

# Adopter recruitment case study: Southwark Council

Prepared by Margaret Grant

**40**

Southwark Council

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## Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) asked BAAF to conduct a case study of Southwark Council's innovative approach to the recruitment of prospective adopters. The case study aims to encourage other agencies to consider their approaches to recruitment in relation to Southwark's, and to explore the potential of this approach for adaptation and improvement to meet local needs.

The recruitment of adopters has come under particular scrutiny as part of the Government's adoption reform agenda. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (England and Wales) aimed to tackle a national shortage of suitable adopters. However, we know from the Adoption Research Initiative (Thomas, 2013) that the problems in recruitment have persisted. Over the last decade, agencies have continued to experience significant difficulties in recruiting prospective adopters for children with additional needs, particularly families willing to consider caring for children with disabilities, children from some minority ethnic backgrounds, older children, those in sibling groups and those with special health needs.

Ofsted has also identified some common issues based on its analysis of adoption agencies' written adopter recruitment strategies. These suggest the need for agencies to better understand the specific needs of their local populations of children awaiting placement, and to develop clearer and more measurable action plans.

Recent research carried out by the University of East Anglia (UEA) and BAAF identified a number of factors associated with effective adopter recruitment (Clifton and Neil, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Four of the main factors that emerged from a series of interviews with 35 agencies were:

- integrating marketing into the agency plan;
- growing the place of the internet in recruitment;
- cherishing enquirers on their adoption journey;
- encouraging adopters to consider complex children.

1 BAAF commissioned this research from the University of East Anglia as part its wider work for the DfE on the recruitment of prospective adopters. The full report is available from UEA's Centre for Research on Children and Families website, at [www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family](http://www.uea.ac.uk/centre-research-child-family).

## The *Finding 40 Families* project

To address its local difficulties in adopter recruitment, Southwark Council used the messages from this research and its own local data collection to revise its approach to recruitment. It launched the *Finding 40 Families* project in June 2013, using its Adoption Reform Grant funding;<sup>2</sup> Southwark Council received £1.3 million of funding, of which £486,000 was ring-fenced for adopter recruitment. The project was a joint initiative between Southwark's adoption team and corporate communications team, conducted between June and December 2013.

The specific aims of the project included:

- reaching and bringing forward potential adopters from across different Southwark communities, particularly from Black African communities;
- increasing the recruitment of adopters in the short term, while also building relationships with local communities to achieve long-term improvements in recruitment.

A wider aim of the project was to reduce the risks of looked after children *drifting* in placements. The project therefore also involved embedding work to promote *permanency planning* across different parts of children's services and related systems.

This report of the case study describes what worked well in the *Finding 40 Families* project and what lessons have been learned.

## Leadership and staffing

Southwark Council set up a strategy team, led by the Director of Children's Social Care, to work on the *Finding 40 Families* project and develop a greater focus on permanency across children's services. A Permanence Champion role – a one-year post created using funding from the Adoption Reform Grant – was filled by an experienced manager from the voluntary sector. The funding was also used to increase the administrative and social work capacity within the team for the duration of the project, including the appointment of a social worker to a new adopter recruitment post, with specific responsibility for co-ordinating work on enquiries from prospective adopters.

2 In 2013/14, the DfE allocated £150 million to local authorities via the Adoption Reform Grant programme, of which £50 million was ring-fenced for activities related to recruiting adopters.

For the corporate communications team, the *Finding 40 Families* campaign was part of their annual work plan, and clear links were made with the council's wider priority of working with vulnerable people.

The council's lead member for children's services also played an active role: promoting the *Finding 40 Families* project at external meetings, within the council, with other elected members, and at local community events. She became the external "Adoption Champion" of the project, undertaking activities including visiting local schools and acting as a media spokesperson.

### Embedding permanency

An analysis of Southwark Council's management data had shown that there was a risk of children drifting in placements. To try to reduce this risk, the Permanency Strategy Team held meetings every two weeks to monitor social workers' performance and track individual children's progress towards permanency.

To build wider awareness across the system, the Permanence Champion delivered a four-session training module covering the child's journey from identification of initial concerns right through to adoption. This permanency training was mandatory for all social workers within Southwark, with the aim of encouraging "thinking permanency right from the beginning".

### Co-ordination between marketing and adoption staff

Monthly meetings were held throughout the project period between adoption staff (including the Head of Adoption, the Permanence Champion, the recruitment worker and frontline administrative staff) and three members of Southwark's Corporate Communications Team (representing marketing, digital and media). The Permanence Champion acted as a central point of communication between meetings. These co-ordination meetings were considered a priority and it was agreed that core staff should attend every meeting if possible.

Marketing data (such as numbers of website hits, numbers of people attending drop-in sessions, and anecdotal feedback from those who attended), was reviewed at each meeting. The following month's activities were agreed on the basis of which routes into the recruitment process were proving most effective.

The project team sought help from other departments as necessary, including the community engagement team, which brought established links with churches and other organisations.

### Understanding local demographics

Southwark Council is a unitary authority and the adoption team is part of a local consortium. Southwark has a high number of children awaiting adoption relative to its population size: usually around 45 children.

As an inner London borough, the population is ethnically diverse, but includes some relatively transient communities. For example, there is a substantial Latin American community in Southwark, but this is not reflected in the children awaiting family placements.

An independent market research company was engaged by Southwark to undertake research with adopters who had previously had children placed through Southwark Council. The researchers carried out telephone interviews and also attended events for adopters, to speak to those who had direct adoption experience. This research helped Southwark Council to understand motivations for adopting, such as people wanting to "complete" their families and offer a child a caring, secure home. It also highlighted the role of faith and community groups in offering possible routes to reaching Black African and other minority ethnic communities.

The input from market researchers helped to refine the messages for the recruitment materials and communications strategy (described in the next section). The research suggested, for instance, that as Southwark is an area with relatively high levels of local authority housing, it was important to emphasise that adopters do not have to be home owners. It also highlighted that potential adopters seek out local authorities partly according to how many children are waiting to be adopted there, on the basis that a successful match is more likely when there are more children available.

Southwark Council also considered its own data on previous adoptions, and identified that – as with many agencies – there were potential disincentives for foster carers considering converting to adoption, in terms of losing financial and other forms of support available to them as foster carers. The team therefore reviewed their allowances for both fostering and adoption to tackle this issue.

## Developing a core message and clear visuals

As a result of the market research, the communications strategy focused on engaging Southwark communities with the message that children who need adoption are an issue for the whole community. It also promoted the number of children waiting to be adopted in Southwark as part of the message to potential adopters.

Although the exact number of children awaiting adoption in Southwark fluctuates within the low to mid-40s, this needed to be translated into a simple and direct core message for the communications strategy of the project. The project title, *Finding 40 Families*, created a memorable and meaningful slogan (see inset box below).

### Forty Southwark schoolchildren

Forty children from a local school, with their parents' permission, were photographed standing in the shape of a number 40 (the photograph is shown on the title page of this document). The decision to create an image for marketing purposes which used Southwark's "real" children, rather than stock photographs of children, helped to convey a sense of authenticity and also build a sense of adoption as an issue for the whole Southwark community. Adoption staff liaised with the school to obtain permissions for children to be featured, while communications staff arranged the technical and media aspects. Every child that took part in the photograph was given a copy and a thank you letter from the lead member of children's services.

The photograph became a media opportunity in itself, and was covered by *Southwark News*. Southwark Council created a video of the "making of" the photograph, fronted by the project's Adoption Champion, which was featured on *BBC London Tonight*. The project was also promoted around Southwark schools.

Other messages focused on:

- the diverse backgrounds of children waiting for adoption;
- the need for adopters from all walks of life who can provide a permanent, stable and caring home;

- Southwark Council's aim to approve adopters within four months;
- the fact that that most approved adopters are matched with a child within six weeks; and
- the availability of adoption support.

A "tick box" graphic was developed to highlight myth-busting facts, and used across materials such as flyers, information packs and leaflets. Two film clips were also developed and placed on Southwark Council's website: the first showed an interview with the Adoption Champion and schoolchildren involved in making the *Finding 40 Families* photograph; the second featured interviews with Southwark adopters talking about their experiences, which included a diverse range of adopters interviewed in their homes. Adoption support was a central part of the message emphasised by the lead member for children's services during all her appearances.

## Marketing/media/social media strategy

Adoption was designated as one of the corporate communication team's major campaigns within their annual work plan, and implemented on a rolling basis across Southwark's online presence (front page of council website, "news" banner, social media, e-newsletter, etc). The corporate communications team monitored activities closely to ensure that the campaign was dynamic and did not clash with messages from other departments across Southwark.

The communications strategy for the *Finding 40 Families* project included a number of iterative strands:

**Regional:** The newspapers *Evening Standard* and *Metro* featured the launch of the campaign, as did the local *Southwark News*. A short film clip of the making of the *Finding 40 Families* photograph, featuring Southwark's Adoption Champion, was aired on *BBC London Tonight*. The Adoption Champion was also interviewed on LBC Radio, and the campaign was promoted during Black History Month.

**Local:** the campaign was promoted via the council's social media outlets; in a quarterly magazine for all Southwark residents (distributed door-to-door); in an e-newsletter with a circulation of around 40,000 people with links to the area; and on large "adshel" posters at bus stops. The market research was used to plan the strategy: for example, based on demographic information broken down to show areas with large numbers of Black Africans aged 35–49, particular

neighbourhoods were targeted for marketing strategies (such as distributing *Finding 40 Families* leaflets).

Two specific aspects of the *Finding 40 Families* project focused on community engagement: involving children from a local school in producing the main photograph, and an offer to community groups of £1,000 if adopters came forward via their organisations (see inset box below).

**Internal:** in line with the idea of reaching a broad audience, the campaign was communicated to staff across Southwark Council using existing channels: the staff intranet; the fortnightly staff newsletter; and via plasma screens and colourful stands displayed in the foyers of council buildings.

### Engaging community organisations

Southwark Council offered a £1,000 incentive to local faith groups and schools if adopters came forward through them. Very few organisations claimed the money (only one or two over the period of the project), but the offer generated considerable publicity.

In particular, Southwark has more than 300 churches, each representing a community from which adopters could be recruited. The adoption team wrote to all churches, based on existing links with the council's community engagement team. Team members meeting faith leaders also helped to break down some of the myths and barriers about who can adopt and what is involved. For example, on Father's Day, staff from the adoption team joined a special service at one of the local churches.

To date, only a small number of enquiries can be attributed directly to this community engagement, but it has established new recruitment routes that can be used again in the future. A central aim of the project was to achieve not just an increase in the number of adopters for the coming year, but to build relationships that might yield more adopters over time from a wide range of backgrounds.

### What changed as a result?

Although the campaign was given the title *Finding 40 Families*, Southwark Council's main aim was to increase the numbers of adopters compared to previous years, rather than having a specific target of 40 families. Comparing the figures for 2013/14 with the previous year, Southwark achieved a number of significant improvements:

- **341 initial enquiries were made** (compared to 217 in 2012/13 – a 36 per cent increase).
- **61 applications were received** (compared to 33 in 2012/13 – a 46 per cent increase).
- **33 children were subject to a final adoption order** (compared to 21 in 2012/13 – a 37 per cent increase).
- **21 placements were made using in-house adoptive families** (compared to 15 in 2012/13 – a 29 per cent increase).
- In terms of adoptive families, **29 were approved, 11 were waiting to be matched and 32 applications were still being assessed** at the end of the year.

Several encouraging trends were also identified.

- Approximately one in four new enquiries were from black and minority ethnic enquirers.
- As hoped, the number of foster carers approved to adopt a child they were fostering increased, from one in 2012/13 to eight in 2013/14.
- Older children (those aged over five years) also benefited significantly: seven older children were adopted in 2013/14, as opposed to only one in the previous year.
- In addition, the timescales for approving adopters and matching them with children were reduced, despite some initial delays as the team adjusted to the new two-stage adopter approval process. For example, compared to the previous year, double the number of families were matched in less than three months in 2013/14 – an increase from seven to 14.

Most agencies need to generate far more enquiries than the number of children waiting, to ensure the recruitment of sufficient numbers of potential adopters who can meet those children's needs. (Southwark's rate of converting initial enquiries to adoption applications is 18 per cent, which is in line

with the national average of 16 per cent.) For some enquirers, the project helped turn a previous idea into reality. As one prospective adopter said:

*I was at a point where everything came together – I had the flat and the job in place. I'd thought about adoption previously, but suddenly I was seeing adverts at the bus stop, and friends and family were mentioning things they'd seen in the local paper. So then I thought, now is the time to get in touch. They invited me to an event at a local library the next week.*

## Cost benefits

The total amount Southwark Council spent on changes to adopter recruitment was £486,000, from the Adoption Reform Grant. Southwark estimates that by increasing the number of adoptions, it saved approximately £37,000 per child per year. This totals around £600,000 per child for 16 years of care. The calculation was worked out on the basis of staff time, Independent Reviewing Officer time, other care costs, and in-house fostering placement costs.

Given the number of factors involved, which can vary substantially for each placement, and the difficulty in accurately determining actual costs, any such calculations must be treated with caution. Previous research has suggested a wide range of figures. However, even after taking into account increased costs for adoption support and allowances, Southwark Council is likely to have made substantial future savings by recruiting 33 new adoptive families, compared to 21 during the previous year.

Two additional potential benefits are also important.

- First, the project has led to sustained changes in the way Southwark Council's adoption team operates (see next section). It is therefore hoped that the improvements will be maintained in future years.
- Second, Southwark Council's approach helped it to avoid unnecessary delays and match children and families more quickly. Research has consistently shown that the younger children are when they are placed, the better their outcomes across a range of domains. Many benefits may not be measurable as direct financial savings for children's services, but are nevertheless significant in the day-to-day lives

of, and long-term prospects for, children and their adoptive families.

## Further developments

Following a review across their social care services, Southwark Council was able to embed many of the changes, initially funded via the Adoption Reform Grant, into a new permanent structure (including converting short-term roles into permanent posts, except for the Permanence Champion role, which was a fixed-term contract).

At an operational level, the two-weekly "tracking meetings" continue to monitor individual children's pathways to permanence. The tracking information is fed into the Adoption Strategy Team's monthly meetings, and practitioners or Independent Reviewing Officers attend as necessary to discuss particular children (or groups of children) where additional work may be necessary.

## Lessons learned

Reviewing what they have learned from this project, Southwark Council staff emphasised the importance of the following points.

### Planning and strategy

- Southwark Council staff suggested that before starting the campaign, it would have been helpful to create a bespoke database to record the data and measure the results.
- Similarly, it would have been beneficial to develop a clear strategy to convert the expected increase in the number of enquiries into assessments and approvals. Although the campaign proved effective in increasing numbers throughout all stages of the process (see previous page), at times it proved difficult to deal with the number of new enquirers, particularly when staff were also adapting to the changes involved in the new two-stage adopter approval process.

### Taking account of short- and long-term objectives

- Southwark Council's corporate communications team's experience suggests that it would be beneficial to develop a three-year marketing strategy rather than a one-year strategy, as people often take a number of years to decide to apply to adopt. This would be in line with the adoption

team's approach to viewing some aspects of the campaign, such as community engagement, as a long-term investment in developing new recruitment routes.

### Making it local

- A central concern was to "Make it look like Peckham". Photographs and film clips featured local families and homes that reflected Southwark rather than a general idealised version of adopters. Using real children – both local schoolchildren and profiles of children waiting for adoption in Southwark – was a calculated risk that paid off.

*We were very clear that we were presenting a new approach, that adoption is a community issue. That's why we involved local children in making the photograph for the campaign.*

**Head of Campaigns**, Southwark Council

### Co-ordinating marketing and adoption tasks

- The campaign required close co-ordination between the adoption team and communications team staff. Dependent tasks were agreed at the outset – for example, before communications staff implemented any marketing activities, the adoption team lined up adopters to speak to the media, prepared case studies of real children and obtained permission to use children's photographs.

### Making changes for individual children

- The Permanence Strategy Team reviewed data on each child awaiting adoption every two weeks, and were prepared to implement changes to assist individual children. For example, if waiting for the next planned panel would delay a child's progress towards permanency by a few weeks, they would convene an extra panel at an earlier date.
- In recent years, greater attention has been paid to the ways in which children are described in their profiles used for family finding. In addition to children's profiles, adoption staff at Southwark also went through the child permanence reports for all children waiting for adoptive placements in Southwark to ensure that they presented a realistic but positive view of the child.

*It's not about ignoring the complex needs that some of the children have, but about recognising the joy that these children bring into people's lives.*

**Permanence Champion** (former), Southwark Council

## References

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