

Fostering

makes an extraordinary difference

2015/16

Annual Report

Southwark Fostering Service



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.

2015/16 has been a time for consolidating the changes within the service and further developing high quality, cost effective foster placements.

The recruitment of Foster Carers declined during 2014/15 and led to plans for a renewed approach to increase the capacity of the Fostering Service during 2015/16. The targets set for recruiting new fostering households have been ambitious, however a noted growth area in the number of family and friends foster carer households is significant.

Fostering recruitment across London is a challenge with many council experiencing challenges in recruiting the number of Foster Carers to meet the demand of placements. This has led Southwark to review the recruitment hub model for 2016/17 to consider what changes are required to achieve a more effective demand and supply model.

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 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016.

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" (Fostering Service January 2015)

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE ¹

Activity Overview - children	31 st March 2014	31 st March 2015	31 st March 2016
Children in care	550	505	472
Children in foster care	417 (76%)	393 (78%)	369 (78%)
Children with Southwark registered foster carers	252	235	273
Children with Independent Fostering Agency carers	130	129	96
Children with friends & family foster carers	35	29	34

There has been a significant reduction in the overall number of children in care during 2015/16 of around 7%. The proportion of children in foster care at around 78% is the same as 2014/15 year and is higher than the national average of 75%.

The last year has seen an increase in the use of Southwark's internal fostering provision. Staying Put continues to have an impact on the Fostering Service with 40 young people in such arrangements on 31st March 2016.² While it is potentially beneficial for care leavers to have support beyond the age of 18, the challenge for the service is to not only support these arrangements but also to increase capacity to accommodate new referrals.

There has been a noted reduction over the last 12 months on the use of Independent Fostering Agencies. This may in part be due to the establishment of a dedicated Placements Service within the Fostering Service since September 2015 who are successfully working better to place a number of sibling groups with in-house Carers.

Positive feedback was noted by a judge in a recent case whereby 'Southwark fostering successfully placed a sibling group of 3 together to in a timely and child-centred manner.

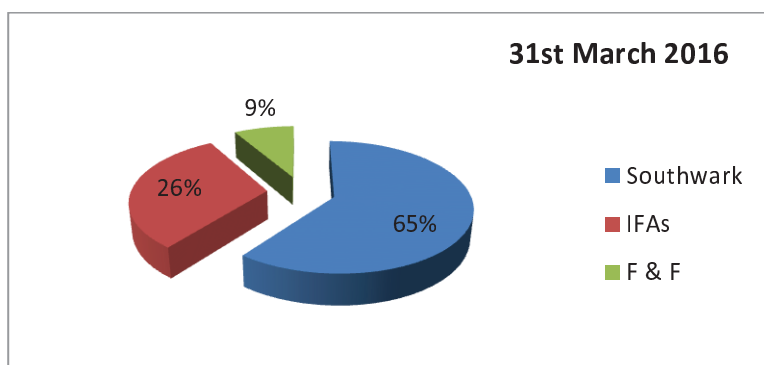
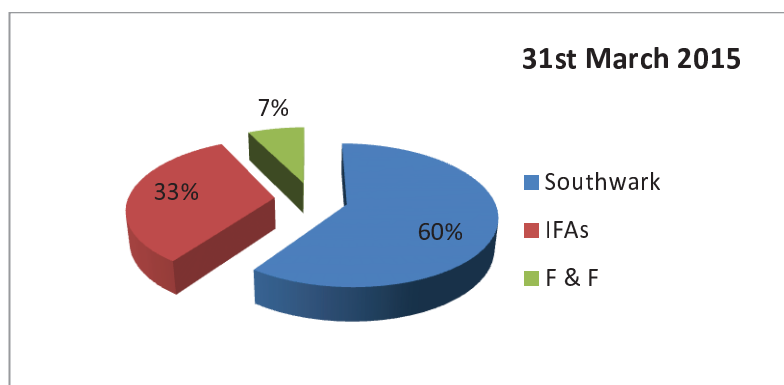
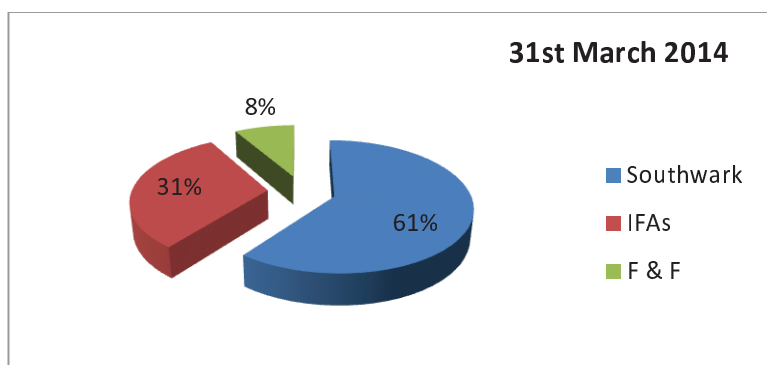
Finding placements for teenagers with challenging behaviour, gang affiliation and those at risk of child sexual exploitation are a growing challenge and often require the use of external IFA's.

The use of Friends and Family Foster care is a little higher than previous years at around 9% of the children in foster care. The fostering service has improved its offer to friends and family carers, with dedicated Supervising Social Workers and assessors. A support group specifically for friends and family carers is soon to be established. The fostering services in partnership with Legal have delivered training seminars on the approvals process for family and friends foster carers across children's services. It is anticipated this will improve the experience of families and lead to better outcomes for children.

¹ Data submitted on CLA by Southwark Children's Services as part of the CLA 903 dataset to the DfE 30/06/2016

² Data on Staying Put submitted by Southwark Children's Services as part of the CLA 903 dataset to the DfE 30/06/2016

DISTRIBUTION OF FOSTER PLACEMENT TYPE - OVER LAST 3 YEARS



These figures illustrate a gradual increase in foster placements with Southwark Foster Carers by 4% since last year and a 2% increase with Family and Friends Carers. A reduction in IFA provision is evident over the last 3 years which highlights better use of Southwark internal provision.

SOUTHWARK FOSTER CARERS

Activity Overview – foster carers	2015/16	2014/15
Foster carers approved	9	14
Foster carers ceased approval	4	13
Friends & Family carers approved	9	1
Family Link carers approved	5	5
Matches for Long Term Foster Care	3	4

Recruitment of foster carers

Southwark fostering recruitment and assessment was outsourced to an external agency for a two year period from 2013-2015. The outsourcing contract ended and fostering recruitment resumed in house from 20th May 2015. Recruitment activity within the last year has been developing as the recruitment hub has become established and learning what works effectively. Within 2015/16, a total of 9 new households were approved to foster, in addition to a further nine friends and families carers approved in the same period. The most critical factor in meeting timescales for assessments has been the significant delays with DBS checks hindered at Stage 4. This is a challenge not only to Southwark or indeed London wide, but is national challenge to all Local Authorities. The fostering network is working with the DfE and DBS to resolve these challenges. Receiving completed medicals efficiently has contributed to delays with regular meetings with Southwark medical advisors now underway to manage this better.

Keeping Southwark children as close to their family origin where appropriate is a key measure of positive outcomes for children and young people. Since April 2016, a recruitment incentive to attract Southwark residents to foster is Council Tax relief to all approved Southwark foster carers. Of the 9 newly approved fostering households in 2015/16, 7 are Southwark residents. It is anticipated this offer will attract new foster carers to Southwark for the year ahead.

In January 2016, Southwark engaged an external charity Home for Good to work in partnership with church and faith communities to attract and recruit foster carers to Southwark. This contract generated minimal enquiries of which none were viable and was terminated after 6 months.

There have been considerable challenges for Southwark in recruiting foster carers for the borough and surrounding areas which prompted a review of the hub. It has been accepted that the hub model requires diverse skills and capabilities to lead a customer facing service to manage and compete in a competitive and evolving social care market. A proposed new structure will be implemented in 2016/17.

Retention of foster carers

The fostering service responds promptly and efficiently to issues and concerns raised by foster carers. The last year has demonstrated improved communication channels with carers –via newsletters, telephone and email reminders of forthcoming training and events. The Supervising Social Workers visit carers monthly to support them in their role, assessing the support needed prior to each new placement which contributes to increasing carers' confidence and capabilities in taking children with high needs.

Consistency and continuity in relationships are very important for foster carers. During 2015/16, new permanent members of staff were appointed and the service expanded with the creation of the dedicated Placements Service and the Recruitment Hub. Both these new service developments will enable the service to provide a more efficient and cost effective service, allowing staff to invest time and effort into the creation of an excellent service for foster carers.

In April 2015 a new training program for Southwark Foster Carers was launched which supported the new payment approach more closely with clearer development pathways for Foster Carers. The program was developed to integrate a systemic and therapeutic approach to retain, support and enable foster Carers to look after children who require more than "ordinary" parenting. Much of the training is underpinned by the Secure Base Model as a foundation, and the more advanced Empathic Behaviour Management. The aim of the two models empowers foster Carers to develop confidence and equip them with the right skills and techniques to help children experience safe and secure care.

Feedback from Southwark Independent Reviewing Service confirmed two separate Foster Carers describing the EBM training as "brilliant". They talked enthusiastically about how they have made the transition from taking on board the theory to applying it effectively to their every day practice. Training and development is important to foster carers and if they value the training on offer, they are less likely to consider moving to another agency.

The revised payment model has been well received by the foster carers with greater transparency and consistency in the way carers are paid. It offers an incentive to support continued professional development and also to improve their financial situation. It has helped to focus carers on the importance of training linked to the quality of care for children and young people. This all contributes to retaining Southwark foster carers and the Councils offer remaining competitive with neighbouring boroughs.

The last 12 months has highlighted key movement in the number of foster carers resigning within Southwark. A total of 18 foster carers have resigned, with 4 foster carers officially deregistered within 2015/16 due to change of circumstances and quality of care. Five households resigned through retirement and age. Other reasons which led to resignation included health reasons change in work commitments, changes within the household and transitioning to Staying Put carers. In the last year, 2 of the 18 foster carers who ceased fostering left to go to another agency.

Support for foster carers

Despite its rewards, foster care can be a demanding vocation. Southwark's fostering service recognises this and understands good outcomes for children can only be achieved when foster carers feel valued, supported and equipped to do this very important job.

Support is a generic term which in a fostering context encompasses the following:

- Allocation and support of a dedicated Supervising Social Worker during the working week and access to out of hours support 7 days a week.
- Foster Carer induction for all newly approved households and as a refresh to existing Foster Carers. A comprehensive post approval training programme that incorporates therapeutic care giving model. The aim of this approach is to help Foster Carers feel confident and equip them with the right skills and techniques to help children experience safe and secure care. Southwark adopted the Secure Base model as its framework for therapeutic care giving by Carers which help children and young people move towards greater security and build resilience. This model was launched in September 2015 and has been incorporated into other training courses, in addition to a more advanced approach to caring – Emphatic Behaviour Management. There has been a renewed interest in training with approximately 40% of Foster Carers benefitting from this approach.
- Training pathway for Foster Carers to enhance professional development and quality of placements linked to a clear payment model.
- Therapeutic intervention and support from a lead clinician, medical advisor, education, and Care link service to support children in placements and the fostering household.
- Regular Carer support groups accessible for all foster caring households.
- Regular communication and information sharing is maintained via emails, quarterly fostering newsletters and occasional coffee mornings. The practice coordinators are office based and offer a central point of contact for all Foster Carers daily.
- Southwark Foster Care Association (SFCA) is an active foster Carers group that brings Southwark foster Carers together to provide a stronger voice to influence and develop services for Southwark. Carers benefit by having an opportunity to come together and share ideas to develop the service for them and the children in their care. The aim is to enhance foster care involvement by empowering Carers to jointly lead social events, recruitment activities and buddy schemes etc.
- An annual foster Carers dinner dance is held to thank Carers for their commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and young people in Southwark.
- Recognising and acknowledging the dedication and commitment of Southwark Foster Carers who make a difference to vulnerable children and young people is evident in the nominations and awards - Southwark Civic Awards, Southwark Life and Fostering Network magazine.
- Membership and advice to Fostering Network which offer independent advice and support with allegations.

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 18th 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 2015/16, 35 young people began staying put arrangements with Southwark Foster Carers on reaching their 18th birthday. On 31st March 2015 there were 19 young people remaining in Staying Put arrangements, while on 31st March 2016 the number had risen to 40. This number is likely to rise and this presents a particular challenge for the fostering service, as the existence of a staying put arrangement in a foster home reduces the Carers capacity to take new placements. A proposal to develop a Supported Lodgings Scheme is being considered for 2016/17. This would provide an alternative to young people remaining with Carers, where a young person is ready to live more independently.

Short Breaks Care

The Fostering Service had 30 short break respite carer households 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; data and performance scrutiny and learning from complaints. Please see below for more detail on the audits undertaken in 2015/16.

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), Director of Children's Social Care. Southwark's Fostering Panel meets once a month.

Fostering and adoption services are undergoing significant changes in the way in which they deliver services and secure permanence for looked after children and young people. In addition to the planned changes of adoption regionalisation, Southwark have agreed to move to a combined panel which reflects the transition to a more integrated permanence service.

The Adoption Panel Advisor is leading the project of implementing a combined permanence panel for Southwark which will take effect from October 2106. Based on panel members' consultation, there is a phased approach to this transition and the adoption panel chair has resigned after a long tenure of 10 years. The combined panel will be chaired by the fostering panel chair that has both personal and professional experience of fostering and adoption. The panel has also successfully transitioned to a paperless panel where all papers are sent electronically in advance to panel members. This has greatly assisted administrative efficiencies and is timely and well organised. The panel is supported by a well organised panel coordinator and has a diverse panel membership.

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

Results from a recent Foster Carer Survey found:

92% considered the support they receive from their SSW to be good or excellent.

75% considered the overall support they receive from the service as good or excellent.

50% considered the support from the child's Social Worker as good or excellent.

Positive feedback.

Many carers who completed the questionnaire wrote about their positive experiences of being foster carers for Southwark. For example:

'We have received training in Empathic Behaviour Management from the Fostering Service. This has been very effective in helping us to grow C as a young adult, helping him to develop self management and self awareness skills. Over the past 18 months we have seen a cessation of violent outbursts and a reduction in abusive behaviour from C.'

We always felt that there was a disconnect between the support services given to A (foster child) and his mum (who he doesn't live with). A's social worker has developed a more relationships based, whole family approach and has built up a rapport with A's mum. This has helped him gain credibility with A and made A and his mum much happier.'

All respondents said they had benefited from the training provided to them as foster carers, especially Empathic Behaviour Management, Secure Base, Challenging Behaviour, CSE and Safeguarding.

Management overview and audit activity

The Quality Assurance Lead for Permanence and the Fostering managers have completed three audits of the Fostering Service in 2015/16. The audits were: Foster Carer Annual Reviews, Foster Carer records, and Safeguarding. Improvement plans with a timescale and actions were written following the analysis of each audit, for example resolving out of date DBS forms and increasing the availability of safeguarding training sessions are currently in progress.

Complaints

Complaints made against the fostering service are taken very seriously and investigated thoroughly by the complaints team and by fostering managers. The learning from complaints is shared amongst the whole team, and changes are made where appropriate to the practice and processes of the team.

There have been four complaints made against the fostering service in 2015/16. Two of the complaints were upheld, and two were partially upheld. Two of the complaints concerned late payments, and were a result of administrative errors and a lack of planning. New systems have now been put in place to ensure that all payments are made in a timely fashion.

The other two complaints were about breaches of confidentiality, that the carers felt unsupported by their supervising social worker and the length of time it took to investigate allegations. Procedures, standards and staff training have been improved as a result.

DEVELOPMENTS DURING 2015/16

The following significant developments were made in the Fostering Service during 2015/16

The foundations for the renewal of the Fostering Service were set in 2014/15. Activity during the period 2015/16 was aimed at building on these and had the following focus:

- Recruiting to team vacancies and strengthening the effectiveness of the fostering managers' group
- Developing the role of the practice coordinators
- Developing the recruitment hub to increase the number of good quality foster Carers
- Creating a dedicated placements service to ensure better planning and matching and increasing placement stability
- Regular practice audits in order to identify key areas for improvement
- Embedding the therapeutic care giving models introduced in 2014/15 – Emphatic Behaviour Management, Reflective Practice, Theraplay and Secure Base
- Extending and developing the training offer to foster Carers and increasing training participation
- Updating the foster carers handbook
- Improving placement stability
- Developing a model for achieving permanence in foster care
- Developing an explicit set of practice standards and expectations for all staff in the service in relation to allegations, payments to Carers, supervisory visits, responding to complaints and safeguarding concerns.

REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR 2015/16

Quality and stability of placements – to improve the offer of therapeutically informed and supported care. The Placements Service makes use of the Secure Base Model to consider potential matches between children and available carers. This allows an honest appraisal of carers' strengths and areas where support will be needed if a placement is made. The clinician can provide initial advice to carers regarding suitable approaches to caring for a child with particular needs. Three further six-day training programmes on EBM have been delivered during 2015/16 which equates to approximately 40% of carers now using this approach.

Capacity of Service – to increase the number of active fostering households by 25% The recruitment hub had been operating for ten months and during that time nine new fostering households were approved, (with another two expected the following month) and a further nine friends and family carers. This figure is significant in increasing the capacity of the fostering service.

This is a 3-year objective to dramatically shift the balance of care giving for Southwark children towards our own Fostering Service, with carers living in or near to Southwark. The Council Tax scheme was implemented in 2016 and is monitoring the effectiveness of this as an incentive to foster for Southwark. The recruitment hub is working closer with Southwark's Communications Team to develop a more modern approach to recruitment, using all forms of modern media to deliver effective fostering recruitment.

The recruitment co-ordinator is involved in achieving permanence for looked after children through building up expertise in producing profiles of children so that these can be circulated to in-house carers, used in advertising and other forms of family finding.

In addition, the placements service has developed better systems to accurately identify carers available to take placements that maximise. The fostering service are developing their carers to accept more difficult placements and establishing identified placement support from the outset. Better deployment of resources has been a significant factor in the reduction of placements made with independent agencies in 2015/16.

Friends and Family Carers – to increase this resource, support and learning offer

The fostering service has improved its offer to friends and family carers, now providing dedicated supervising social workers and assessors, with the development of a support group specifically for friends and family carers.

A time limited working group was established to map out the approval process and decision making for Family and Friends Foster Carers with representatives from across children's social care. This led to a schedule of training seminars being delivered across the services by representatives from Southwark Fostering and Legal service. The aim is to improve the quality of decision making and lead to better outcomes for children.

Family and friends carers are invited to all training provided by the fostering service, including preparation training, post-approval induction training, Training Support and Development standards, and all other training relevant to their placement.

Long Term Foster Care – to have a clear policy, practice and scheme with more internal placements Members of the fostering service have been involved in department wide conversations about improving permanence outcomes for children and have helped to shape the policy. The service has also developed a template for recording plans for achieving permanence, which is currently under consultation.

The Placements Service and Recruitment Hub are both actively involved in achieving permanence meetings where the plan for a child may not be adoption. There is the need to continue recruiting families for older children and sibling groups, while maintaining an appropriate balance between promoting permanence with suitable existing carers and utilising the pool of available temporary carers.

Workers have the knowledge and expertise to make a real difference to children’s wellbeing. The service has continued to develop its workforce to improve the skills and abilities, through reflective practice groups, team training events and individual personal development plans. During 2015/16, vacancies have been replaced with permanent staff appointments and continuation to train all advanced practitioners in systemic practice. In addition all practice groups now have a supervising social worker trained in Theraplay Level 1. The knowledge and skills statements for social workers have been used as the basis of each worker’s individual work plan for the year.

DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR 2016/17

Quality and stability of placements – Making Placements Better

- Develop and implement an Access to Resource Service to offer an integrated and coordinated service to manage resources effectively to make placements better. This will maximise placement choice, strengthen matching and support placements from the outset.
- Review and amend the permanence structure to realign the teams within the appropriate function.
- Recruit to vacancies to achieve a competent and motivated permanent fostering workforce.
- Review and evaluate the Advanced Practitioner role to strengthen and develop leadership and management support in the fostering service.
- Embed the Secure Base framework as the care giving model across the permanence service.

Permanent Fostering – policy and practice guidance with a scheme for more internal placements

- Develop a permanence consultation approach and offer to ensure early permanence planning for fostering or kinship is considered at the earliest opportunity for children and young people.
- Review and streamline the long term fostering process for children whose care plan is permanent fostering. This will include a refresh of the policy and practice guidance to comply with statutory changes.
- Supportive Lodgings Scheme to be developed to support young people’s transition to independence and balance the demand and requirements of “Staying Put” arrangements.

Capacity of Service – to increase the number of active fostering households by 25%

- Review and evaluate the effectiveness of the fostering recruitment hub and implement developments for 2016/17.
- Implement the fostering recruitment strategy with a much greater focus on utilising digital and social media.
- Develop a recruitment group that incorporates foster cares and Speaker box representatives to support recruitment activities for 2016/17.
- Refresh and maintain a foster carer register to ascertain actual vacancies. Carers who have routinely been vacant need to be resolved to either increase their scope to foster or cease approval.
- Friends and Family Carers – analyse and review service need to respond to increase in demand and efficiencies.