

# Annual Report

## Southwark Fostering Service



### Get the facts on fostering

- Visit [www.southwark.gov.uk/fostering](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/fostering)
- Call 020 7525 4497 or 020 7525 0971
- Email [fostering@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:fostering@southwark.gov.uk)

## **KEY MESSAGES**

Southwark Fostering Service continues to provide good quality care for a significant proportion of children and young people in care to the Council.

2014/15 was a time of considerable change for the service that has built a good foundation for the future.

The recruitment of foster carers declined during 2014/15 and has led to plans for a renewed approach to increase the capacity of the Fostering Service and quality of care offered.

## **PURPOSE OF ANNUAL REPORT**

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

This report details the work of Southwark Council Fostering Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

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

The Fostering Service is a service for children in care. It is committed to supporting stable placements for children and young people where foster care is the identified plan. The service is a key element in the Council's drive to place more children and young people with Southwark foster carers in or near the borough where possible. It is a fundamental part of our sufficiency strategy to develop enough in-borough placements with the range and capacity to meet the needs of Southwark's children who cannot live at home for whatever reason.

The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide high quality care for children in safe, secure and nurturing families by means of recruiting and developing highly skilled foster carers supported by reflective, challenging and enabling social workers in order to give children and young people the best possible childhood to help them become valued members of society, maximising their life-long opportunities

## CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

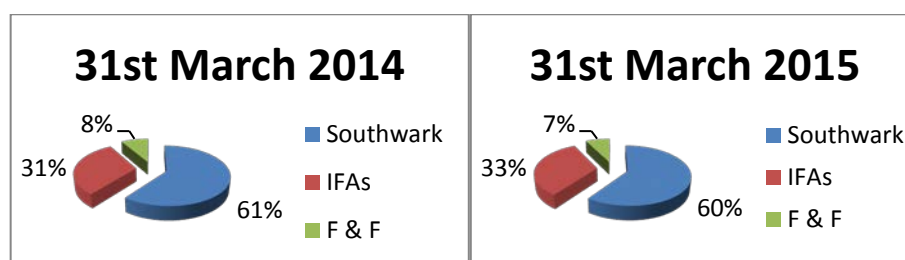
| Activity Overview - children                      | 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2015 | 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2014 |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Children in care                                  | 505                         | 550                         |
| Children in foster care                           | 393<br>(78%)                | 417<br>(76%)                |
| Children with Southwark registered foster carers  | 235                         | 252                         |
| Children with Independent Fostering Agency carers | 129                         | 130                         |
| Children with friends & family foster carers      | 29                          | 35                          |

There has been a significant reduction in the overall number of children in care during 2014/15 of around 8%. This has largely been with younger children in care as a result of the reduction in care proceedings activity and increase in children adopted. The proportion of children in foster care at around 78% rose a little this year and is higher than the national average of 75%.

The last year has seen a decrease in the use of Southwark's Fostering Service. This is directly related to the reduction in children between the ages of 0-5 entering care when historically Southwark Fostering Service has provided for all these placements. Staying Put continues to have an impact on the Fostering Service with 19 young people in such arrangements on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 and 9 children were adopted by Southwark Foster Carers which also had an impact.

There use of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) has continued at around the same level. The continued use has been due to a significant rise in the use of parent and child foster placements as part of a care plan during court proceedings or assessments in the Public Law Outline. It also reflects the continuing difficulty in finding placements for teenagers able to meet their needs within Southwark provision. Children are more likely to be placed with an IFA if they are part of a large sibling group, have challenging behaviour, or have previously had a breakdown with an in-house placement.

The use of Friends and Family Foster care remains similar to previous years at around 6% of the children in care population although it has reduced slightly as a proportion of the number of children in foster care.



*Distribution of foster placement type*

## SOUTHWARK FOSTER CARERS

| <b>Activity Overview – foster carers</b>    | <b>2014/15</b> | <b>2013/14</b> |
|---------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>Foster carers approved</b>               | <b>14</b>      | <b>23</b>      |
| <b>Foster carers ceased approval</b>        | <b>13</b>      | <b>17</b>      |
| <b>Friends &amp; Family carers approved</b> | <b>1</b>       | <b>5</b>       |
| <b>Family Link carers approved</b>          | <b>5</b>       | <b>8</b>       |
| <b>Matches for Long Term Foster Care</b>    | <b>4</b>       | <b>1</b>       |

### **Recruitment of foster carers**

There has been a decline in numbers of foster carers approved. In May 2013 fostering recruitment and assessment was outsourced to an external agency. While there were initial high hopes for this arrangement and it became apparent during 2014/15 that it was failing to deliver both the quantity and quality of foster carers required by Southwark to meet the needs of its children in care. One of the main difficulties with the outsourced arrangements were the issues around quality of assessment of carers, as well as appropriateness of some of the carers who have been assessed and approved. This has resulted in 6 fostering households of the total (25% of those approved) unable to be used by the Council due to concerns, appropriateness and capacity to take placements.

A decision was made not to renew the outsourcing contract which ended in May 2015. A plan was developed to create a Recruitment Hub as a flexible, responsive and high quality method of recruiting foster carers. The Hub includes a dedicated recruitment manager working with a roles dedicated to marketing, initial visits and screening as well as business support. This will then allocate and manage assessments through a team of freelance Independent Social Worker who have been selected for their quality and professionalism.

### **Retention of foster carers**

There has continued to be carers who have left the service. The main reason is resigning through mostly age but sometimes losing interest and commitment to fostering. In the last 2 years 3 out of 30 foster carers who ceased fostering left to go to another fostering agency. 4 foster carer's approvals were ceased due to concerns about the quality of care they offered.

In 2014/15 a new payment scheme was established that significantly improved the financial rewards to carers particularly those with younger children. The working of this scheme was reviewed again during the early part of 2015 and an updated, more detailed version agreed for 2015/16. Payments to foster carers are in 2 main areas, the child's allowance, which Southwark bases on the National Fostering Network rate for every age group, and the fee element which increases depending on the experience and competence of the carer and their ability to offer therapeutic care to the child or young person.

## **Support for foster carers**

All foster carers have a supervising social worker. They provide support and assistance to foster carers to manage the care they give their children and young people. Their approval as a foster carer is reviewed annually by an independent social worker. Arrangements for such reviews are undertaken through an agency specialising in this called Avocet.

The supervising social worker ensures that each carer has a learning and development plan specific to their needs and a comprehensive training programme is offered to foster carers. 2015/16 saw significant developments in the approach of the Fostering Service to offering better quality and more flexible learning opportunities.

In November 2014 a systemic model of social work practice was introduced to the service with a full time qualified family therapist embedded within the service. As well as offering a different way for supervising social workers to be supported in their role, specific behaviour based workshops were developed targeted at common behaviours experienced by carers (for example lying, self-harm and going missing). In January 2015 the whole service was trained in Empathic Behaviour Management to promote an approach to improving the quality of care children experience by focusing on "connection not correction". This will be further developed during 2015/16 as a way of strengthening more challenging placements where specific behaviours are hard to shift and more targeted, skilled care and support is needed.

All foster carers are required to complete Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Carers (TSDs). The supervising social worker ensures they meet all standards and supports them in the task of doing so.

The Foster Carers Handbook has undergone a comprehensive review that commenced in early 2015 and a new updated version should be completed later this year to support foster carers clearly in their role. A similar process commenced with the Learning and Development Programme for Foster Carers with plans to integrate Secure Base as the foundational approach to caregiving for recruiting, assessing, supporting and reviewing foster carers. Secure Base is a framework for understanding caregiving based on attachment theory and particularly suited to foster care developed by Professor Gillian Schoffield and Dr Mary Beek at the University of East Anglia over the last 20 years and is well regarded in the sector. Empathic Behaviour Management as described above will be developed as a more specialised therapeutic approach around challenging behaviour that builds on the Secure Base approach.

The Southwark Foster Care Association (SFCA) is active in supporting foster carers and was instrumental in working with the Fostering Service to establish the new payments policy. Membership is available to all foster carers and they produce a regular newsletter for carers. They meet approximately every two months and invite different representatives from Children's Social Care to discuss issues. Separate meetings have been held with the Head of Service for Permanence, Fostering Practice Group Lead and SFCA to improve communication around how to continue to work together to improve the Fostering Service.

An annual Christmas Foster Carers Dinner and Dance took place for foster carers in December 2014 at the JK Banquet Hall in Forest Hill. Over 150 people were present and as usual it was a thoroughly enjoyable event where the Council says thank you to its foster carers for the huge commitment they give to children and young people in care.

## **Staying Put**

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a duty on the local authority to provide 'staying put' arrangements for fostered young people to continue to live with their former foster carer beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and potentially up to the age of 21 years if they are in education. This is a welcome development for young people who have not developed the maturity to move into independent living. 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.

During 2014/15, 35 young people began staying put arrangements with Southwark Foster Carers on reaching their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 19 young people were in such arrangements with 5 of them over 18 years old. The previous year there were 22 young people in such arrangements. The average length of time for such an arrangement is around 4 months but 30% of the time in staying put is by 19 yrs old or over which is a significant increase on the previous year. This has and will continue to have resource implications for the service in relation to availability of placements for teenagers as no other children can be placed within these placements until these young people move on.

## **Short Breaks Care**

The fostering service had 46 short break respite carers offering care to 46 children with disabilities one weekend a month allowing the child's parents to have a break. Short break foster carers are specialist carers assessed and matched to a particular child. These carers generally develop a good relationship with parents and often provide care for the children for many years. The short break service is part of the wider support service for families where a child has a disability and enables children to remain within their families and communities while at the same time providing a much needed break for parents.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

The Fostering Service has a clear quality assurance framework. This includes: effective fostering panel scrutiny; feedback from foster carers; management review including audit activity; as well as learning from complaints.

## **Fostering Panel**

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

During 2014/15 the Fostering Panel chair resigned due to the finding the travel too difficult from where she lived and a new chair was permanently recruited to. The panel has been strengthened in regard to safeguarding by a Child Protection Coordinator being recruited to as a key panel member and continues to have a strong multi-disciplinary focus with the vice-Chair being an Educational Psychologist.

There are quarterly meetings with the management group of the Fostering Service and the independent chair and vice-chairs as well as other key staff to facilitate good communication between the panel and the agency to focus on continuing improvement.

### **Foster Carer feedback**

In November 2015 a foster carer survey was undertaken to find out from foster carers how they experienced the service. 32 carers returned it and the responses really helped gain a better understanding of the fostering service provided. Some of the most positive headlines are that 75% of carers felt the service was either good or excellent and 87% felt the same about training and learning opportunities as well as the support received from their supervising social worker.

The areas identified that we need to improve upon are our communication with foster carers and each other; our involvement of foster carers in decision making; and our systems and procedures so social workers can spend more time doing their jobs well.

These are helpful themes that we will be working on during 2015.

### **Management overview and audit activity**

Case file audits have been carried out during 2014/15 and an audit plan developed for 2015/16. There was an identified need to improve the quality of recording and a need to focus more on the quality of annual reviews of approval. The quality of fostering assessments for approval of carers continued to be a concern that contributed to the ending of arrangements to externally commission such assessments.

### **Complaints**

In 2014/15 there were four complaints against the Fostering Service. Of these, two were resolved at stage one and one has been moved to a stage two investigation which is ongoing. The fourth one was withdrawn. Two complaints were about the response by the service when a young person had damaged the home. One complaint was about allowances. All of these complaints will be addressed through the stronger and more consistent management approach and improved payments policy for 2015/16. One foster carer referred the decision to cease her approval to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) which upheld the decision. The IRM is an independent panel managed by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (now Coram BAAF) to provide an extra independent layer of scrutiny in certain circumstances like ceasing the approval of a foster carer.

## REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS DURING 2014/15

The following significant developments were made in the Fostering Service during 2014/15

**Establishment of a systemic model of social work practice** in November 2014. This included the forming of 4 practice groups led by an Advanced Practitioner and supported by a full time business support role. They meet weekly and share responsibility for work. There is a clinical practitioner who works full time within the service developing systemic practice. One of the Practice Groups focuses on Short Breaks (Family Link).

**Increase in resources** to more effectively deliver a higher quality Fostering Service. The resources were re-evaluated through the Social Work Matters program to ensure that the effective capacity was available to provide the most effective support to foster carers.

**Recruitment of a stable and experienced management team** able to take the service forward. The team was not completed until January 2015 with the recruitment of an experienced Fostering Manager with a track record of quality and improvement. This is a good platform to develop the Fostering Service.

**Introduction of a new Payments to Carers Policy.** This was a big change to the previous approach with improved fees given to carers as well as clearer written information about allowances, fees and other entitlement. This was further reviewed and developed with a high value placed on principles of transparency, accountability and fairness, as well as ensuring foster carers were rewarded fairly for the care they give to children and young people.

## DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR 2015/16

2014/15 was a time on unprecedented change for children's social work in Southwark. Southwark Fostering Service has always delivered a good service as recognised by its last inspection by Ofsted in November 2011. The next 3 years are seen as a time of renewal for the Fostering Service to embed and grow the new model of systemic social work practice, built on a foundation of the Secure Base caregiving framework, while developing bespoke therapeutic approaches for more challenging behaviour through Empathic Behaviour Management (EBM) and systemic practice.

The foundations for the renewal of the Fostering Service were dug and set in 2014/15. The next 3 years will see a continued program of renewal that aims to develop a more child centred service with improved quality of care offered to children alongside increased capacity to meet the needs of Southwark children and young people.

The Development Plan 2015/16 has specific objectives ensuring:

**Quality and stability of placements – to improve the offer of therapeutically informed and supported care.** We will establish Secure Base<sup>1</sup> as our foundational approach to caregiving for recruiting, assessing, supporting and reviewing foster carers. We will develop a comprehensive learning and development offer for foster carers incorporating Empathic Behaviour Management (EBM)<sup>2</sup> and systemic practice. We will develop support systems around carers through developing a Placements Service alongside the Fostering Service to improve placement choice and strengthen matching and support to placements from the outset.

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<sup>1</sup> Schoffield, G & Beek, M, The Secure Base Model – promoting attachment & Resilience in fostering and adoption, BAAF 2014

<sup>2</sup> Elliot, A Empathic Behaviour Management for Foster and Adoptive Families, Jessica Kingsley Publications 2013



**Capacity of Service – to increase the number of active fostering households by 25%.** This is a 3 year objective to dramatically shift the balance of caregiving for Southwark children more towards our own Fostering Service, nearer to Southwark, building on incentives like the Council Tax scheme that will roll out during 2015/16. We will develop a new recruitment hub better able to recruit the right high quality foster carers our children need and launch a new modern recruitment campaign as a priority using all ways of modern media to deliver effective fostering recruitment.

**Friends and Family Carers – to increase the use of and support to and learning offered.** We will offer support for all carers temporarily approved under Regulation 24 and develop the learning offer for them. We hope in the longer term to see a greater proportion of children live with friends and families foster care as part of a larger strategy around enabling young people to live with their families as far as possible.

**Long Term Foster Care – to have a clear policy, practice and scheme with more internal placements.** We will develop this by building on our successful approach to delegated authority and through the course of the year implement the new regulations around long term foster care. 2015/16 will see the development of clear policy and practice while subsequent years will see the developing of a clearer scheme as part of the wider approach to renewing the service.

**Workers have the knowledge and expertise to make a real difference to children’s wellbeing.** We will continue to develop our workforce to improve their skills and abilities to children’s lives through their carers. During 2015/16 we will recruit to establish a fully permanent and highly competent workforce and continue to train all advance practitioners in systemic practice to lead the development and learning of the workforce. All practice groups will have a supervising social worker trained in Theraplay Level 1 and there will be further training and development to build the identity and skills base of supervising social workers.

We will ensure that all practice, learning & development is informed by a shared child-centred commitment to excellence within the Fostering Service.