

# FOSTERING WITH SOUTHWARK

## YOUR GUIDE

Open your door to change a life

# Introduction

## In Southwark we have a large, well established fostering service.

All the social workers and managers in the fostering service are qualified and experienced in fostering. We are always looking to recruit new foster carers to replace carers who are retiring from fostering.

We have to maintain a sufficient pool of foster carers to meet the needs of the many children and young people who are in our care.

### Why do children come into Foster Care?

Most parents who experience difficulties will receive support and assistance from local services to help them care for their children and meet their children's needs. Sometimes families have serious difficulties requiring children to be cared for by other family members or friends. If a parent is unable to care for their child, and there is no relative or family friend able to care for the child, the child may be placed with a local foster family.

A parent may be ill or may require a short term break and in some cases there are children who may have been abused or neglected. In such circumstances the courts may require the child to be placed in care for a period of time. Sometimes parents have severe problems involving drugs or alcohol, or they may be in trouble with the police and be held in custody.

Some children are fostered with the agreement of their parents, but when there are serious concerns about a child's safety or welfare, the child may be subject to a court order. Often children's services are able to work with the child's parents to enable the child to return home but if this is not possible, then the child will need a permanent/ long term foster family or they may move on to an adoptive family. It would be the role of the foster carer to help prepare the child for their new life.

### How do past experiences affect children?

Each child will express their feelings differently, but many children become distrustful of adults. Many foster children blame themselves for what has happened and they may feel unwanted and unloved. Some children hide their feelings and others

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## DID YOU KNOW ?

40% Southwark Foster Carers have been fostering for more than 10 years.

act out their feelings through their behaviour. Foster carers need a great deal of patience and understanding to help children manage their behaviour and to help them make sense of their past. We will provide training to all foster carers so they can provide therapeutic parenting to all children in their care. They will also be expected to give them the skills to live independently such as cooking, cleaning and financial management.

### Why is it important to find foster homes for children locally?

Most of our foster families live in Southwark or in one of our neighbouring boroughs. Placing children with local foster families allows the children to remain close to the communities they come from and maintain important relationships with their families and friends. It also enables children to continue to attend the same school as this will provide some stability in their lives. However we do have foster families who live some distance from Southwark, and if you live further away and feel you have something special to offer, we may still be able to consider your application. This is especially relevant if you foster primary school-age children you will be expected to take them and collect them from school.





## Common questions about fostering

### Who can be a foster carer?

There is no such thing as a typical foster carer. Foster carers come from a very wide range of backgrounds. All kinds of people foster. The key is that a foster carer is able to offer a stable, secure home and can commit themselves to providing the care a child needs.

- You can be single, married or living with a partner. If you live with a partner then you must both be assessed as we expect you to treat the child as part of your family.
- You may or may not have your own children but you must have some experience with children.
- You can be from any sexual orientation.
- You must be at least 21 years old and there is no maximum age. However, fostering can be physically demanding and therefore you will need the health and stamina to care for someone else's child.
- You must be the legal tenant or owner of your home and have a spare bedroom. We will need to get permission from your landlord or mortgage provider and ensure that you do not have any rent/ mortgage arrears
- You can be from any racial, cultural or religious background.
- We would expect your home to be a non-smoking household.

### What experience and qualities do I need?

As a foster carer, you will be caring for children who have experienced difficulties in their lives. These children may therefore present very challenging and disturbed behaviour. You will need to be able to deal with this behaviour in a positive and caring manner. You will also need to have some experience of looking after and/or working with children and be able to demonstrate that you have the skills to ensure that a child's fullest potential is reached. This means helping them to achieve at school, maintain good health and be able to make positive relationships with friends and other people in their lives. It means attending as much training as is relevant to you. Training is an important part of fostering and we expect all our carers to attend.

You will need to be organised and able to prioritise time to attend school meetings, make hospital appointments and keep daily records of a child's day.

You need to be kind, patient and understanding and able to set clear rules for children and help them to follow these rules. Building relationships with a child's birth family without judging or criticising is very important, as you will be expected to help the child keep in contact with their birth family.

## What sort of accommodation do I need?

You will need to be the legal tenant or owner of your property. Your home does not need to be luxurious but it does obviously need to be homely and safe for children. Your house will be expected to be in a good state of repair and cleanliness. You will also need to have a spare bedroom for a foster child and enough space for their clothes and other belongings. The bedroom for a foster child needs to feel like their own and contains only their personal belongings; this needs to be their space. We expect any foster child to have their own bedroom and not to have to share a bedroom. We do not expect any of your own children to be displaced by a foster child.

That any young person returning from university for the vacation or permanently, has their own space in the house and if sharing with a sibling, they are both happy to do so and the accommodation is suitable for this to happen. We wouldn't want any resentment towards a fostered child who might be seen as using someone else's bedroom.

There should be sufficient space in the rest of the home for play, homework and eating. The home should not be overcrowded.

## Can I still hold down a paid job and be a foster carer?

We encourage foster carers to work, but your work needs to be very flexible - especially in your first year when you will have to do

a lot of training. Foster carers are expected to attend meetings, take children to appointments and to facilitate contact visits with family members. Your fostering supervising social worker and the child's social worker will also need to arrange regular visits to your home to see you and the foster children. For couples who foster, usually one person will foster full time. However both adults in a couple must attend all three days of Skills to Foster as the household will be assessed as being a Fostering Household.

Southwark Council is a Fostering Friendly Employer so if you are employed by them you will be entitled to extra days off for training.

## Is where I live important?

It is preferable that you live in or near Southwark so foster children are not far removed from their home communities. It also helps them to stay in touch with family and friends and continue to attend the same schools or nurseries. However, we will consider an application if you live in a borough close to Southwark or if you have particular experience in caring for sibling groups, children with disabilities, children with very challenging behaviour, or if you want to consider offering a long-term home to a child who needs a permanent family. We usually try to avoid school aged children having to change school, as very often this may be only place where they have had consistency and a positive experience, and

to move school could affect their educational progress. Therefore for foster carers who live some distance from Southwark schools we will need to consider the practicalities of how they can transport foster children to and from their current school.

## What happens?

One of our recruitment team will meet with you at your house. We will need to see everyone who lives there on this visit. All foster carers are required to be accredited as a foster carer by completing the training, support and development standards for foster care (induction standards) run by the Department of Education. This is a requirement for all foster carers in England and Wales. These standards cover all aspects of a foster carer's role, which includes

- maintaining health and safety standards in the foster home.
- providing safe and consistent care to foster children.
- meeting the health, educational and recreational needs of foster children.
- preparing older children for independence.
- preparing children to move to a permanent family either through adoption or to another family member.
- helping foster children to regain their self-esteem and a positive sense of identity.

These will be discussed with you during your assessment. You will also be given case studies relating to these areas, but you can also find out further information about the Fostering Standards from the following websites.

[www.education.gov.uk](http://www.education.gov.uk)

[www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/foster-care/standards](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/foster-care/standards)

## Are there different types of foster carers?

Newly approved carers start off by caring for children for short periods of time on a planned basis. Carers may then go on to care for children for longer periods of time or even permanently. There is no set pattern – it all depends on the foster carers and what they feel they can offer.

All our foster carers are approved to take children 0 - 17 years. Some children are placed in care in an emergency when their family is in crisis and the child will return home quite quickly once the crisis has been dealt with. With many children, however, family difficulties are more complex and they will need a foster placement for several months, while social workers assess whether they can return home or not. If the courts are involved then this process could take much longer.

Some of our temporary foster carers decide that they wish to offer a permanent home to the children they foster either by offering them a long-term home or by adopting them. For applicants who wish to work with teenagers or take parent and child placements will need

to show previous experience before being assessed on this basis. For people who take older children we would like them to care for them until they reach independence.

We have a special team of social workers who recruit foster carers to provide short-term breaks for children with disabilities. This scheme requires foster carers to work directly with parents in partnership as children are matched with a specific foster carer for at least a year. This is called the Family Link Scheme.

We have a number of children requiring long-term foster placements. Long-term fostering provides a permanent home for children when there is a need for continued social work involvement or it has not been possible to identify an adoptive family for them. Children who need long-term foster placements

are generally over eight years of age. Applicants who wish to become long-term foster carers need to be prepared to commit to these children until 18 years old or until they leave care. The children requiring long-term placements come from a very wide range of racial, cultural and religious backgrounds and may be part of a sibling group of children.

Southwark has a rich and diverse population and the children who require foster care come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Wherever possible, we seek to place children with families of the same cultural background in order to sustain the child's sense of cultural identity.

We are especially interested in those who wish to foster teenagers and sibling groups.

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**We particularly welcome applications from people who live in and near the borough so that we can place children as close as possible to the communities they have grown up in.**



# How to become a foster carer

## 1. You contact us

All our contact details are provided on the back cover of this information booklet.

When you contact us we will ask you for your basic details and ask you some questions about yourself and the people living with you, your accommodation and your current working arrangements. You will be asked about your experience of caring for children and your reasons for applying to foster. We then make an initial assessment about whether we can pursue your application any further. You will also be given the opportunity to discuss any queries you may have about fostering for Southwark.

## 2. We arrange an initial visit

An experienced worker will come to visit you in your home to see your accommodation, including the bedrooms. We will need to see everyone who lives in the house as if we assess you we will assess the house as a fostering household. The social worker will also tell you about the assessment process. A decision is then made about whether or not to offer you an application form.

## 3. We take up references and make checks

You will be asked to complete an application form and return it to us within two weeks, giving two personal referees and one family member referee, who

we interview in person. You will need to arrange with your GP for a full medical to ensure you are fit and healthy. We also make checks with the police (DBS), your local social services department, Ofsted, the Probation and Youth Offending Service, we will also look on search engines such as Google for your social media profiles and your previous employers. The purpose of these checks is to make sure that we do not place children with people who may be a danger to them and these checks are government requirements. Minor criminal offences or problems in your past would not rule you out from being a foster carer, but more serious ones would. It is always best for you to be completely honest with us from the start.

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**Seven days a week access to telephone support from a fostering social worker.**

## 4. We assess you thoroughly

A fostering social worker makes several visits to you and your family over a period of four to six months. You are encouraged to talk with the social worker openly and honestly about yourself; how you were brought up, how you parented your children, work you have done and all the experiences that make you who you are, your experiences, and your skills. This is also an opportunity for you to learn more about the fostering task, such as caring for a child who may have been sexually abused, managing children's challenging behaviour, working with birth parents and child care law.

Fostering involves everyone in the family. Your partner will be expected to attend Skills to Foster with you as well. Your backup carer(s) are welcome to attend too. They will be expected to treat any foster child as part of their family, and so we need to seek the views of other people living with you including your children. We have to make sure we place children with families who are safe, caring and have the necessary skills to look after children. The process for assessing foster carers is very thorough. All prospective foster carers and regular adult visitors to the household will be required to have DBS checks undertaken.

# DID YOU KNOW ?

Southwark Foster Carers receive a competitive allowance and a generous setting-up grant to help prepare the foster child's bedroom.

As a foster carer we expect you to identify at least one back up carer. This is someone who will help out in times of need. Sometimes this is a partner or an adult child, sometimes a friend of the family. They will need to be interviewed and have DBS checks. They will need to have had some experience with children and are strongly encouraged to attend Skills to Foster training with you

## 5. Training

During the assessment you and your partner will be expected to attend a three day training course: Skills to Foster. This usually runs two days one week and one the next. It is from 9am until 5pm and you are expected to attend all three days, all day. The course covers all aspects of the fostering task, such as working with the child's family, child development, safe caring, managing challenging behaviour, promoting the health and education of foster children and preparing young people for leaving care.

## 6. A panel of experts approves you to foster children

The social worker assessing you will write a detailed report called a Form F, which you must agree is accurate before it is presented to Southwark's Fostering Panel. The panel is made up of people from a range of backgrounds and people who are experts in the field of fostering, childcare, health and education. A number of panel members are also independent and are

not employed by Southwark Council. You will be invited to attend the panel meeting with the social worker who assessed you, and at this meeting the panel look at your future approval as foster carers for Southwark. The Fostering Panel then makes a recommendation to the "Agency Decision Maker" (a senior manager in Children's Services), who will make the final decision about whether to approve you as a foster carer, and about how many children you should foster and what age they should be. Your approval will then be reviewed every year.

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**The key is that a foster carer is able to offer a stable, secure home and can commit themselves to providing the care a child needs.**







## What we can offer you

### **As a foster carer you are never on your own**

All foster carers receive a high level of support and training from a dedicated team of specialist social workers and health and educational experts.

### **Supervising social workers in the fostering team**

Every foster carer has an allocated supervising social worker from the fostering team. It is their job to supervise and support you and to provide you with assistance and guidance with the many tasks that are required of foster carers. This includes working with foster children's families and the other professionals involved in the children's lives.

### **A generous fostering allowance for each child placed with you**

The fostering allowance is based on the age and needs of the child, and covers all the costs of caring for your foster child, which includes clothes, food, travel, pocket money, the wear and tear to your home, and the cost of gas and electricity.

### **Practical assistance**

We will provide you with essential bedroom and safety equipment for each child you foster, and a computer and digital camera for both the foster child's and your use. You will also get a library card for you and your child

to access the Southwark libraries and all they have to offer.

Seven days a week access to telephone support from a fostering social worker

Our out of hours service provides telephone assistance to foster carers at times when social workers are not normally available.

### **Extra support in times of need which includes**

- Respite support – which gives foster carers day, weekend or a holiday break from their foster child, particularly when they need time out from a very demanding foster child.
- A fostering consultant from the specialist child and adolescent mental health team for 'children looked after' – who can provide support, counselling and advice to foster carers and their families, to help them cope with a child's difficult behaviour.
- Individual support packages – devised to support a foster placement in times of crisis or when placements become stressful.
- Direct access to educational support and advocacy.
- Direct access to a dedicated health adviser.

## **A comprehensive training programme for approved foster carers**

Courses on all aspects of fostering run throughout the year. Training covers a variety of topics, including essential record keeping, understanding the foster carer's roles and responsibilities, child protection, helping a child learn through play and healthy living. Many other courses are also on offer to foster carers such as first aid, life story work, managing challenging behaviour and computer skills.

## **Support groups**

We run a monthly support group for all our foster carers. This group provides foster carers with mutual support, friendship and skill and problem sharing, and is facilitated by a supervising social worker from the fostering team. This group provide foster carers with mutual support, friendship and skill and problem sharing, and is facilitated by a supervising social worker from the fostering team.

There are also a number of other projects in Southwark which can give support and input to foster carers and foster children, including counselling for foster carers and their children, and specialist advice about health, drugs, education and careers for young people leaving care.

We also offer the chance to attend a Well Being group - walking and yoga groups as well as other activities. There is also a newsletter produced for foster carers with details of events happening in Southwark, news for foster carers as well as competitions.

## **Fostering Network subscription**

All approved foster carers are given an annual subscription to the Fostering Network which has a newsletter, website [www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net) and runs events for foster carers and their children. This national fostering organisation will keep you up-to-date with what is happening in the world of fostering and provides a helpline and advice about insurance and legal matters.

## **Outings and events**

Various events are organised for Southwark foster carers throughout the year including coffee mornings, celebratory lunches, summer outings and trips to the pantomime.

# OPEN YOUR DOOR TO CHANGE A LIFE

## If you would like to know more about fostering

Ring us today on freephone 0800 952 070  
9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Email: [fostering@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:fostering@southwark.gov.uk)

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