

**Fostering**  
makes an extraordinary difference



2018/19

# Annual Report

Southwark Fostering Service

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## **KEY MESSAGES**

Southwark were visited by Ofsted in January 2019 for a focused visit looking at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, including disabled children. Ofsted highlighted areas for growth and development but concluded that 'Children in care in Southwark receive effective support that helps many of them to achieve good outcomes' and further 'they continue to show drive and determination in sustaining and improving outcomes for children in care'.

A real area of success for the Fostering and Care Services for 2018/2019 is a continued focus on ensuring children for whom their permanence plan is long term fostering are matched with long term foster carers and permanency is secured. The number of children being matched with their carers long term in 2018/2019 was 16 children.

The percentage of children in care placed with in-house foster carers has reduced from 54% in 2017/18 to 46% in 2018/19. However as Friends and Family carers are approved carers by Southwark if we include these 47 children then the percentage is 59% of children placed with carers approved by Southwark.

12 new fostering households were recruited this year, 10 of these within Southwark. This is good compared to the great majority of our London neighbours.

Southwark Fostering Service remains the largest inner London borough Fostering Service in respect of the total number of children placed with in house foster carers. In comparing with outer London boroughs the only borough that offers more local authority foster placements is the London Borough of Croydon. \*(Data based on the National Statistics Fostering in England 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018)

Southwark Fostering Service continued to work together with the University of East Anglia to embed the Secure Base Model of therapeutic Caregiving. The service has worked in partnership with foster carers and to roll out training to the Care Service and this will continue to roll out further across all of Children's Services in 2019/2020 as is a key part of the Southwark Practice framework.

## **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 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

When a child enters care, it is one of the most important and significant changes in their life and it is crucial that the families who look after these most vulnerable children through foster care 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 children who cannot remain with or return safely to their birth families, good quality foster care offers the best opportunity for them to experience a warm and loving family environment while the most appropriate plans are made for their future.

The Fostering Service is a service for children in 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. This year the Fostering Service recruited 12 new fostering households, 10 of whom live in Southwark as well as reapproving one carer who lives in the borough but had taken a break from fostering for a couple of years

The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide high-quality care for children and young people in safe, secure and nurturing families. The Fostering Service in 2018- 2019 have fully embedded the Secure Base Caregiving Model within the Fostering Service and worked to embed across Children's Services in particular the Care Service. We aim to develop highly skilled foster carers, supported by reflective, challenging and enabling social workers. Our goal is to give children and young people the best possible childhood, to help them become valued members of society and to maximise their life opportunities.

### **Southwark's response to the national fostering context**

During 2017-2018 two key reports on Fostering commissioned by the government were published:

- The Education Select Committee Enquiry into Fostering Published in December 2017
- Foster Care in England Report Commissioned by the Department of Education and published in February 2018 making 36 recommendations for Government.

Both reports state clearly that, for many children and young people, foster care provides the protective - and loving - environment that they need to develop and thrive. Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers write:

*"The care system in England, in which fostering plays a predominant role, has an undeservedly poor reputation. The reality is that fostering is a success story."*

The Government published its response to these two reports in July 2018 and their vision for fostering and children in care. The vision is broken down to five areas:

- Children are listened to and involved in decisions about their lives
- Foster parents receive the support and respect they need and deserve to care for children
- There are enough high quality fostering placements in the right place, at the right time
- Local Authorities commission placements according to the needs of the child
- Children experience stability regardless of permanence plan.

This vision chimes with the Fostering Service's Business Plan. The key developments for 2019/20 are set out in the final section of this report..

## CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE IN SOUTHWARK

<b>Activity Overview - children</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2014</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2015</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2016</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2017</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2018</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2019</b>
<b>Children in care</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>498</b>	<b>491</b>	<b>459</b>
<b>Children in foster care</b>	<b>424 (77%)</b>	<b>390 (78%)</b>	<b>369 (78%)</b>	<b>381 (77%)</b>	<b>381 (78%)</b>	<b>385 (84%)</b>
<b>Children with Southwark registered foster carers</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>205</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Children with Independent Fostering Agency carers</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Children with friends &amp; family foster carers (approved at Panel)</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Matches for Long Term Foster Care during the year</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>

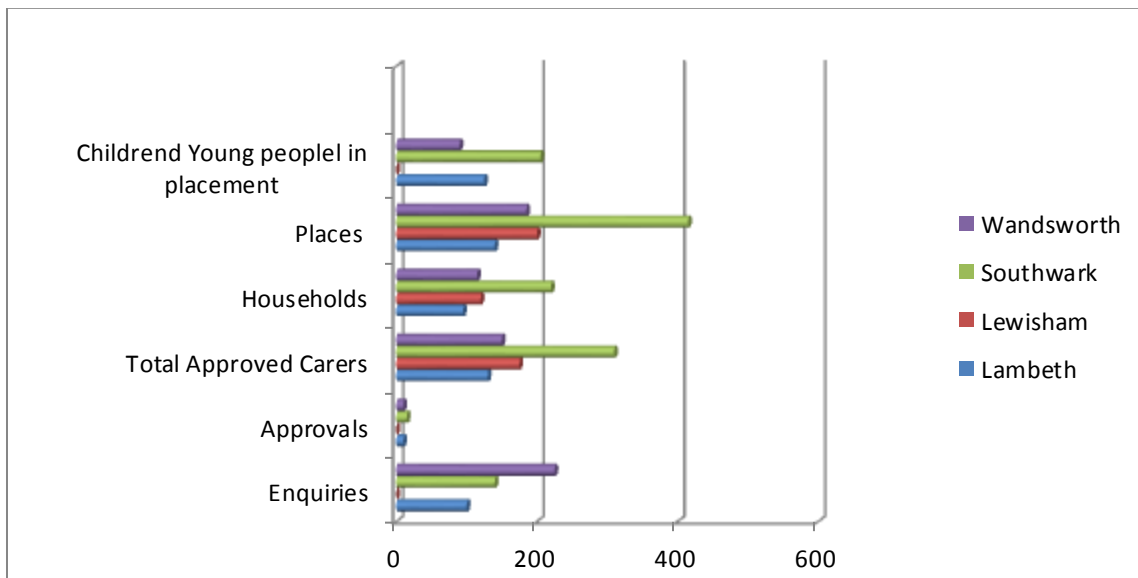
\*Figures for 2018/2019 remain provisional subject to the final submission to the DfE.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 the number of children in care was 459. This is a decrease of 32 (7%) compared to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018. The proportion of children in foster care (all types including connected carers) is now 84% which compares very favourably with the England average of 73%. The use of Independent Fostering Agencies has increased, up from 138 to 159. In part this can be attributed to a decrease in the number of Southwark (unrelated) foster carers with 20 ceasing to be approved this year, and an older cohort of young people with more complex needs. Southwark are doing well in ensuring children in care are being placed wherever possible in a family setting, with 47 children placed with connected carers, an increase of 8 since 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018.

The tables below illustrate how we compare with neighbouring boroughs in relation to fostering capacity. This is taken from the last publicly available data. It does show that Southwark continues to be a relatively high capacity service.

**Information on Fostering approved households at 31/3/2018**

	Lambeth	Lewisham	Southwark	Wandsworth	Total
<b>Enquiries</b>	100	0	140	225	465
<b>Approvals</b>	10	0	15	10	35
<b>Total Approved Carers</b>	130	175	310	150	765
<b>Households</b>	95	120	220	115	550
<b>Places</b>	140	200	415	185	940
<b>Children and Young people in placement</b>	125	0	205	90	420



## **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children**

As of the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2019 the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children was 45, a decrease of 8 since 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 when there were 52. Of these unaccompanied children 38 were placed in foster care - 84%. This proportion has increased since 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018 when 71% were placed in foster care. 29 out of 38 (76%) were placed with Southwark approved foster carers and 9 out of 38 (24%) were placed in IFA foster placements.

## **Changing Age Profile**

Since 2016/2017 The age profile of children in care has been increasing. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 42% of children and young people in care were aged 15 or older, as opposed to 38% on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017. The proportions of children aged 0-5 has decreased, 29% of children in care were aged 0 -9 in 2016/17 but in 2017/2018 this fell 5% to 24% and in 2018/19 remained at 24%. This has reduced the number of younger children requiring placements and highlighted the need for placements for older children and sibling groups.

## **Southwark's Provision of Foster Carers**

Southwark remains committed to provision of in house foster carers for children in care and the need to recruit more carers who are able to look after adolescents and sibling groups remains a focus. The last year has seen a disappointing decrease in the percentage use of Southwark's internal fostering provision from 54% in 2017/18 to 46% in 2018/19. Recruitment of foster carers is increasing but this is not yet making sufficient impact as at the same time many foster carers aged 70 plus are retiring and as part of service improvement and following implementation of the Secure Base Therapeutic Caregiving Model, some carers have not been able to meet the standards of care that the service requires and have decided to resign or in a very few cases it has been recommended they cease to foster.

The Access to Resources Team (ART) established in 2017, continues to unify and strengthen the placement finding process, increasing the shared focus on improving placement stability and getting the right placement for children as soon as possible. The joint collaboration and decision making between ART and fostering colleagues improves placement stability primarily by getting the best possible matched placement for each child while in parallel seeking to maximise use of our own internal fostering provision where the placement choice is right for the child. Placement stability has improved and the increased use of stability meetings ensures intervention and support is provided promptly when issues arise. The focused visit by Ofsted in January 2019 was positive in its comments about ART,

*'The access to resources team, which has been created since the last inspection, is having a positive impact on ensuring a more vigorous approach to identifying placements for children. More recent placements demonstrate better matching between children's identified needs and the capacity of carers to meet those needs. The quality of referral information for children who need placements has also improved, better reflecting children's unique needs and personalities, and enabling more appropriate matches to be made.'*



Finding placements for teenagers with challenging behaviour, gang affiliation, those at risk of child exploitation and those at risk of or stepping down from residential care remains the most significant challenge to placement sufficiency. The Fostering Service continues to work closely with the Access to Resources Team and Clinical Service to develop more and better quality placement choice that has made a significant contribution to reducing the need for young people to be placed in residential care.

### **Friends and Family Foster Care**

The Special Guardianship and Connected Persons team is now established and has a focus on assessing and supporting Special Guardians, as well as assessing friends and family foster carers and presenting them to fostering panel. The use of Friends and Family Foster care has increased with 47 children being in a friends and family placement for the year, under Regulations 24 and 27 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010). This is compared to 39 children at the end of the previous year. Wherever possible when the children cannot be rehabilitated to the care of their parents and where there is a positive assessment the local authority would support them applying for an SGO to secure permanence for the child/ children outside of the care service. There were 123 Special Guardianship assessments completed for the year, with 30 Special Guardian Orders being granted and enabling those children to leave care.

### **Matches for Long term Foster Care**

The Care Permanence Tracking Panel continues to meet monthly with the remit of ensuring all children in care with a plan of long term fostering had identified a family placement able to meet their long term needs, including thinking about therapeutic support and post 18 supports and Staying Put.

The addition of a revised Long term Fostering Policy in January 2019 has been key in ensuring practice standards are uniform across the service and in supporting the focus remaining on permanency for children in care. The policy provides clear direction around procedures for Long-Term Fostering and matching processes, as well as promoting new and innovative ideas working with Carelink, the Clinical Service and the Family Group Conference Service to promote placement stability. We will also be facilitating lunchtime workshops to fully understand Delegated Authority and these will be co-run with foster carers, supervising Social Workers and a Team Manager from the Care Service.

The Fostering Service has continued to work closely with the Safeguarding and Care Services to ensure that children in long term placements have their placement formally matched at the Adoption and Fostering Panel. For children aged 14 and over, the decision for Long-Term Fostering may be recommended outside of the Fostering Panel by the IRO at a Child Looked after Review and then referred for a decision by the Agency Decision Maker. This enables independent scrutiny to ensure the match is the best possible for the child and to provide optimum support. Attending panel is also a day of celebration for children and carers and we have introduced a matching certificate and sending out photographs of children and their carers taken with the fostering panel.

In 2017/18 15 children were matched, a 400% increase from the previous year and in 2018/19 this figure was 16 children, we had anticipated 20 but 4 were delayed going to Panel so happened in April 2019. We recognise we need to continue to increase this so that all children whose plan it is to remain in foster care have a matched placement and that we are tracking that this happens in the right timescale for each child and challenging delay.

Whilst the numbers of children being matched are only slightly increased, this is seen as positive achievement in sustaining our endeavours with matching; and securing permanency for our young people remains a priority. It is expected that in 2019/20 this will significantly increase as already in the first 2 months of 2019/20 5 children have been matched and 15 are booked into Panel up until the end of September 2019. In this regard, the Care and Fostering Service in conjunction with Coram BAAF facilitated a Fostering activity day in September 2018 where interest was shown in looked after children on the day, allowing for some to move to long term foster placements. This included two children moving from residential to foster families they met on this day and three children moving from short term foster placements to carers committed to meeting their long term needs. Additionally, the creation of a Stability Taskforce in January 2019 has been pivotal in considering how staff is utilising effective placement planning and stability meetings in maintaining permanency for children in foster care.

## SOUTHWARK FOSTER CARERS

Activity Overview – foster carers	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
Foster carers approved	12	12	10	9
Foster carers ceased approval	21	16	8	4
Friends & Family Foster Carers (Regulation 27)	9	5	7	9
Family Link carers approved	3	3	5	5
Matches for Long Term Foster Care	16	15	3	3

### Recruitment of foster carers

*“I wanted to become a foster carer and especially a foster carer for Southwark Council because it’s where I live and I think it is important Southwark people foster Southwark children. We found ourselves in a situation where our youngest went away to university and we were rattling around a three bedroom flat and it’s a joy to have youngsters coming into the home. It’s something that we both wish we had done sooner.”*

(Southwark foster carer since 2015)

In 2018/9 the number of general foster carers recruited – 12 - was the same as the previous year, and in addition a carer who had not been fostering for 2 years had an updated assessment and was reassessed to take placements. There was a marked improvement in the number of carer households who live in Southwark with 10 of the 12 households living in the borough. There was an increase in the number of friends and family foster carers approved by panel as long term carers for children, from 5 the previous year to 9 in 2018/19 which is an 80 % percentage increase.

In 2018/19 Southwark Recruitment Hub received 125 enquiries from households about becoming foster carers. This is a slight decrease from 2017/8 when the number was 133. During 2018/2019 a photo campaign working with Southwark Carers and Southwark Communications Team has been developed and launched, with leaflets being delivered to all Southwark households, posters displayed on bus stops and an article published in Southwark Life. This publicity has resulted in a number of enquiries to the Recruitment Hub. The target of 15 carers recruited throughout the year has not been met, and it is acknowledged that the level of recruitment over the last few years is still not providing the number of placements needed for Southwark children to provide sufficiency and choice. The fostering recruitment strategy is being updated to address this.

Approvals for Southwark becoming a Fostering Friendly Employer and also incentives for staff across the Council who successfully introduce someone to becoming a foster carer are also proposed for 2019/20.

### **Retention of foster carers**

The retention of foster carers is critical to the functioning of the Fostering Service. Fostering Network reported in 2017 that on average a service will lose 10% of carers annually through, retirement, adopting, changing career and de-registration. The total number leaving fostering in the last 2 years has been just under 10% each year. The majority of these were carers who left fostering due to personal circumstances, such as ill health, retirement or wanting to leave fostering to pursue another career. Two carers moved to foster with other London boroughs, and one carer was deregistered following a safeguarding investigation and standards of care issues.

The Fostering Service recognises the importance of support in retaining carers, based on a combination of regular social work support, a professional package of relevant training, opportunities for contact with other carers and adequate remuneration.

The Fostering Service responds promptly and efficiently to issues and concerns raised by foster carers. Communication includes newsletters and e-mails and phone calls about community events and opportunities. Fostering supervising social workers visit carers monthly to support carers in their role, assessing the support needed prior to each new placement which contributes to increasing carers' confidence and capabilities in taking children with high needs. There is a monthly support group and coffee morning which takes place in East Dulwich, with regular attendance from staff in the Fostering Service as well as foster carers. The support group often have guests on topics such as Welfare Benefits and new initiatives for children in care. At the carers request every 3 months there continues to be a therapist available to offer carers massages to help them relax.

### **Training and Learning and Development**

There is a strong and growing learning culture throughout the Fostering Service for both foster carers and for staff which involves learning together. The foundation of all learning and development is built upon the Secure Base Model as a foundation for therapeutic caregiving and the more advanced Empathic Behaviour Management (EBM). The aims of the two approaches are to empower foster carers to develop confidence and equip them with the right skills and techniques to help children experience safe and secure care. There are now 57 fostering households who have been trained in EBM which involves a 2-3 day training delivered by a Clinical Practitioner with follow up interactive workshop which take place over 6 weeks. Follow up support with EBM happens in a support group held every 2 months and is regularly attended by foster carers. The last EBM course in January 2019 was attended by 13 Southwark foster carers.

The Secure Base Model introduced in September 2015 has continued to be an integral part of the training programme throughout the Fostering Service. It underpins all in-house training, therefore reaching all the carers that attend training. As a Fostering Service we deliver The Secure base Model to all Social workers within children's services who are newly qualified.

Post approval training is compulsory for all new foster carers as part of their Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) and there are monthly TSD workshops which have helped new carers and existing carers towards completing their standards.

The fostering training programme includes:

- Working with the Department
- Safeguarding Children
- Attachment, Child Development and Secure Base
- Therapeutic Play
- Active Listening Skills and responding effectively to challenging behavior.
- Supporting your Child with Education and PEPs
- Promoting the Health of children
- Transitions and helping young people prepare for independence.
- Emotional Health and Physical Well-being

The training sessions are dynamic and interactive and are delivered by social workers, foster carers and managers in the Permanence Service together with a multidisciplinary team that includes the Virtual School, the looked after children nurses and Designated Doctor, the Clinical Service and also input from care leavers from Speakerbox who have experience of being in foster care. The training programme has developed over the past year where courses have been adapted to meet the changing needs of the service. We have started to adapt courses to incorporate the National Minimum Standards and the Regulations that govern fostering, to ensure that foster carers understand the legislation and guidance that they work under.

The Fostering Service continues to build on relationships with colleagues across the service by having training delivered by YOS (Restorative Practice and Gangs and Street violence), and Safeguarding (Signs of Safety), which were both well received. This has helped to embed our Practice Framework with our foster carers. Parent and Child Training for foster carers has been successful and will be repeated with a view of increasing sufficiency in this area.

There have been two Men Who Foster workshops, and a Team Manager from the Care Service delivered one of the sessions on Safeguarding, this received very positive feedback. One of the sessions had 10 carers in attendance.

Foster carers are increasingly required to use computers and IT to support the children they care for and the Fostering Family Support Worker continues to provide both group and individual support to help foster carers to be able to use the online booking system for training and to use computers to support education for children.

As well as traditional training it is recognised that many foster carers look after everyone else but don't often have opportunities to think about their own health, relaxation and well-being. In this regard, a well-being day for carers and staff was held, replicating the success of last year's event. This emphasises the importance of the physical and emotional well-being of Southwark's foster carers. The feedback from the 2018 event was exceptionally good; carers said they felt nourished, cared for and appreciated. The wellbeing day was used to canvass and encourage our carers to attend the Fostering Network 5k walk to be undertaken in June alongside supervising social workers.

Two experienced Supervising Social Workers deliver the Skills to Foster training for applicants who are starting their assessments to become foster carers. The training from participants on this programme is consistently rated as being excellent by prospective carers. The three day course includes multi-disciplinary input from health and education as well as the clinical service. One of the most popular parts and one which the Fostering Service recognises is crucial in fostering recruitment is the direct input of the Children's Rights Officer and young people who are care leavers. They are part of every Skills to Foster training and this is often one of the segments of the course that participants speak most highly of.

The creation of a training lead within the Fostering Service has been instrumental in driving forward the changes within training provision and this has created a training programme that is responsive yet visionary.

Feedback from carers on some of the training they received:

### **Challenging behaviour training**

*'The training made me think more outside of the box, and be more aware of different possibilities and situations.'*

*'The training was delivered in a friendly and professional way that encouraged active participation by all the attendees. Useful strategies were recommended for managing challenging behaviour in young people.'*

### **Non-violent Resistance training**

*'I will now be more confident in dealing with issues relation to the children in our care.'*

*'It has provided a focus for improving my parenting skills, which has improved relationships in my family between myself, my husband and our son. It has provided us with a very useful set of tools which will help us to be a calm and happy family.'*

### **Unaccompanied minors training**

*'It was good to share with other carers their experiences of young people from other countries.'*

*'Lots of good and relevant information which helps us to become more aware and understanding of our young people.'*

### **Support for foster carers**

Despite its rewards, foster care can be a very 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 provide the attention, commitment and care that children who may have experienced neglect, harm and loss require.

Support for Foster Carers encompasses the following:

- Allocation and support of a dedicated Supervising Social Worker during the working week and access to dedicated out of hours support 7 days a week.
- Foster carer induction for all newly approved households and as a refresher 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.
- A more advanced approach to caring – Emphatic Behaviour Management for more challenging behavior.
- Training pathway for foster carers to enhance professional development and quality of placements linked to a clear payment approach.
- Therapeutic intervention and support from a lead clinician, medical advisor, education, and Carelink service to support children in placements and the fostering household.
- Regular carer support groups accessible for all foster caring households run by the Fostering Service.
- Regular communication and information sharing is maintained via emails, quarterly fostering newsletters and coffee mornings.

- A Foster Carer run support group has also been set up and continues to meet and offer peer support to all foster carers.
- Following the service running a Well-being day in March 2018 a Foster carer walking group has established meeting regularly in Southwark parks and also a group of foster carers who use the gym.
- An annual foster carers ball is held to thank carers for their commitment to improving the lives of looked after children and young people in Southwark.
- Membership and advice to Fostering Network for all Southwark foster carers which offer independent advice and support with allegations.

### **Staying Put**

*“This Christmas we had over 20 of our children at our house. This time they came back with their partners and their children. Seeing them now and remembering them how they were- that’s the real reward for foster carers.”*

(Southwark foster carer )

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a duty on the local authority to provide ‘staying put’ arrangements for children in foster care to continue to live with their former foster carer beyond their 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 and who want to remain as part of a family. The service was well placed to implement these changes as we were already enabling young people to remain in their placements while they completed exams and were prepared fully for independence.

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 there were 43 young people staying put with their foster carers. The majority of these were with Southwark carers. What is also increasing is the number of young people who have gone away to stay at University in halls of residence and shared accommodation but who also return to former foster carers for support and to enjoy family life during the University breaks.

Supporting staying put arrangements are a key part of offering a secure base to children that they are supported to continue full family membership, a key aspect of this is being able to remain in a family setting until they are ready for independence. The approach we take in Southwark regarding payments is very similar to that taken in other local authorities.

The Staying Put guidance and the Staying Put policy is in the process of being updated, with input from foster carers, young people and staff. This is due to be finished in July 2019.



## Short Breaks Care – Family Link

At the end of March 2019 the Family Link Team had 32 short break respite carer households offering care to 41 children with disabilities, allowing the child's parents or guardian to have a break. Short break carers are specialist foster 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 and guardian. During 2018/19, 3 new family link carers were assessed and approved.

Linking is based on children's needs and families preferences so families work together with the social worker and carer to carefully establish a relationship and design together the support for each child, for some children this can be daytime breaks for some overnight stays and for some children a mixture of daytime and overnight respite. Referrals come from the Children with Disabilities Team to Family link and each child with their social worker and family has a profile about them which includes an Education Health Care Plan, and the child's health profile. There is a matching process and a short period of introductions (up to two introductions between the child, parent, short break carer and SSW) prior to proceeding with the placement. Matches are reviewed under the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 Reg 48. Carers and links are reviewed annually by an Independent Reviewing Officer.

Carers are recruited via people interested in fostering who may not be able to foster full time due to their work commitments, as well as some carers recruited through having existing community connections to children who they want to support.

A key aim is supporting Children and their families and preventing children from needing to become permanently looked after. In terms of a joined up service from April 2018 together with Children with Disabilities Family link became part of the All Age Disability Service who continue to work closely with the Fostering Service in ensuring all carers are compliant with fostering regulations.

Feedback from families and children who receive a service from Family Link is consistently high. One parent said of the family link foster carer *'she takes very good care of him and I am very happy'*. When speaking about her allocated social worker she said *'she will always explain things with you properly'*.

(Parental Feedback to Family Link February 2019)

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

The Fostering Service has a Quality Assurance Framework, which is part of the overarching quality assurance and performance framework for Southwark Children's Services. The framework includes: effective Adoption and Fostering Panel scrutiny; foster carer feedback through consultations, the annual review process and feedback on training and development; management oversight and review including audit activity; as well as learning from complaints and placement breakdowns.

The audits areas in 2018/9 included: an audit on placements incorporating first time entrants into care and changes of placements. The recommendations from this were increased oversight of placement planning meetings to ensure they were happening and were effective and the need for Stability Meetings to happen early in placements when there are difficulties, rather than later when issues "set in" and the focus moves towards a potential "disruption"

### **Fostering Panel**

Fostering Services Regulations (2011) and National Minimum Standards (2011) require a Fostering Panel to be constituted, chaired by an independent person. Panel members include representatives from 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 children for long term foster care and in certain circumstances reviewing the approval of foster carer. The combined Panel is able to approve Early Permanence carers as both foster carers and adopters under both Adoption and Fostering regulations. Final decisions, based on the panel's recommendations are made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADMs), Assistant Director Safeguarding and Care and the Director for Children and Families.

From January 2017 the Adoption and Fostering Panel combined. The Chair of the Fostering Panel since 2014 took over the role of chairing the Joint Panel which takes place fortnightly. There have been changes in panel membership since the last annual report.

The Panel Chair and two independent panel members have resigned during 2017/18. The Panel chair and a panel member to take up new permanent roles that prevent their continued Panel membership, and the third member to take up a panel position closer to home. This led to the appointment of a new panel chair in June 2018 and the opportunity to recruit three independent and one agency panel members. Further recruitment has recently taken place that has seen the appointment of three male Panel members, yet to take up their positions. New Panel members have been welcomed by longstanding members and the changes have served to further strengthen the Panel by creating a diverse central list of suitably qualified and experienced members that reflect the communities in Southwark.

From October 2019 Adopt London South which Southwark are hosting working with nine South London boroughs will go live with two Panels covering all adoption cases across the nine boroughs. This will mean that the Panel from October 2019 will again become a Fostering Panel focussed on fostering cases. Given the drive for all children to have matched placements and the growth in placements with Family and Friends it is envisaged the Panel will continue fortnightly. At the end of July 2019 the Quality Assurance Framework and project plan for the development of the Fostering Panel will be completed. There is an opportunity here for an increased focus on the quality of reports coming to panel, and it is also envisaged that foster carers should return to panel every three years for a review of their approval. This is to ensure that carers who are not attending training and development opportunities or working professionally with the department are challenged.

The Key areas identified by the Independent Chair for improvement in the Fostering Service are:

- Meeting timeframes for Regulation 24 approvals and Regulation 27 approvals
- Continued improvement of the quality of assessments of all foster carers including Friends and Family Foster Carers.

These improvements remain the same as in 2018/2019 so it is recognised that there is a need to introduce a more robust management tracking system for timescales of friends and family assessments as well as ongoing work with Practitioners and Managers to ensure all assessments are high quality.

### **Changes to Fostering Payments Policy – Consultation with Foster Carers and Staff**

Southwark council is going through a period of unprecedented budgetary constraints, and as a result in 2018/19 considerable savings had to be identified. One of these was making changes to the fostering Payments Policy (last updated 2015/6) whereby the rates of payments to carers would no longer be aligned to the Fostering Network rates, but instead be aligned with the Government recommended rates. Due to the new policy proposing that the fostering allowance rates decrease by up to 23% the decision was made to complete an Equalities Impact Assessment on the proposed changes. As part of this an online public consultation was implemented plus consultation drop-in events for foster carers and special guardians whose allowances are linked to the fostering allowance and would therefore also decrease.

Staff were also consulted, and came up with a number of ideas to mitigate the proposed changes, including redefining the amounts that foster carers should pay for young peoples clothing and leisure activities, so that young people themselves would not notice the decrease in their allowance.

The decision to change the policy was made by the Children's and Adults board, chaired by the Strategic Director of Children's and Adults services.

## **Complaints**

The fostering service reviews complaints received from foster carers and uses the learning from what hasn't been done well to inform service improvement. In 2018/2019 there were three complaints relating to fostering, two of which concerned the Family Link service, and the other one relating to Fostering.

One complaint concerned lack of communication when a staff member had left – the family were not informed of this and information on the Southwark council website was not up to date. Another concerned delays in payment for a Family Link carer – her emails were not picked up due to staff absence.

The third complaint related to information about a carer being forwarded to her Fostering Network Advocate without her permission.

Communication and responses have now been improved, with the website being updated and a generic email address supplied to enable all emails to be answered in a timely way. Strict adherence to confidentiality of carers' information is now embedded throughout the service.

## REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2018- 2019

This section reviews our commitments to improvement stated in the Annual Report 2017/18 and reflects on the progress we made.

**We will continue to recruit more foster carers living within the borough or nearby to Southwark who are able to meet the needs of Southwark Children and to ensure creative and robust support plans to enable more children to experience family life in foster care.**

There has been a drive for local recruitment of foster carers and this has resulted in approval of 10 (out of 12) foster carers that live in the borough of Southwark. This remains an ongoing focus for the Fostering Service and recruitment hub.

**We will ensure that more children have their permanence confirmed and celebrated in Long term Fostering Placements to feel safe and secure and enjoy family life and that they have the right support to ensure the placement remains settled and happy.**

Permanence continues to be a focus for the Fostering Service. There have been improvements in matching and permanency being secured as well as the launch of an innovative and clear.

**We will work with all Children's Social Workers to ensure that all children cared for by Southwark foster carers have Life Story work which their foster carers are actively involved with and that all children and their foster carers know why they are looked after and supported with this understanding.**

The Fostering Service continues to work closely with colleagues in the Care Service around life story work and helping young people to understand their life journey. There is tailored training for both foster carers and staff.

**We will ensure that all Southwark foster carers continue to have access to high quality training and support to continue their professional development and to provide excellent care for Southwark children. All training will connect to the Secure Base Model of therapeutic Care Giving.**

The training programme is comprehensive and meets the needs of foster carers in delivering care provision to our looked after children. The Secure Base Model is woven between all courses and ensures a knowledgeable and equipped fostering service. The courses are attended often by both SSW's and foster carers resulting in a shared understanding and vision of support for our young people.

**We will ensure that the Voice of Young People, their birth families and foster carers is central to the development of the Fostering Service through listening to and working with young people, foster carers and family members. Wherever possible training will be co-delivered with experienced foster carers and young people with experience of being Looked After.**

Skills to foster is co delivered by young people who are care leavers, as well as undertaking sessions in the Secure Base training. We also seek their views from their attendance at Speakerbox. Foster carers have also been involved in these courses and others.

The voice of the young people and foster carers is always sought via their attendance at training courses. Our parent and child placements also offer opportunity for feedback from birth families, and this is an area that the fostering service continues to develop.

Recruitment of staff joining the Service includes Young People being part of the decision making panels and this included the recruitment of the Fostering Service Manager in 2018/19 with the retirement of the previous post holder.

**We will champion the need for young people to be connected and have Lifelong Links. This will be by supporting Lifelong Links innovation project but also by ensuring children in foster care are supported to retain key connections in their foster and birth family including their brothers, sisters and their friends.**

This is a new initiative that continues to be developed with the creation of a link person between the fostering service and Lifelong links. The link person attends regular meetings with Lifelong links and shares information between the two areas. Southwark has received referrals and is working with 23 children from the identified cohort.

**We will implement an improvement plan for children placed with Friends and Family to ensure these assessments are completed in timescale and where possible families are supported to apply for Special Guardianship Orders, to promote family life and not remaining Looked After.**

All kinship assessments look at permanency options for the looked after child so as to promote family life and consider the support available. An independent review in the Safeguarding Service noted the positive impact of the dedicated SGO and Friends and Family Team, however compliance with completing assessments within the 16 week timescale remains low and a much more robust tracking system is needed in 2019/20 to ensure assessments are completed in a more timely fashion.

**We will undertake a peer and management review on the quality of Annual Reviews for foster carers (including the voice of foster carers) and a plan to ensure all reviews have high quality analysis will be developed and implemented in 2018/19.**

Staff from the fostering service will be attending a training course looking specifically at foster carers annual reviews in May 2019. This will inform the peer and management review of annual reviews which will take place in July 2019. All foster carers however are asked for feedback regarding their review, and there has been a drive to seek feedback from IRO's birth families, young people and children's social workers so as to inform the annual review. *This action has been rolled over to the 2019/20 development plan*

## **DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2019/2020**

### **Ensure that the voice of children families and carers is heard, so that their views shape and improve our services and all parts of the service on a continuous learning journey**

- Ensure that training for prospective and current foster carers includes direct input from care experienced young people, current carers and parents.
- Directly involve current foster carers in the training of social workers to embed the Secure Base Model.
- Ensure that recruitment of foster carers and staff involves the input of young people and of experienced foster carers.

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

- Ensure effective placement planning meetings are held within 5 days of a new placement.
- Ensure challenging placements are identified as early as possible (through foster carers and SSWs) and that placement stability meetings take place as early as possible with input from Carelink or the Clinical Service.
- Referring social work team and ART to involve Carelink or the Clinical Service in any consideration of children moving so that both placement stability and the impact on the child's emotion wellbeing and educational stability and progress are carefully considered.
- Ensure management oversight through ongoing development of the Achieving Permanence Tracker for all children in care.
- Ensure adherence to the Long term fostering policy and guidance published in January 2019
- Ensure that more children have their permanence confirmed and celebrated in long term fostering placements either through the fostering panel or through IRO/LAC Review.

### **Maintain and further develop a stable and high-quality workforce across the Permanence Service**

Give all social workers the opportunity to attend fortnightly Group Supervision sessions led by the Team Manager. All social workers can attend the across service Practitioner Forum where they have the opportunity to shape the ongoing development of the Practice Framework. Promote the Council Offer of learning and development through short courses and professional development courses.

### **Improve placement choice and sufficiency as set out in the Sufficiency Strategy and to reduce the percentage of children who are looked after who are living 20 miles or more from the borough**

- An updated recruitment and retention plan developed and published in 2019/20 to ensure that more foster carers are recruited who live within the borough or nearby to Southwark who are able to meet the needs of Southwark children.
- Ensure creative and robust support plans to enable more children to experience family life in foster care.

### **Continue to Roll out and embed the Secure Base model of therapeutic caregiving across children's services as part of the Practice Framework**

- Ensure that all children cared for by Southwark foster carers have life story work which their foster carers are actively involved in and that all children and their carers know why they are looked after and are supported with this understanding.
- Ensure that all Southwark foster carers can access high quality training and support to continue their professional development. All training will connect the Secure Base model.
- Ensure that all Southwark foster carers are supported to complete their TSDS within the required timescale.
- Undertake a peer and management review on the quality of Annual Reviews for foster carers (involving the voice of foster carers) completed by the Fostering Service.

### **Develop high quality support for friends and family foster carers and SGO carers**

- Ensure Safeguarding and Connected Persons teams are supported to work more closely together in respect of Regulation 24 assessments.
- Ensure robust tracking of timescales for all assessments to ensure Friends and Family assessments are undertaken within 16 weeks and the 8 week extension is only sought in exceptional circumstances.
- Ongoing work with Grandparents Plus to develop greater support networks for all kinship carers local to carers and organized and run by carers.