

Southend Fostering Service Report 2019/20



Introduction

This has been a mixed year for Southend Fostering Service. While we remain committed to the priority of increasing the number of carers being recruited to care for our most vulnerable children, we have also had a year characterized by change. There have continued to be staffing challenges, not only with our longstanding Team Manager, Emmet Perry moving onto the next phase of his life in retirement but also with the great loss of our Head of Service Diane Keens too. We have been able to welcome a new manager to the service Penny Mercer who has brought with her a lot of experience and a clear focus for development and improvement.

The Southend Foster Families Community (previously council) and the Fostering Team have worked hard again this year to arrange a number of social events for carers and Looked After Children in their care. This includes the popular Christmas Party and the Foster Carers continue to make use of the Beach Hut in Thorpe Bay as a place to meet up and develop their own support networks within the Fostering Community.

Our LAC children were also invited to attend the Mad Hatters Tea Party organised by the Black Cabbies Charity to Grosvenor House in London. 37 LAC children attended for the first time in over 10 years.

Placement Stability has been facilitated by the Edge of Care team now offering additional support 7 days a week where placements are at risk or where older young people are on the brink of entering care.

MOMO has been introduced as an APP which enables our young people to communicate with their social workers directly to ensure their views, wishes and feelings can influence and remain a clear focus in all that is done.

Our Ethos

The core of what we do continues to be to strive to provide opportunities for children and young people to thrive in foster care, whether for a few days or for a few years and to find safe, high quality adoptive placements where this is required for children who cannot return to their birth families.

Carers have continued to show a real commitment to supporting Southend children and ensuring they have the best possible opportunities as they progress to independence themselves.

Working together with SBC Foster carers over the last 10 months we have held 2 forums and a fostering conference to gather our foster carers views and share our vision to improve our Fostering service. It is known and acknowledged that the most successful recruiters of new foster carers are the existing foster carers themselves. What we have learned from our existing Foster carers is that they wish to work with us to create a service that includes foster carers and listens to their ideas. Together we want to create a fostering service that works together holistically to be able to create a Fostering Community that prospective foster carers will want to be part of and our carers will spread the word because they are proud to be part of SBC fostering service.

Purpose of This Report

The provision, standard and operations of the Fostering Service are governed by:

- The Local Authority Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011(updated 2013)
- Out of Authority – Placement of LAC Guidance (2014)
- Fostering Minimum Standards 2011 and the
- Children Act 1989 Guidance & Regulations Volume 4, 2011
- Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment regulations 2020

The Executive side of the council has a responsibility to monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users and that they are satisfied that the service is complying with the conditions of registration. The aim of this report is to provide the information required to enable the Executive side of the Council to fulfil its duties in this respect.

Overview

2019/20 has been a mixed year with some good success whilst managing challenges with staffing and a significant increase in the LAC population putting greater pressure on the service to secure placements.

At the beginning of the year we took the opportunity to invite Essex Fostering Service to complete a Health Check on the Service from which an ambitious development plan

was created and is being driven forward to improve standards and practice across the service. The vision and development plan to develop a trauma informed Fostering Community has been presented and endorsed by the Improvement Board.

Chris Sandercombe is currently Head of Service for Fostering, with Jo Hines as Service Manager and Penny Mercer as Team and Registered Manager and together they are supporting the team to fully implement the many changes.

In Southend we recognise that the foster carers themselves are our greatest resource and one highlight of the year was the fostering conference which took place in Jan 20. This was well attended and afforded the opportunity to engage with the wider Fostering Service regarding the many changes being developed and provided an opportunity to identify Fostering Ambassadors who going forward will be an integral part in all Recruitment activity.

While still one service the team have split their roles, so the workers focus is either Recruitment and Assessment or Support and Development with the aim to increase time and energy on recruiting the required new carers to the service and strengthening the support offered to the foster families. This approach is tried and tested and many LA and Independent fostering agencies use it. It works because if a Supporting social worker is trying to support and develop foster carers and inevitably dealing with emerging crisis in the placement it is then hard to prioritize recruitment and assessment of potential foster carers. Having a dedicated team who can create a successful recruitment programme that not only meets our demand for in house foster carers but is able to raise our profile to a level that attract not only new Foster carers but experienced Foster carers who want to be part of our Fostering family.

This year there has been a primary focus on raising standards within the Fostering Service and has extended to training for social workers across Children's services to support and improve the quality of decision making when permanency planning for LAC children. The Annual Household Review process and supervision of foster carers has been redesigned along with a robust strategy for managing and investigating allegations.

Statistics 19/20

There has been an increase in the number of children Looked after, over the past 18 months. The needs of many of these young people, who have experienced a lot of trauma and challenges have been assessed as complex, and with the national shortage in placements for such children an increase in the use of residential placements has increased.

Specifically, since April 2020 there has been an increase in demand for placements for teenagers and we have had to significantly rely on the Independent Fostering agencies to meet this demand which places additional pressure on the budget.

The number of young people placed with relatives under connected person's

placements continues to place additional demand and impact on the fostering service capacity and while it is of course right that children are placed within their families where possible, it must be recognised that supporting Kinship placements does often need a high level of Supervising Social Worker input which can at times reduce the support available to our in house foster carers.

- Number of fostering Households approved - 10 (*7 in 18/19*)
- Number of fostering households as at 31st March 2020 - 113 (104 At 31st March 2019)
- New Family & Friends carers - 6 (8 in the previous year)
- How many young people over 18 remained in foster care (*using our staying put policy where a young person can remain in their foster placement until the age of 21*) 12

Since April 20 there have been 6 households approved with a further 8 in process of assessment.

The Breakdown of Current Carers which includes all foster carer types

April 20 Nov 20

Foster Carer Households	113	101
Breakdown: Project	5	4
Fee Paid	44	35
Single Placement	33	29
Voluntary	6	4
Shared Lives	1	1
Connected Persons	9	15
Kinship	15	13

There have been 16 deregistration's of foster carers since April which is a significant increase to previous years.

This is for a variety of reasons

- Retirement – impacted by the fact the foster carers are largely an older population
- COVID – 19 – living in such uncertain times has led some resignations where fostering can no longer be the priority
- Young people moving on from kinship placements to independence
- Standards – some foster carers have been deregistered due to concerns re standards of care



Recruitment

Recruitment is a current priority for the service. It is the aim of Southend Fostering Service to have sufficient suitable placements to enable all Southend children who require foster care to be placed with its own carers, local to their families and friends and who can meet their individual needs.

In order to meet the challenge of recruiting foster carers a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy has been developed which includes a range of advertising strategies. We have continued to develop alternative methods of recruitment to revitalise our programme such as through the use of social media sites like our active Facebook page. We continue to use proven methods such as bus back advertising and radio as well as attending a number of local events and activities within the community. Our newly appointed Fostering Ambassadors will be supporting this activity throughout the coming year as we believe it is those who are fostering themselves that are the best recruiters. We are also meeting with the public online offering question and answer sessions about Fostering. It is recognised that no single approach encourages someone who is interested in Fostering to take that first step. Today a variety of information platforms are accessed before the all-important phone call or email is made/sent. We are aware that we must create a campaign that utilizes as many of these platforms as possible, simultaneously in order to maximise public interest in becoming a Southend Foster carer. We are also working closely with the Comms department within the council and seeking to forge links with Community based projects in Southend.

Campaigns

A wide variety of foster carers are required to meet the needs of children in Southend and a variety of campaigns are run through the year in order to support this we use a variety of general and targeted campaigns for example we may target potential foster

carers who are interested in fostering Teenagers or sibling groups.— some examples of our adverts are shown below.



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Statistics 2019/20

- Number of enquiries - 176
- Number of Initial Visits - 31
- Number of Information Events - 10 (6 drop in events at the civic and 4 evening events)
- Number of Skills to Foster courses 5

Since April 20

- Number of enquiries – 84
- Number of Initial Visits – 14
- Number of Information Events – 4 virtual events
- Number of Skills to Foster courses - 1

Covid- 19 has had a big impact on recruitment locally and Nationally as all community events have been cancelled. The team have sought to be creative and held virtual events online and continue to seek avenues to promote the fostering message.

We are also currently working with Commissioning in the Council to develop stronger links with IFA's where required and are exploring the possibility of developing some in house residential provision.



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Placement Activity

On the whole, stability of placement and care is associated with better outcomes for children. Proper assessment of the child's needs and a sufficient choice of placements to meet the varied and specific needs of different children are essential if appropriate

stable placements are to be achieved. Inappropriate placements tend to break down and lead to more frequent moves for a young person. The % of looked after children with three or more placements in one year at end of March:

2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
11.5%	9.5%	9.3%	10.3%	12.6%

For this indicator a lower score is indicative of good performance. Performance in Southend is in line when compared to statistical neighbours and the national average. The criteria for this indicator has changed over the past few years. Previously when a child returned from a missing episode this was classified as a new placement, even if a child returned to the same placement. These are no longer included in this indicator. The percentage of looked after children with three or more placements in one year has remained fairly stable over the past few years. It was expected that the % would increase slightly during 2019/20 due to the high numbers of children with parallel plans for adoption and where the making of a placement order has been delayed through changes in the level of court challenge and with a higher number of older children entering care, however the service worked hard with Edge of Care to support placements.

In a recent survey with LAC young people 91% stated that they felt safe in their foster placement. This is an improvement of 1% on last year's figure of 90%. One of the most important responsibilities of a foster carer is to keep children and young people safe and this data supports that this is happening

Placement location and type

There are many reasons why some looked after children are placed away from Southend. Whilst availability of placements is a factor, some young people need to live out of area to help to keep them safe from harm or from dangerous influences closer to home. Others may need specialist care that is not available locally or may be placed further afield but with family kinship carers.

Over the past two to three years, there has developed a national shortage of placements both fostering and residential which has led to challenges locally to ensure that placements are well matched.

For most of 2019/20 in house fostering services have been running at between 110% and 130% capacity, which leads to pressures within fostering families. The support of the Edge of Care Team has been invaluable to carers during what has been a challenging time.



Of the 315 children looked after by Southend at March 2020:

- 232 (73.6%) were placed with foster carers and
- 241 (76.5%) were placed less than 20 miles from their home.

As at 31 October there were 308 children looked after by Southend:

- 232 (75.3%) were placed with foster carers and
- 230 (74.7%) were placed within 20 miles of their home

The majority of those children in placements classified as 'at a distance' were placed in Essex or local authorities bordering Essex, were UASC or were placed for adoption. It is recognised that children placed away from their home area may need additional support. The quality and impact of care and support that they receive is carefully planned and closely monitored. Where young people are in any form of residential care, the placements are monitored through the Placement Panel & Funding and Exit Panel to ensure that their health, including mental health, education and care needs are appropriately being met with a clear exit plan in place.

Support

The aim of the Southend Fostering Service is to ensure we develop a team of highly skilled, experienced and dedicated foster carers who understand the therapeutic needs of vulnerable children impacted by trauma who will be able to support young

people to experience a sense of security and belonging as they navigate their journey through their childhood.

To support this we have run an extensive training programme for all of our carers throughout the year.

This coming year this will be enhanced further as we introduce a foundational training programme for all foster carers and launch a preschool theraplay support group. Theraplay seeks to strengthen the attachment connections for young children with their carers which in turn promotes a sense of safety. Children need to feel safe in order embrace opportunity and experience life to the full.



Unfortunately, due to Covid 19 and the venue being closed The Fostering Sparkles group has had to be postponed, although it is hoped to be launched as soon as it is safe to do so early next year. Some of the foundational training for foster carers has been able to proceed remotely and the TSD programme has been launched with online TSD support groups up and running.

It is recognised that as the integral resource in fostering we actively sought to engage and involve our foster carers at the fostering conference earlier this year to plan and highlight their support needs and while delayed by Covid 19, foster carers support groups are being run virtually encouraging them to take an active lead.

Emotional Health and Wellbeing of Looked after Children



Our senior MH worker continues to work with our young people and their carers to support and address the emotional health and wellbeing of the Borough's looked after children.

In the last year this included:-

- Direct work with Family Groups
- Dyadic Attachment-focused sessions with Foster Parents and Adolescents
- Long-term (30+ sessions) psychotherapy with 7 LAC.
- Short-term psychotherapy with 4 LAC.
- Short-term psych-education / CBT with adolescents.
- Support provided around Sexually Harmful Behaviour - AIM2 work
- Parent Work with individual Foster Parents
- One 'State of Mind' Assessment
- One Sibling 'Together or Apart' Assessment
- Monthly Clinical Supervision Groups for Foster Parents
- Support with Skills to Foster Training
- Provided consultation to colleagues regarding understanding the emotional health needs and impact of trauma on the developing child.
- Developed links and a working relationship with Children & Adolescent NHS MH Service (EWMHS). Liaised directly in relation to progress and outcome of referrals.
- Maintained a monitoring system for referrals across the two agencies.
- Written bespoke Therapeutic Care Plans for LAC.
- Facilitated two Just Right State Group Programmes.
- Collected and input the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaires.

This work is integral in the wider development of the service as a whole and will focus in the coming year on supporting the development of a trauma-informed foster parent

group that have enhanced skills in understanding the impact of attachment difficulties and the ability offer a 'reparenting experience' to meet the emotional health and wellbeing needs of Looked After Children.

To help foster carers assist the children in their care in developing their emotional regulation capacities, the ability to form and maintain healthier relationships and engage socially with peers and other adults, and participate meaningfully in a healthy, active life. This will be achieved in through regular training events and consistent, high-quality support interventions as well as the continual recruitment of more foster carers.

Special Guardianship Orders

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) means that while parental responsibility (PR) remains with the parents, a carer (including foster carers) or relative can apply for the child to live with them and make day to day decisions on behalf of the child. The Special Guardian is given over-riding parental responsibility and there are very few instances where a parent with PR needs to be consulted.

Since 2015/16 there has been a national increase in the use of Special Guardianship as a long term outcome for children leaving care. There are challenges with some directions from the Courts leading to Court ordered SGO Assessments when Viability Assessments are negative or the granting of SGO's to those with whom the Local Authority are not in support.

Over time, Southend has witnessed the outcome of some court decisions leading to SGO breakdown, reduced life chances for children and in some cases exposure to further harm. Since March 2019, a sibling group of 2 were removed under a Police Protection Order and are now living under the auspices of a Care Order with a plan for long term foster care. One young person was made subject to a Child Protection Plan and the Special Guardian for a baby advised that she could no longer care for the baby after 13 months in her care. In two of these cases, the Local Authority was not in support of the SGO being granted.

By 31st March 2020, there were 105 SGO's in place incorporating 129 children. In 2019/20, 10 SGO's were granted incorporating 11 children as one included a sibling group of 2. Of these, 10 of the children were LAC prior to the making of the SGO and one was a result of a private application. These figures have shown a slight increase from 9 the previous year. Regarding the relationship to the child, 4 were Grandparents, 3 were Aunts, one was a family friend and another a sister.

Since April 20 a further 8 SGO's have be granted.

In March 2017, the Department introduced mandatory SGO training as part of Special's Guardian's assessments in response to a variety of themes that previous Special Guardian's had expressed concerns about. As a Local Authority, the Department felt duty bound to ensure that Special Guardians were equipped with enough information about realities, impact and support available in order for them to make an informed decision. This training is well embedded and courts do ask if

applicants have attended. To date, 73 prospective Special Guardians have attended the training and their evaluation sheets frequently score the training as excellent followed by very good. Colleagues from Essex have attended the training to help them incorporate a similar training programme within their area.

'I feel this presentation/discussion should be provided to anyone who is asked to consider putting themselves forward to become a Special Guardian' – Grandmother 2020

'Good confirmation of some of the things we already knew and really useful and helpful about the things we didn't' – Grandparents 2020

The Southend Permanency Panel (formerly known as the SGO Panel) acts as a robust quality assurance panel who make recommendations as to the suitability of prospective guardians and also agree the SGO Support Plans. SGO Support continues to develop and 2 families were able to access Therapeutic Life Story Work and 1 family, Play Therapy as the result of successful applications made by the Local Authority to the Adoption Support Fund during the year 2019/2020. Proactive support is offered where placements are seen to be under pressure and there are close links with the Marigold Assessment Plus Team to ensure advocacy work and mediation regarding contact issues but equally in the provision of Life Story work. Where there have been two risks of breakdown during this period, Southend's Edge of Care Team have offered robust and intensive support. Where a family requests specific support, a review of their SGO Support Plan can be undertaken and presented to Southend's Permanency Panel for consideration.

Private Fostering

A child under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled) who is cared for, or proposed to be cared for, and provided with accommodation by someone other than a parent, person with parental responsibility or close relative for 28 days or more is described as being privately fostered. A private foster carer may be a friend of the family, the parent of a friend of the child or someone previously unknown to the child's family who is willing to privately foster a child. They may also be from extended family such as a cousin or great-aunt.

Local Authorities do not approve private foster carers in the same way as general foster carers but are required to assess and say whether or not they agree and accept a private fostering arrangement to ensure that the welfare of privately fostered children is being safeguarded and promoted. To fulfil this duty Local Authorities must take a proactive approach in partnership with other agencies and other key professionals in raising public awareness of requirements regarding notifications of private fostering arrangements.

Decisions made as to whether private fostering arrangements are suitable are agreed at Southend's Permanency Panel (formerly known as the SGO/Private Fostering Panel) which considers all initial and final assessments in addition to annual reviews where required. Statutory checks are completed in line with the checks which are

undertaken for any Local Authority foster carer and the panel ensures quality assurance and that safeguarding issues are followed.

All privately fostered children in Southend are deemed to be “Children in need” and as such have an allocated children’s Social Worker and a formal Child in Need Plan. However, there are rare exceptions when a Child in Need Plan is not deemed necessary but any such decision has to be agreed by the Director of Children’s Services.

During the period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020, there were 12 children living in private fostering arrangements. Of these, 11 young people were aged between 10 – 15 years old with the youngest child aged 9.

Four young people within 3 households have lived in their private fostering arrangement for over 12 months. Of the total numbers in this period, one young person became LAC and her private foster carer was prohibited by the Local Authority in April 2019. One young person was a French Exchange student and has since returned home with another moving back to Nigeria to live with his mother. Two further young people have returned to their parents care and another child’s private foster carers have obtained an Interim Child Arrangement Order and are currently being assessed for a SGO. At 31st March 2020, there were 6 young people living under private fostering arrangements across 5 households.

Since April 20 there are an additional 2 young people living in a private fostering arrangement.

As part of the Private Fostering Action Plan January 2019 – December 2019, the following actions have been undertaken thus far with more planned for 2020:

A one minute guide for private fostering has been produced and disseminated by Southend Borough Councils School Admissions Team to their admission colleague’s forum which includes school admission colleagues across 17 Infant/Primary Schools and 8 Secondary Schools. This is an ideal opportunity to identify unknown private fostering arrangements. The One Minute guide was also sent to the Children with Disabilities Team and a piece will feature in the CWDT Newsletter.

The Senior Fostering Worker has delivered a private fostering awareness session to colleagues in the MASH+ Team which is particularly important given that all private fostering referrals are made via this team and therefore it is crucial that they are able to recognise these referrals and respond in line with our agreed processes. This has been effective as there is increased contact between MASH+ Team and the Senior Fostering Worker and private fostering processes are well embedded in Southend as highlighted in the Ofsted Inspection in 2019.

Following the discovery of French exchange students staying with host families in Southend, a meeting was held with Border Control from London Southend Airport to ensure that any young person who would be considered under the private fostering regulations are treated accordingly in line with the regulations. A meeting was held on 15th May 2019 with two representatives working for Jev Langues (non-profit

organisation founded by language Teachers). The next step is to establish if and how JEV Langues processes and Southend Borough Councils private fostering processes can be aligned to prevent duplication whilst still adhering to the regulations.

Due to intelligence gathering amongst agencies, prohibitions offer a layer of protection for other young people not just the privately fostered child. Should an individual who has been prohibited allow another young person to reside in their care, this will remain a criminal offence and allow the police to act swiftly and accordingly.

Since 2013, 6 households have been formally prohibited from privately fostering following presentation at Southend's Panel and none to date have appealed the decision to prohibit them. The most recent prohibition which came into force in April 2019 resulted in the young person in question becoming Looked After and the opening of the private foster carers own family for assessment by Children's Social Care which supported safeguarding of other children within her household.

Bi-annual reports are presented to the Southend Local Safeguarding Board to monitor both compliance and the multiagency approach to safeguarding these vulnerable children and young people.

Extra Activities

The fostering service has continued to offer a range of activities including ones which are fund raising; celebratory and as an opportunity for foster families to meet.

In the last year Southend Fostering Service has coordinated and supported the following activities in conjunction with the Southend Foster Families Community:

10/4/19 SFFC funded Kids Kingdom for Children & families.

29/4/19 Fund Raising Indian Meal for Foster carers & Children.

26/5/19 Barbara held Boot Sale for SFFC.

29/5/19 SFFC funded Bouncy Castle Day at The Scouts Hall.

7/8/19 SFFC Teddy Bears Picnic in Southchurch Park.

22/8/19 SFFC funded Kids Kingdom for Children.

8/12/19 SFFC funded Childrens Christmas Party for 100 Children & Families.

31/12/19 SFFC organised tickets for Pantomime at Cliffs Pavilion for 120 Children & Families.

SFFC held monthly Coffee Mornings/Support Groups and raised approx £400 from Cash for Clothes.

Feb half term 2020 Bouncy Castle Day funded by SFFC/ Fostering Team.

SFFC Beach Hut also brings in Funds for SFFC at £10 daily when in use.

Kind Donations from Foster Carers, Hawkwell Baptist Church & local people support our Fund Raising, along with Raffles and the support of all our loyal Foster Carers!

SFFC had a full Events Plan booked for this year which included Foster Care Fortnight and all activities were for both birth children and looked after children. They have continued to fund raise on a regular basis and use The Support Group / Coffee Morning for recruitment, training, raising funds and awareness, these have currently been impacted by COVID-19 as social gatherings have not been permitted, although we continue to explore further creative ways of staying connected.

Southend Virtual School

The Fostering service works closely with the Virtual School to ensure the Educational needs of LAC children are consistently supported.

Challenges for the coming year

To strengthen the Fostering Service there is a lot of collaborative development underway. To achieve this, it was also recognised that the service required additional management support and we are currently recruiting additional managers which will start in January next year.

To ensure that Southend is competitive with the Independent Fostering Agencies and transparent with our carers, we are currently seeking to review Southend's offer (payment, training, support etc). There has been a lot of research and currently ideas and views are being sought from a consultation with the carers to ensure they are actively involved in any change.

Recruitment will remain a primary focus.

Over the coming year we will continue to work with our fostering colleagues to support young people to feel safe and well, to maintain both stable placements and to fully engage and succeed with education placements so they in turn can embrace opportunity and prosper in their own future goals.

Jo Hines
Service Manager