescales will be very important.

Most importantly, the voices of children placed with foster and kinship carers are clearly represented in their feedback forms, which have further increased during this period, along with feedback from children in carers' households.

Areas for development:

- Every effort should be made to ensure Kinship Carers assessments are presented to panel within the 16-week timescale, and extensions sought in exceptional circumstances. The paperwork for DBS and GP medicals should be discussed with temporarily approved Kinship carers during the viability assessment to ensure they have the necessary documents and to prevent delay.
- Some delays in foster carer medicals is reported to be due to some GPs refusal to complete medicals until they are paid. This will require discussion as medicals are required to ensure foster and kinship carers are fit to foster.
- Very few Learning logs are presented to panel and fewer still with learning outcomes. It is clear that a number of foster carers are not attending required training course because they have already attended a particular course in the past. The fostering service will need to consider what it expects of its carers. Perhaps a minimum number of evidenced hours of learning per year and in an agreed form might help increase their development.
- Foster carers should return to panel within eight weeks of their First Annual Review, which should be held within 12 months of their approval.
- All matching reports should include a support plan and information on the foster carers' ability to prepare a young person for independence.

- All children's social workers should provide written feedback for foster carers' annual reviews, including when children have left the placement within the reviewing period.
- Foster carers currently using diaries or other methods to record information about the child in their care should be supported to use the online template.
- All Learning Development Plans should be fully completed with details of learning outcomes and presented with paperwork for foster carers' Annual Reviews and fostering panel.

Areas for Panel development:

- The panel will ensure it asks relevant questions about foster carers' ability to meet a child's cultural and identity needs unless this is evidenced in the paperwork.
- The Panel Chair will endeavour to keep to time during the meeting, despite any delay and if not possible notification will be sent to attendees waiting to alert them of any delay.
- Panel members will ensure cameras are on at all times, if technical issues arise during panel the chair will ask the panel member's question.
- The panel Chair will ensure panel members explain the reasons why certain questions are being asked.

Independent Fostering Panel Chair