



Southwark Council

Corporate Parenting

Annual Report 2023-24

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Foreword – Councillor Jasmine Ali, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees

I am delighted to introduce the Corporate Parenting Annual report for 2023-24 to Cabinet. I am also delighted to share this foreword with members of our Children in Care Council, SpeakerBox.

We know that the care experience for children and young people in the UK can be a mixed bag for many. Even with a powerful parent that is the state, the outcomes for children in care are not always as positive as they should be. Here in Southwark nothing is as important to us as supporting the children and young people in our care. We are committed to finding ways to develop and improve our services. We want to make sure our children and young people get the best start in life that they deserve.

We have seen a number of developments over 2023-24 including our first children's home in over a decade and a refreshed recruitment campaign for foster carers. Amongst lots of other exciting innovations outlined in this report. We are committed to providing secure and stable homes for our children and young people to ensure lasting positive outcomes as they become independent adults.

We have supported SpeakerBox to run a number of activities and opportunities for our children in care and care leavers. This includes a winter ball, an annual celebration awards ceremony, photography courses, cookery courses and many other exciting events that we have heard about from young people at each meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee. We have championed the voices of children and young people by formalising groups of children to consult with us on challenges they face and to consult on service development.

I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to all the children and young people that have participated over the last year as well as all of the Corporate Parenting Committee for their continued commitment to strengthening services for children in care and care leavers.

Going into 2024-25, we know we still have work to do with the challenges that we still face including accessing opportunities for employment and housing as well as achieving well at school and living in safe, stable homes.

We continue to be ambitious for our children and young people, striving for the best opportunities and services for them and we look forward to the future and a refreshed Corporate Parenting Strategy 2025-2030. Because nothing is too good for the children and young people in our care.

Foreword – Speakerbox – Southwark Children in Care Council

We are SpeakerBox – we are a collective of young people who are active in the Children in Care Council and advocacy service. We are a diverse group of people who are passionate about providing support to our peers and committed to getting involved in initiatives to improve services to other children and young people. This report is an important document that lets you know what the Corporate Parenting Committee has been doing over the last year and what is important for the next one. It is important for children and young people to get involved and drive change from the inside.

We have lots of different interests including making films, photography, public speaking, performing arts and science however we all have in common an interest in raising the voices of our young people and bringing our children in care community together. We all agree that children in care and young people with care experience need support, so they know who they are and are empowered to have high ambitions in life.

Over 2023/24 we have been involved in many different opportunities. We have supported the development of a new children's home including the design of the home, creating the children's guide, name of the home and recruiting the staff/managers/head of the home who will all work there. We have been to cookery classes, a celebration event, a barbecue and have been a part of many different recruitment panels. We were invited to talk at a meeting that involved all the directors at Southwark Council; raising awareness about the issues young people face and asking for their support to improve the experiences of our young people. Whatever we do, we are always representing the lived experiences of children in care and care leavers and making sure that our voices are heard to influence how the council delivers services to us.

Who are the children in our care?

At the end of March 2024 there were 397 children in our care, 5% less than in April 2023. We have a lower rate of children in care (68 per 10,000) than nationally (70 per 10,000), but this remains higher than the average rate across London (51 per 10,000). 55 (14%) of the children in our care are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children which is higher than the national average (7%) and London average (11%).

Children who have come into our care from families in Southwark are almost evenly split between male and female, with 1% of children identifying as trans or non-binary. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are 93% male and 7% female. Adolescents represent over 80% of the children in our care which is higher than our statutory neighbours, London and national peers.

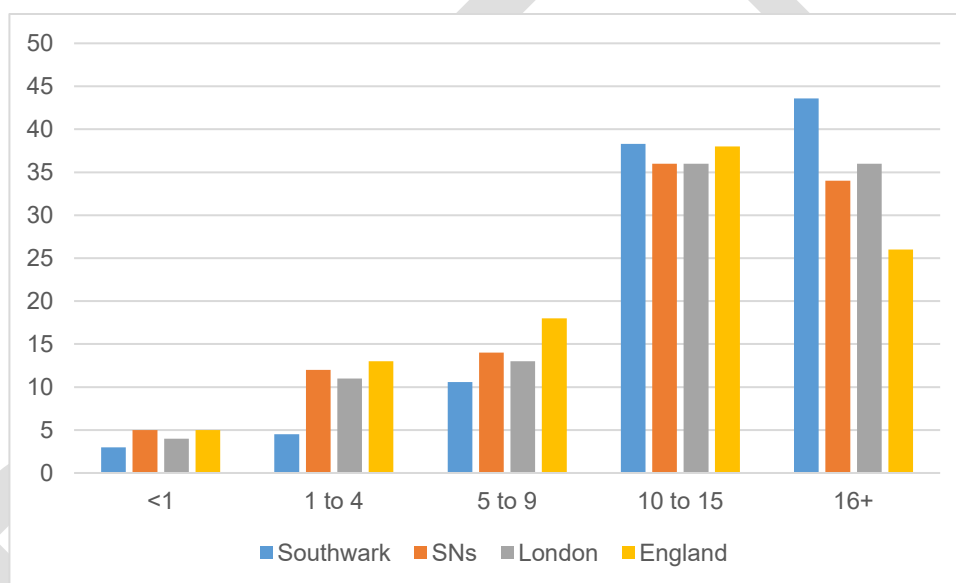


Figure 1: percentage children in care by age as of 31st March, DfE SSDA903

More children in our care are from black or black British (39%) backgrounds, than white (25%) and mixed (23%) backgrounds. The gap is widest for children care aged 10-15, with 47% of this group being from a black or black British background, against 30% from white backgrounds and 20% from mixed backgrounds. Conversely children aged under 10 years old, 31% are from a black or black British background, 32% from a white background and 34% from mixed backgrounds.

Of the 177 children who entered our care in the year the majority (72%) were also adolescents over the age of ten, this reduces to 62% when we exclude unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Overall almost half (47%) of children who entered our care this year were over 16.

Who are our care leavers?

At the end of March 2024, the council was actively supporting 639 care leavers aged 16-25 years old. This is a rate of 187 care leavers per 10,000 of the population, compared to a London rate of 163 per 10,000. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children now make up 29% of our 18–25 year-old care leaver population, which is 167 young people.

During 2023/24, 198 children left our care, almost half (47%) moved into adulthood, and became our care leavers. Approximately a third (34%) of children leaving care returned to the care of their parents or another connected person.

Our young people (other than former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) from black or black British backgrounds make up 54% of our care leaver population with those from a white background making up 24% and those from mixed backgrounds making up 15%.

94% of our care leavers are in suitable accommodation, with just 22 young people in living arrangements that we do not feel fully meet their needs. This includes 13 young people who are currently in custody.

We saw a slight fall in the percentage of our care leavers who are in education, employment or training in the year, down to 67% from 70% the previous year. However, this continued to far exceed the London average of 56%.

What is a corporate parent?

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 says that when a child comes into the care of the local authority or is under 25 and was in the care of the local authority for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday, the authority becomes their corporate parent. This means that they should follow the core 'corporate parenting' principles enshrined in the 2017 legislation to:

- to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people.
- to encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
- to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people.
- to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners.
- to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people.
- for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
- to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

As corporate parents, it is every councillor's responsibility to make sure that the council is meeting these duties towards children in care and care leavers.

Corporate parenting means the whole council, its public and private sector partners, taking collective responsibility to achieve the outcomes for our children in care and those who have left out care that we would want for our own children.

Being an excellent corporate parent means we should be tirelessly ambitious for our children and unashamed at using every tool at our disposal to provide for our children, giving them access to opportunities, offering every ounce of support we can to ensure they grow up to live their best lives.

The Lead Member for Children's Services and Director of Children's Services share a statutory responsibility to ensure that *all officers and members of the local authority [act] as effective and caring corporate parents for looked after children, with key roles in improving their educational attainment, providing stable and high-quality placements and proper planning for when they leave care*¹.

¹ [Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services – April 2013](#)

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy

In July 2021 the Corporate Parenting Committee agreed *Caring to Care: Achieving Excellence for Our Children*² - Southwark's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2024. The strategy sets out how Southwark intends to deliver on the Corporate Parenting Principles codified in The Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy delivers on the principles through 6 priorities which are:

1. Supporting More Families to Safely Stay Together
2. Growing Up Safe and Independent in Society
3. Health, Wellbeing, Education & Opportunity
4. Happy, Safe and Stable
5. Identity & Belonging
6. A Whole Borough That 'Cares to Care'

² [Southwark Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2024 – July 2021](#)

Supporting more families to safely stay together

Our commitment

Ensuring all our children & families get the right help at the right time, and at the earliest possible opportunity. To make sure that every child is supported to safely thrive at home. We said we would:

- Continue to invest in evidence-based edge of care services and provision.
- Further increase the rate of children in connected care arrangements, through investment in our Family Group Conferencing and support offers.
- Further develop our re-unification support offer to ensure when children return home, they are able to do so sustainably and that more children are supported to return home.

How we have delivered

This year we continued to see more children supported to remain at home in the care of their parents. The number of children looked after by the council reduced to 397 at the end of 2023/24, compared to 420 at the end of 2022/23 and 457 at the end of 2021/22. We know that this is not just about reducing numbers of children in the care of the council as the rate of children in our care has come down from 78 per 10,000 of the child population to 68 in the same period.

Decisions for children to come into the council's care are made by Heads of Service, chairing our Legal Panel, or by the Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting, at our Resource Panel, which is specifically for adolescents. These panels provide strong leadership and oversight of decisions for children to enter care and support a multi-disciplinary approach to decision making, which benefits from qualified clinical input to consider any additional support that would help children to remain in their families.

In 2023/24 177 children came into the care of the council, which is a reduction from 182 in 2022/23 and 228 in 2021/22. Similar to the overall number of children in our care the rate of children coming into care in the year has also fallen from 37 per 10,000 in 2021/22 to 31 in 2023/24.

Our robust approach to decision making ensures that we explore all options for the best care arrangements for our children. This has seen a continued upward trend in the percentage of children who we support to live with friends and family, when their parents are no longer able to safely care for them.

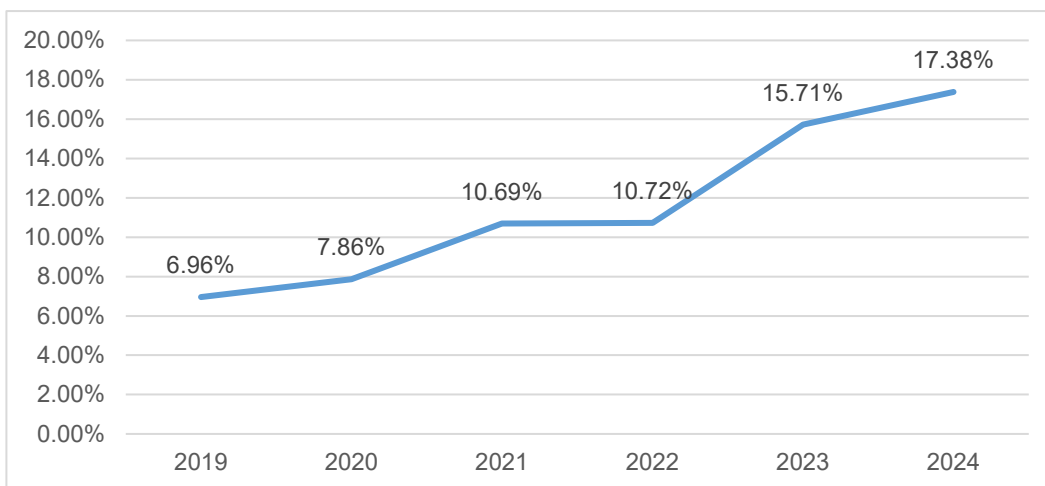


Figure 1: percentage of children in care who are in family and friend placements 2019-2024.

We have maintained our investment in our specialist teams who work with children and families who are most at risk of having to come into our care, like our Keeping Families Together Team who provide intensive intervention and support to ensure the families can stay together and thrive. In 2023/24 we launched a new innovative approach called Southwark Works Intensively with Families Together, or SWIFT, to work with families on the verge of entering into court proceedings for their children to be taken into care.

The SWIFT team focusses on children on child protection plans for long periods of time where previous interventions have been unable to create the right changes for the family. The team has been able to support more than half the families worked with to get to a place where their children came off protection plans and away from the risk of entering care, as well as being able to show a positive impact on 81% of the children in terms of their mental health.

What we still need to achieve

Whilst the success of our services and partners in supporting more children to remain at home is cause for much positivity, we know there is still more we need to do to ensure that families get the right help at the right time. The reduction in the rate of children in our care remains higher than our peers across London with Southwark having the seventh highest rate across the Capital and the London average being 51 per 10,000, compared to our 68.

The trend in older children making up the majority of those coming into care is continuing (figure 2). Research conducted by the Children’s Commissioner³ in 2021 found that most children entering care from thirteen had significant vulnerabilities including issues with school such as fixed-term or permanent exclusions and a large proportion had an education, health and care plan. The research emphasises the need for continued investment into earlier intervention and prevention activity across an increasingly joined up partnership system. This means ensuring families are supported to provide the right foundation for their children from the earliest days through to adulthood. The opportunity will be delivered under the Southwark 2030 commitments and principles to improve outcomes for our children and young people in care.

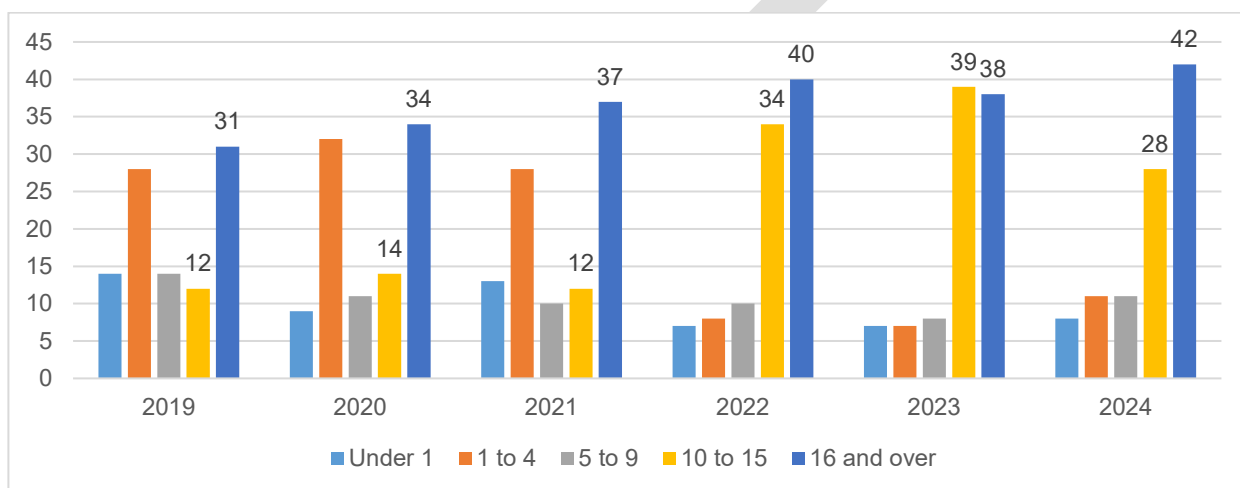


Figure 2: percentage of children entering care by age group.

We know there is more for us to do to support children who do go home from care to stay with their parents and carers. In 2023/24 we saw 37 children come into care for a second or subsequent time, which was 19% of all the children who came into care in the year. Whilst national data tells us roughly 26% of children who go home from care will return into care at some point, we are keen to continue to explore and expand our evidence-based approaches to sustainable reunification and to outperform national averages by an even greater margin.

³ [The Characteristics of children entering care for the first time as teenagers](#)

Growing up safe and independent in society

Our commitment

Giving all of our children the tools, skills, resources and support that they need to grow towards independence and be protected from the threats and risks to them from an increasingly complex world. We said we would:

- Embed transitional safeguarding practice so that care leavers are safeguarded from exploitation and abuse when they turn 18.
- Continue to invest in support for our children to 'stay put' with their carer's when they wish to do so.
- We will work with our Housing teams to ensure our care leavers are given as much help as possible to find not just suitable housing, but housing that is fit for their futures.
- Invest in enhanced life skills programmes for all of our children.
- Work with partners to develop deposit support schemes and savings accounts for our children.

How we have delivered

Our young people continue to be much more likely than their national peers to be supported to stay living with their foster carers after they turn 18, known as 'staying put.' The percentage of care leavers aged 19-21 in Southwark who are still living with the former foster carers increased again this year. Now at 18%, up from 16% in 2022/23, and compared to the national average of just 9%.

The council's Children's Services and Housing teams are still working closely to continuously improve the local offer and access to suitable accommodation for our care leavers. The percentage of our care leavers living in suitable accommodation increased again to 96%, from 93% the year before. This compares to an average of 88% across England. This reflects our continued ambition for all of our care leavers to live in accommodation that suits their needs and gives them a stable place to call home.

Our Children's Rights Team have provided opportunities over the last year for care leavers to support their transition to independence such as cookery classes and sports activities amongst many other opportunities. These provide engaging sessions for young people to access peer support while learning other life skills.

Our partnership with the Share Foundation is now fully embedded meaning more of our children have secure and industry leading savings accounts ready to support them when they reach adulthood.

The multi-agency support offer provided at our Care Leaver Hub, Talfourd Place, continues to expand. With professionals from a range of disciplines now on hand or providing drop-in sessions for care leavers in a place that belongs to them. The last year has seen new sessions being delivered around issues like substance misuse, employability, mental health support, and colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions providing on site advice and support on benefits entitlements and access to our care leavers. The Hub also provides an open space for our care leavers to drop-in and get practical support when they need it from the onsite team and their peers on a range of activities like personal care, doing laundry and much more.

What we still need to achieve

A number of workshops have taken place to continue to strengthen the working relationship between Children's Services and Housing, with many positive results. One outcome of these sessions was the recognised need to develop a stronger joint working protocol to ensure we are meeting our obligations as set out in the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DHLUC) and Department for Education (DfE) good practice guidance for joint housing protocols for care leavers⁴ and incorporate the new Pan London Care Leaver Compact⁵ pledges on housing. The protocol will be finalised and implemented in 2024/25.

Whilst we have seen a significant increase in the level of high-quality and multi-disciplinary skills and support activity provided to our care leavers in the Hub, we have not yet achieved our ambition to have a truly thriving and lively space that our care leavers can treat as 'their place.' A space where they feel comfortable and able to drop-in whenever it suits them just to be amongst friends and to get whatever small or large support they need. We will be investing, through co-design work with our care leavers to re-decorate the space, increase the accessibility and put in place more facilities for interesting and positive activities, like a new computer suite for homework, gaming and skills development.

Our care leavers have told us that they would like to see a greater availability of local semi-independent accommodation options for them. In the same way we have responded to the voice and needs of our children in care by creating new Children's Homes in Southwark, we will explore the opportunity to better stimulate the market for local semi-independent accommodation and where possible to invest capital funds to develop more provision inside the borough.

⁴ [Good Practice Guidance](#)

⁵ [Pan London Care Leaver Compact](#)

Health, wellbeing, education and opportunity

Our commitment

Marshalling the unique resources of the borough to ensure that every one of our children and young adults gets the support and advocacy they deserve and expect from an excellent parent. We said we would:

- Set high aspirations for our children, listen to them and develop every possible opportunity for new experiences that match their aspirations and harness their enthusiasm.
- Commit to providing all our children and young adults with the right digital devices and connections so they are not disadvantaged.
- Guarantee access to high quality mental health support for all our children.
- Strengthen the sporting, leisure and cultural offer.
- Deliver a comprehensive educational catch-up offer for our children to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

How we have delivered

Making sure our children and young people are heard and are driving the development of our local offer is the at the heart of all the work of our services. In 2023/24 we doubled the size of our Children's Rights Officer Team to make sure that we have the right capacity in place to deliver every opportunity to bring our children and young people together to have their voices heard, but also to ensure that the right one-to-one support is available when our it's needed.

The percentage of our care leavers in higher education continued to increase in 2023/24, with 10% of our care leavers now entered in higher education compared to 6% across England and 7% across statistical neighbours. This included a record number of students progressing to university or degree level apprenticeships this year. Our Virtual School has continued to deliver high quality support and advocacy for all our children in care. The Team has in particular, increased their focus on ensuring any of our children placed outside of Southwark are supported where necessary to get a new local school place quickly, and where this is not possible for them, that the receive high quality professional tuition in their placement.

Our Care Leavers Hub has worked with our partners at the NEST to bring high quality on hand mental health support to our children and young people when they need it, through a drop-in clinic and a regular presence in the Hub. Meaning more care leavers can get direct access to advice and guidance, as well as clinical support where they need it to support their mental wellbeing.

The Leisure Service continues to provide free gym and swim access to all children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25. Meaning all our children and young people can keep physically active and access a range of individual and group lessons across Southwark's leisure centres. Services work closely together to better promote the uptake of the leisure offer.

What we still need to achieve

A major barrier to employability schemes for many of our care leavers is the inability to access apprenticeships due to the levels of minimum qualifications required. We are working across the council and with our anchor partners to develop more alternative routes into employment and for our care leavers, including traineeships, work experience and shadowing opportunities and support to apply for more entry-level positions.

Our children and young people have told us that they really value the free leisure offer available to them. But they often find it difficult and sometimes intimidating having to attend sessions and classes alone. We want to explore more opportunities to ensure our children and young people are able to benefit from the rich offer in Southwark together, with peers, in groups and supported by their non-care experienced peers.

One of the most important parts of supporting our young people to move into adulthood and independence is ensuring they fully understand their health and wellbeing history when they reach 18 and receive continuing support to understand what this means for their health as they grow into adulthood. We know that not enough of our young people receive a detailed Care Leaver Health Summary when they reach 18 and we need to work better with health services to make sure that not only do our young receive all their relevant documents, but that they have the opportunity to discuss and understand their individual history.

Happy, safe and stable

Our commitment to children and young people

Making sure that every one of our children has a say in where they live and who they live with. That they are safe and in permanent homes earlier, closer to home, and supported to remain there as long as they need to. We said we would:

- Increase the sufficiency, range and quality of opportunities for our children and our young adults, to ensure more are able to live within and close to the Borough.
- Listen more to our children and change how we all speak and think about them.
- Continue to invest in the support offer for our children and carers, through our clinical services and other partners.
- Provide an enhanced training offer to our carers and increase the availability of therapeutic carers.

How we have delivered

We have completed the capital programme to develop and open the first council run Children's Home in Southwark for over 20 years. The new state-of-the-art, climate-friendly home will mean more of our children are supported to remain living in the borough, close to their networks, communities and the people who mean the most to them. The views of young people have been at the centre of every aspect of the development of the home. From designing the layout of the home, selecting the decoration and furniture, to staff recruitment and most recently choosing a new name for the home.

Our Clinical Service continues to provide a strong offer of support and interventions for children, young people and their families. We have increased the number of qualified Clinicians working directly with our children in care and care leavers, particularly to provide more outreach to care leavers living outside of Southwark. We have also appointed a specialist Senior Clinical Practitioner dedicated solely to working within our new children's homes and provide valuable support for children who live there and the staff supporting them.

We have refreshed our marketing assets for recruiting new foster carers to the service and we are utilising the power of social media to advertise these and increase the numbers of people wanting to become foster carers with the council. While we are still in the early phases of developing this strategy we are seeing increased engagement on our social media channels.

What we still need to achieve

The capital works on our second new Children's Home begin in November 2024 and is scheduled to open in late Autumn 2025. Meaning even more of our children in care will be able to live in local council run homes. We know we can mobilise more assets to develop local provision for our young adults and will continue to campaign for more affordable independent housing opportunities for our care leavers.

With the increasing cost of living pressures and demographic changes in Southwark, the traditional pipeline of foster carers and carer accommodation is increasingly squeezed. We will keep exploring innovation in foster care to offer new pathways into caring, and work with our existing carers to explore new opportunities to maximise their capacity to care for more children. This includes expanding the ability of our carers to care for more complex children by providing dedicated and out of hours therapeutic support to carers. We will also work to develop more caring communities working with our previous kinship carers to encourage them to care for more children outside their family groups.

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Identity and belonging

Our commitment

Giving all our children and young people the chance to learn about themselves, their history and identity, and to live with carers who understand and reflect their cultural identity. Providing every chance for our children to appropriately engage with their own families and personal history. We said we would:

- Provide enhanced opportunities for children to 'Re-Connect' with their families, family networks and important people in their lives.
- Review our assessment, learning and development for foster carers about the needs of black young people in care.
- Address disproportionality in our carer population and bring more young people back to live in our Borough, and with their communities.
- Deliver a mandatory education program for workers and managers about racism, anti-discriminatory practice, black history, and inequality.
- Improve our equality data collection and monitoring, address the gaps and understand why certain groups are overrepresented in care.
- Ensure that life story work is completed with our children and young people.

How we have delivered

We were successful in our bid to secure nearly £0.5m in additional grant funding from the Department for Education to increase our 're-connect' offer to care experienced young adults. Our Lifelong Links programme has funded a dedicated new team focused on supported our young people to identify and re-connect to the important people in their lives, build stronger community connections, reduce loneliness and support them to understand themselves, their culture and identity better. Nearly 100 people, including over 40 care experienced young people, attended our launch event.

In March 2024, we became one of the first councils to sign the immigration support pledge for children in care and care leavers. This means that children in care with immigration and nationality issues will be connected with good quality legal advice and we will take a proactive and informed role in supporting children in care and care leavers to enable them to resolve these issues. This has involved creating new ways to track and monitor the immigration status of our children and young people to ensure we are doing our best as corporate parents to support the resolution of these.

Over 2024, the department recruited to a dedicated permanency lead post in the Corporate Parenting service. This worker has been focused on embedding process and good practice in life-story work within the 0-15 care service to enable children in care to understand more about their journeys into and in care, where they have lived and who with and to understand their families and who they are.

As part of our work to embed anti-racist practice and tackle disproportionality we delivered a weeklong learning and development programme - 'LearningFest' - for all Children's Services staff. The programme included nearly 20 intensive practice development and learning seminars across a range of topics such as the: Adulthood of Black Children; Disproportionality Data Analysis; Anti-Racism and Psychological Safety in the workplace; Community Engagement and the Police. Seminars were led by local and national leaders in tackling discrimination in service delivery, as well as our own Children in Care Council leading a session on Identity.

Children in care, care leavers and foster carers are considered as part of our departmental action plan for the council wide programme Southwark Stands Together tackling discrimination. Data relating to disproportionality is routinely collected and analysed across the service to consider service delivery to children, young people and carers. Our colleagues in the Virtual School are also providing materials and resources to help our children and young people celebrate Black History Month.

What we still need to achieve

We see outstanding examples of work to help children in care and care leavers to understand their life story, with many of our staff using innovative and collaborative approaches to helping children understand their personal history in a meaningful way that is individual to them. This includes helping young people to design and describe their life story in a range of creative ways for example using visual arts and creative writing. But we know that the consistency of this work is not yet what it needs to be, and we will take a whole system approach to our life story work so that everyone has a detailed history from the first contact onwards.

Proactively seeking permanence for children in care remains a council priority. We have been seeking views from special guardians about the support they receive and how we could improve this. We will strengthen our offer for special guardians to increase this permanence option for children in care.

A whole borough that 'cares to care'

Our commitment

Placing delivering for our children and young adults at the heart of everything the council and its partners do. Broadening the voice and experience of our children across all decision making and making Southwark a truly Corporate Parenting Borough. We said we would:

- Review the council's commissioning, planning and licensing arrangements to leverage Social Capital for our children and young adults.
- Establish a shadow Children & Young People's Cabinet to hold the whole council to account to include young people with experience of care.
- Work with our children and young people to develop their own version of this strategy and develop a new pledge.
- Develop a corporate parenting champions network across the council and our key partners.
- Challenge all the major organisations in the Borough to adopt the corporate parenting principles and deliver on a promise to our children.
- Improve how we listen to our children and young adults and embed them and their views in our service improvement activity at every stage.

How we have delivered

Southwark Youth Parliament is now well established and has good links with our children in care council – Speakerbox. Our Youth Parliament and Speakerbox representatives regularly attend a range of groups, forums and council committees to ensure the voice of children and young people is central to the council's deliberations and decisions. Speakerbox have also presented to the council's Directors Forum, with commitments from across the council to improving the corporate parenting offer across the system.

The Staff Expo in the winter of 2023 had representatives from our care experienced community speaking to staff and leaders from across the council about the needs and ambitions of children in care and care leavers. A range of corporate parenting pledges of support were made and have provided a range of new opportunities for care leavers, including career conversations and skills workshops.

Our children and young people regularly co-produce child-friendly versions of our key strategies, documents and reports, that help us to inform and empower their peers to understand the work we are doing to help and support them and strengthen the opportunity for them to challenge and hold us to account for the success of our delivery.

Leaders across the council are increasingly working to break down barriers to improving the one council corporate parenting offer. The Customer Contact Centre helped model how to support employability opportunities for care leavers, by holding targeted information and advice sessions for care leaver applications, and ring-fencing employment opportunities. Resulting in five care leavers joining the team.

We have established a new Innovation Group with children, young people, parents and carers, working alongside staff to explore ideas big and small that can help improve our system and the offer to our care experienced community. The group meets quarterly to present and discuss their ideas for the development of services.

What we still need to achieve

Following on from the publication of the Southwark 2030 Strategy we will launch work with our care experienced children and young people to design the new Corporate Parenting Strategy 2025 – 2030. This will be developed in full collaboration with our children and young people ensuring their voice, lived experience and ambitions are at the heart of the next phase of our whole partnership corporate parenting delivery.

We want to mobilise more support across the council to expand the corporate parenting offer and create more awareness of the opportunities to support our children and young people at all levels of the organisation. We will further develop our network of corporate parenting champions across council departments and develop a new training offer for any staff who would like to volunteer their time, experience and expertise so that people have a better understanding of the needs of our children and young people so that we can provide a stronger and more sustainable support offer.

We are creating more job roles specifically for care experienced young people such as Young Inspectors supporting the development and embedding of a new quality assurance approach for placements of children in care.

The work of the Corporate Parenting Committee

The Corporate Parenting Committee is a cross-party committee, chaired by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees. The committee meets on a quarterly basis to fulfil its role to secure real and sustained improvements in the life chances of children in care and our care leavers.

The committee champions the voice and experience of children in care and care leavers, and has active representation from Speakerbox at all meetings, both to present the views of our children and young people and to scrutinize and join discussions on the decision making and reporting to the committee. Young people's representation at the committee is broad and mirrors the care and care leaver population, ensuring a range of views and experiences are present in discussions.

The committee takes a thematic approach to in depth review of key issues impacting on the life chances of care experienced children and young people.

Housing

Representatives of the council's Housing Services regularly attend the committee to provide updates on the cross-council work to improve the accommodation support offer for children in care and care leavers. The committee heard of the competing demands placed on the council's housing services with high demand and increasing pressure on housing supply within the Borough. But recognised that supporting care leavers is a continuing priority for the services.

The committee heard of the work done to amend the council's Housing Allocation Scheme including changes to promote easier access to housing for care leavers, and about the development of the Pan-London Care Leaver's Housing Compact. Young people were invited by the committee to join workshops and groups taking forward the work to review the allocation scheme and compact.

The committee heard from the young people's steering group about their group's priorities for better housing, which included the desire for more support to find move-on accommodation as young people are approaching 25, and help with more general lifestyle skills for housekeeping, like gardening and home maintenance.

Health

The committee regularly scrutinises the provision of health and wellbeing support for our children and young people. Young people and committee members hold providers to account to ensure they recognise the unique challenges for children in care and care leavers.

Young people have spoken to the committee about particular issues that they wanted to see greater emphasis from health services in supporting them. Young people were keen for more recognition of additional needs and neurodiversity amongst the care experienced population, and they talked to the committee about their concerns about substance abuse and wider determinants of wellbeing.

The committee has taken a particular focus on mental health of both children in care and care leavers but also the carers who support our children and young people. The committee convened a specific working group to look at the issues impacting on the mental health of children subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs) and their families. The committee secured the agreement of partnership services to make better efforts to recognise children on SGOs as care experienced children and young people and to explore opportunities to fund additional support to meet their needs.

The Designated Doctor for Looked After Children, the Designated Nurse for Safeguarding and the Virtual Mental Health Lead for Looked After Children report regularly to the committee and provide an annual report of the Integrated Care System's (ICS) delivery of services to children in care and care leavers. The committee highlighted the strengths in ensuring that where services are having challenges in meeting the needs of care experienced individuals or delays in care are likely, these are escalated promptly and to the most senior levels within the ICS to ensure solutions are found. The committee heard of the continuing issues in ensuring equity of support for those in care placements outside of Southwark and agreed to focus its scrutiny on how to take forward improvement in this area.

Education and employment

The committee monitors the education and employment outcomes for children in care and care leavers through the work of the Virtual School for Looked After Children and the Experienced Practitioners in the 16+ service.

The committee receives the Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher which gives oversight of the educational achievement of all children in care and care leavers, including the barriers to success in education for them. The committee's oversight has driven improvements in the use of new digital solutions for children's Personal Education Plan (PEP), that now allow much stronger multi-agency collaboration in planning for individual children's education. As a result of this, PEP completion timeliness reached 100% in the spring term and audits of these plans showed high quality educational planning for children in care.

The committee heard and placed a particular focus on the support provided to children with additional needs, noting that 43% of children in our care have an identified special educational need, compared to 12% of their non looked after peers. As well as the use of the over £830k of Pupil Premium grant that is received annually to specifically promote the education of school aged children in care.

The committee has also focused on challenging persistent absenteeism for children in care and exploring opportunities to better support our children to access and remain in education. The committee has challenged services to focus more closely on the intersectional needs for our children in care, such as the over prevalence of special educational needs, societal inequalities, and accessing services when placed outside of Southwark; and to ensure that work is focusing on reducing inequity in educational access.

Placements and permanence

The committee has responsibility for oversight over the council's sufficiency strategy to ensure that all our children have the opportunity to live in placements that meet their needs in a place that allows them to maintain links to their families, friends, education and wider societal connections. This includes taking a broader view on whether services are sufficiently championing alternative routes to permanent and stable care for all our children.

On this basis the committee has taken a particularly focused look at the delivery of special guardianship and kinship care arrangements in Southwark, and how services are supporting more children to leave care by moving into these arrangements. The committee challenged services to develop a developmental plan to improve the uptake of these alternative care arrangements over the next municipal year.

The committee has given regular and robust scrutiny on the programme to increase the number and variety of local care placements. This has included regular oversight of the plans to develop and open new council-run Children's Homes in Southwark and the development of new resources to promote in-house foster care.

Quality of practice and services

As well as scrutinising the main themes and issues affecting children in care and care leavers the committee plays a vital role in overseeing the effectiveness of service delivery to our children and young people.

The committee has responsibility for reviewing the outcome of regulatory inspections of Children's Services and monitoring the delivery of action planning in response to inspection. The committee received a report following the Ofsted Focused visit into Care Leavers and agreed to receive further reporting on the delivery of areas highlighted for improvement in that visit.

The committee recognised the particular vulnerabilities faced by our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and agreed to sign the *immigration support pledge* drafted in partnership between the South London Refugee Association and Coram Children's Legal Centre. Committing the council to four key pledges to support children with immigration and nationality issues.

The Annual IRO Report was received by the Committee in April 2024, and this set out the performance of services in meeting our key service obligations. The committee was provided with the details on the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service whose role it is to provide independent scrutiny of services delivered to children in care and ensure our care services are properly meeting the needs of individual children and the whole cohort of children in our care. This includes key performance measures around care planning for children in care and the scrutiny of these. The report also outlines how IRO's ensure that the voices of children and young people are at the heart of their care plans and that their unique experiences and journeys are captured in documents about them.

Celebrating the voice of children and young people together

We continue to be proud of how we purposefully and meaningfully engage with children and young people. We ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard individually in their care plans and strategically with our senior leaders. We prioritise participation in all aspects of service improvement work ensuring that our priorities for development meet the needs of our children and young people.

We have been recruiting for staff within our first children's home and all positions have included a young people's panel that comprised young people with care experience. Young people have then been encouraged to share their views on candidate's suitability to work in the home with the management panel to ensure a good breadth of successful candidates.

Our two Children's Rights Officers (CROs) have continued to support children in care and care leavers through the group Speakerbox to engage, participate and share their views with senior leaders and the committee to ensure that their voices contribute to senior leadership strategic activity and decision making.

In November 2023 we held our children in care celebration event at the James Allen's Girls' School in East Dulwich. This event celebrates the achievements of our children in care and care leavers with award categories such as: music, educational achievements, sport and an outstanding achievement award. The event is organised and sponsored by the care service, the virtual school and draws volunteers from across the service to help organise and run the event. The views of children and young people are integral to the event, and we make sure they have input into the planning and delivery on the night. The event is always well attended by members of the corporate parenting committee, children and young people, carers, social workers and members of the Children's Services leadership team. In 2023, the Mayor of Southwark and the Chief Executive of the council also attended the event and gave out awards.

In December we held a winter ball for our children in care and care leavers to provide a more child focused event. This organised by the CROs and supported by a large number of volunteers from across the department. This was an amazing night that was attended by all ages of children in care and care leavers and there was a number of fun activities and games led by staff. Feedback from our children shows how much they enjoy these events and opportunities to meet and socialise with other children and young people.

In January 2024, Children's Services held a stand at the staff expo to talk to members of staff about corporate parenting duties and responsibilities. This was followed in March 2024 with two members of staff from Children's Services presenting at the Chief Executive's all staff briefing on the council's duties and responsibilities relating to corporate parenting. The presentation was well received by staff from all parts of the council and shows the depth of will to work together to improve life-chances for children in care and care leavers. This presentation was swiftly followed with a SpeakerBox 'take-over' of the Directors forum where children and young people had an opportunity to talk to senior officers in the council about their experiences in care and beyond. Children's Services have had pledges from across the council and we plan to formalise an approach to harnessing the amazing pledges of time and expertise into a programme of support for our children in care over 2024/25.

Our priorities for 2024/25

Our 2021 to 2024 corporate parenting strategy is in the process of being refreshed and we are looking to be bold and ambitious in our plans to develop services for children in care and care leavers for our 2025 to 2030 strategy. Over 2025 to 2030, in-line with the Southwark 2030 strategy, we will be focusing on the best start in life for children in care. Our priorities include:

- Improving the sufficiency of homes in Southwark
- Embedding the use of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment
- Streamlining service delivery to children in care and care leavers ensuring that the resources we have are utilised to their maximum efficiency to impact positively long-term outcomes for children in care.
- Have focus on tackling the underlying reasons for placement breakdown and instability for children in care with the aim of improving the resilience of placements.

These will be achieved by:

- Increasing the number of residential placements in the borough by opening a second children's home
- Undertaking an in-depth needs and demand analysis of children and young people living in semi-independent supported accommodation to better understand if placement demand meets need in the local area.
- Going further to embed our corporate parenting duties across the council to include creating new pathways into employment and work experience both inside and outside the council.

- Increasing the support available to children and their families who are on the edge of care to prevent any further escalation that may require the children to be accommodated in-line with the pledge to invest in prevention in the Southwark 2030 strategy.
- Equipping our foster carers to care for our children and young people by investing in services and recruitment to both provide high levels of support and increase the number of fostering households available to foster.
- Embedding a detailed quality assurance framework for all placements of children in care that are robustly monitored offering partnership improvement work between providers and the local authority.
- Making sure our children in care are able to succeed in their chosen careers by increasing opportunities for work-based training and work skills.
- Assessing the reasons for high rates of persistent absence across school age children in care and creating a detailed action plan to address these.

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