

# Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025



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# Foreword

## Councillor Jasmine Ali, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees

I am very proud to share the Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025. This report shows the progress we have made, how we worked together, and the promise at the heart of what we do for children and young people who are **looked after** and **care leavers** in Southwark.

This year, we have seen what can happen when we work together as one caring community. Being a corporate parent is not the job of just one team. It belongs to all of us. Every councillor, every worker, every neighbour, every school, and every business in Southwark has a duty to make sure children in care are loved, supported, and given the same chances that any parent would want for their own child.

Over the last year, we have kept building on strong foundations. We welcomed residents into Southwark's first children's home in more than 10 years. This means more young people can stay near their friends, schools, and community.

Our foster carer recruitment campaign reached new people too. This means more people can offer stability, kindness, and care. We also strengthened our support for care leavers. This helps them move into adulthood with better access to housing, education, training, and work.



Most importantly, we listened to young people. Through **SpeakerBox** (our Children in Care Council), we listened to what matters most to them. They told us about emotional wellbeing and belonging, safety, identity, and independence. Their ideas and honesty help us make services better. Thank you to every young person who shared their time and thoughts this year.

We have a lot to celebrate, but there is still more to do. Some challenges need long-term teamwork and big ambition. These include supporting education, helping young people get apprenticeships and jobs, and making sure there are safe and affordable homes. These are not just “policy goals”. They are the building blocks of a good life. Our young people deserve nothing less.

Looking ahead to 2026, we will launch our new **Corporate Parenting Strategy 2026–2030**. We feel hopeful and determined. We will keep standing up for every child and young person in our care: their dreams, their rights, and their future.



**Councillor Jasmine Ali**  
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees





## Foreword

### SpeakerBox, Southwark Children in Care Council

We are **SpeakerBox**. We are Southwark's Children in Care Council. We are proud because we have just celebrated our **22nd birthday**! Over the years, we have grown into a strong, diverse, and determined community of children and young people with care experience. We really want to make a difference.

Our aim is simple but powerful. We aim to support each other, be part of change, and help get better outcomes for children and young people in care.

This Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2025 shows what improved over the last year. It also shows what we will focus on next year. For us, this is more than a report. It shows how our voices, ideas, and experiences help shape better services.

At SpeakerBox, we believe children and young people should be involved. This links to **Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**. This means children and young people should be able to share their wishes and feelings, in a safe and supportive space. We know what children and young people say really matters.

This year, we created **eight pillars of priorities**. These show what is important to care-experienced children and young people in Southwark:

- 1. Education and Employment**
- 2. Non-Discrimination**
- 3. Safety and Support Services**
- 4. Freedom of Expression**
- 5. Standards and Treatment in Care**
- 6. Voice of the Child**
- 7. Knowledge of Rights**
- 8. Health Services**

These pillars guide what we do. They also help us hold our corporate parents to account.



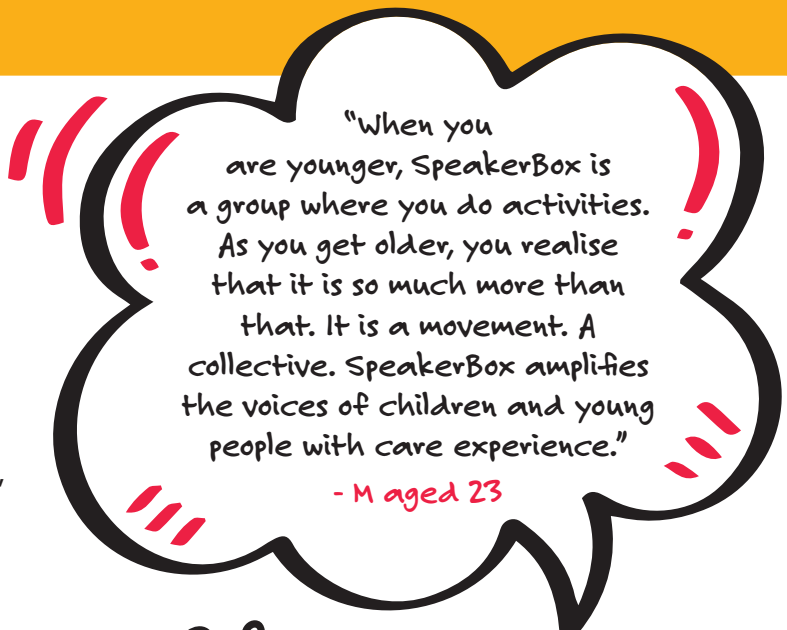
This year, we did many activities to bring people together and celebrate who we are. Highlights include our annual **Winter Ball**. We also did creative projects like recording an album, photography, and cookery courses. These activities are fun, but they also help build skills, confidence, and friendships.

We also took part in consultations about housing, education, and wellbeing. This helps make sure young people's real experiences shape how services are designed and delivered.

Our mission and purpose stay the same:

- **Engage** – Build a community of confident, passionate, and empowered children and young people who use their voice.
- **Explore** – Find problems in the system, speak up for change that matters, and help create solutions.
- **Embed** – Make sure care experience is recognised, valued, and included across the system (Children's Services, the whole council, and the community) so the impact lasts.

We are proud of how far we have come. But we know there is still more to do. Together, with our corporate parents and supporters, we will keep working to make Southwark a place where every care-experienced child and young person feels safe, valued, and excited for the future.



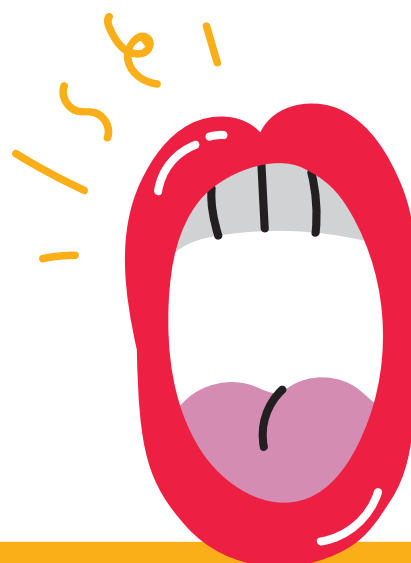
"When you are younger, SpeakerBox is a group where you do activities. As you get older, you realise that it is so much more than that. It is a movement. A collective. SpeakerBox amplifies the voices of children and young people with care experience."

- M aged 23



"SpeakerBox to me is a family and a home. It gives me a lot of opportunities and space to grow. I'm so happy I joined SpeakerBox. It helped me to meet new people and create joyful memories."

- N aged 19



# What is a corporate parent?

**The Children and Social Work Act 2017** says that when a child comes into the care of the local authority, the authority becomes their **corporate parent**.

It also says the same if a young person is **under 25**, and they were in care for **at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday**.

This means the local authority should follow the core principles in the 2017 law. These are to:

- act in the best interests of children and young people, and promote their physical and mental health and wellbeing
- encourage them to share their views, wishes, and feelings, and listen to what they say
- make sure they can access services
- make sure they are safe, and have stable home lives, relationships, and education or work
- promote high hopes for them, and try to get the best outcomes for them
- prepare them for adulthood and independent living

As corporate parents, it is every councillor's responsibility to make sure the council meets these duties towards children in care and care leavers.

Corporate parenting means the whole council, and its public and private partners, share responsibility. Together, we aim for the same outcomes for children in care and care leavers that we would want for our own children.

Being an excellent corporate parent means we should always be ambitious for our children. We should use every tool we can to support them, help them access opportunities, and give them as much support as possible so they can live their best lives.

The **Lead Member for Children's Services** and the **Director of Children's Services** have a legal (statutory) duty to make sure all officers and councillors act as effective and caring corporate parents for looked after children. They have key roles in improving children's education

results, providing stable and high-quality placements, and planning well for when young people leave care.



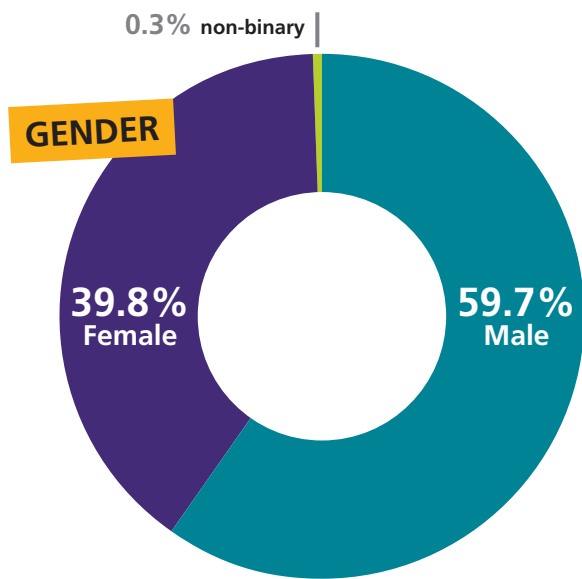
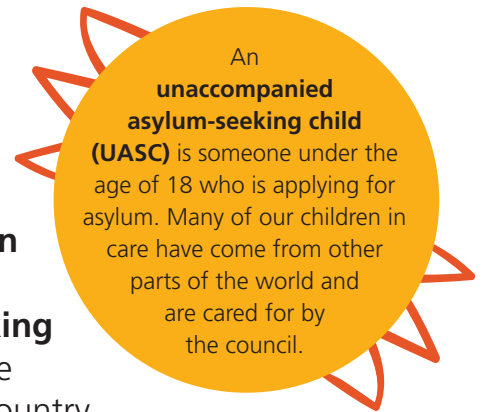
# Southwark as a borough

## Who are our children in care?

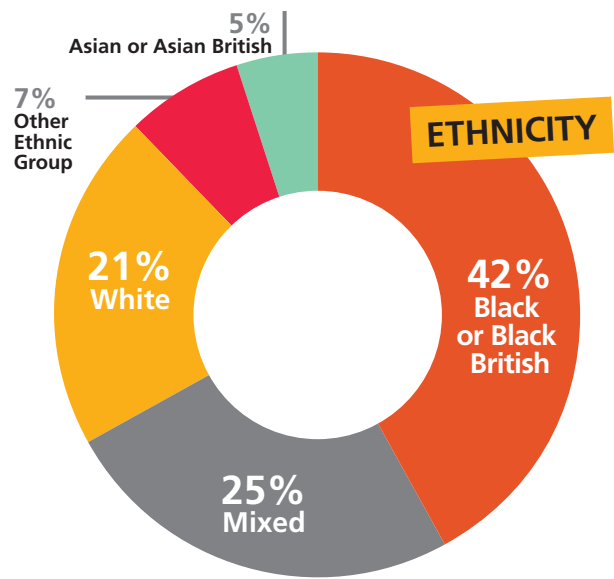
In December 2025, there were **367 children** in our care at the end of 2025.

This is slightly below the national average and similar to nearby boroughs.

By the end of 2025, **50 children (14%)** in our care were **unaccompanied asylum-seeking children**. This is higher than the average in London and in the country.



**59.7%** of children in our care were **male**, **39.8%** were **female**, and **0.3%** were **non-binary**.



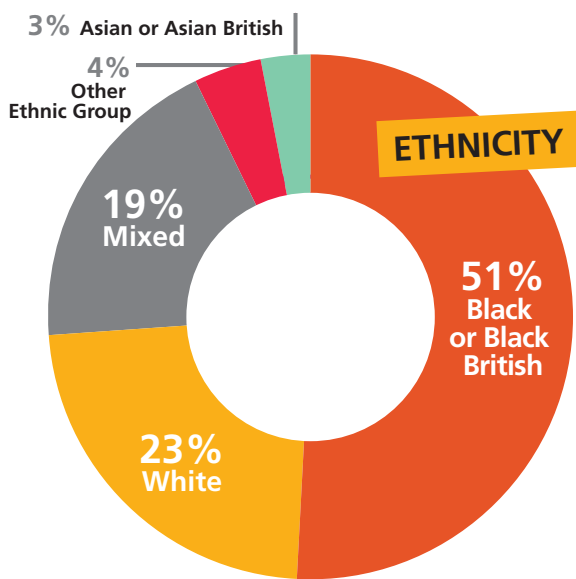
Most children in our care are from **Black or Black British (42%)** backgrounds. This is followed by **Mixed (25%)** and **White (21%)** backgrounds. This shows that **Black, Black British, Caribbean and African** children are overrepresented compared to Southwark's full population.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Census 2021: Population, demography and health (October 2023)

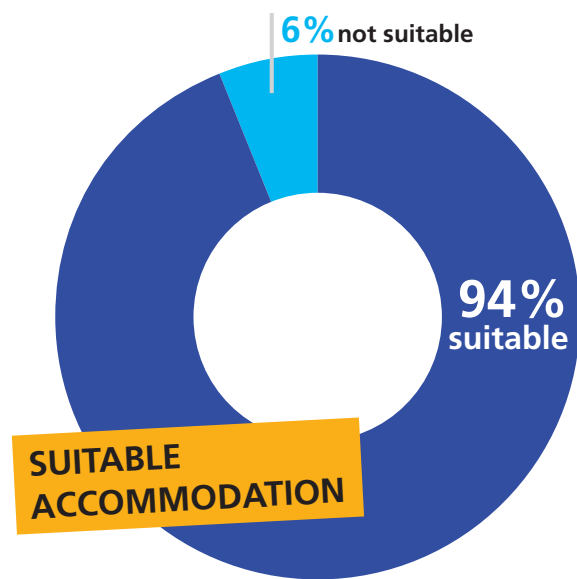
# Who are the young people we support as care leavers?

As of December 2025, we were supporting **665 care leavers, aged 17 to 25**

Former UASC children now make up **28%** of our care leaver group up to age 25. This is **187 young people**.



Most care leavers (not including former UASC children) are from **Black or Black British** backgrounds (51%). 23% are **White or White British**, and 20% are **Mixed or multiple ethnic groups**.



In December 2025, **94%** of our care leavers aged **17–21** were in **suitable accommodation**. Of those sharing that their living arrangements did not fully meet their needs, 15 young people were reported to be in custody

At the end of December, **72% of 17–21 year olds** were in **education, employment, or training education**.

A **care leaver** is a young person over 17 years old who has been in care for at least twelve weeks and spent some time in care after their sixteenth birthday.

# Our Corporate Parenting Strategy (2021–2025)



In **July 2021**, the Corporate Parenting Committee agreed **Caring to Care: Achieving Excellence for Our Children – Southwark’s Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021–2025**.



The strategy explains how the council will deliver the Corporate Parenting Principles in the **Children and Social Work Act 2017**. The principles for children and young people in care are to:

- act in their best interests, and promote their physical and mental health and wellbeing
- encourage them to share their views, wishes, and feelings
- take their views, wishes, and feelings into account
- help them access and use services provided by the local authority and partners
- promote high hopes and aim for the best outcomes
- make sure they are safe and have stability in home life, relationships, and education or work
- prepare them for adulthood and independent living



The strategy delivers these principles through **six priorities**:

1. supporting more families to safely stay together
2. growing up safe and independent in society
3. health, wellbeing, education & opportunity
4. happy, safe and stable
5. identity & belonging
6. a whole borough that 'cares to care'

Our strategy is being refreshed. We want to be bold and ambitious for 2026–2030. In line with the **Southwark 2030 strategy**, launched in September 2024, we will keep focusing on giving children in care a good start in life.

Our new strategy is being developed in full partnership with care-experienced young people.

It will be based on the **eight pillars for future delivery** defined by SpeakerBox and presented to the Corporate Parenting Committee in **July 2025**:

1. Education & Employment
2. Non-Discrimination
3. Safety & Support Services
4. Freedom of Expression
5. Standards & Treatment in Care
6. Voice of the Child
7. Knowledge of Rights
8. Health Services



# STRATEGY PRIORITY 1:

## Supporting More Families to Safely Stay Together

### Our commitment

We will make sure children and families get the right help at the right time, as early as possible. We want every child to be able to grow up safely and well at home.

### What we said we would do:

- keep investing in evidence-based “edge of care” services and support
- increase the number of children in **connected care arrangements**, by investing in family group conferencing and support offers
- develop our **re-unification** support, so when children return home they can stay there safely and for the long term



## How we have delivered:

This year, more children were supported to stay with their parents. The number of children looked after by the council reduced to **367** at the end of 2025.

Decisions about children entering care are made by:

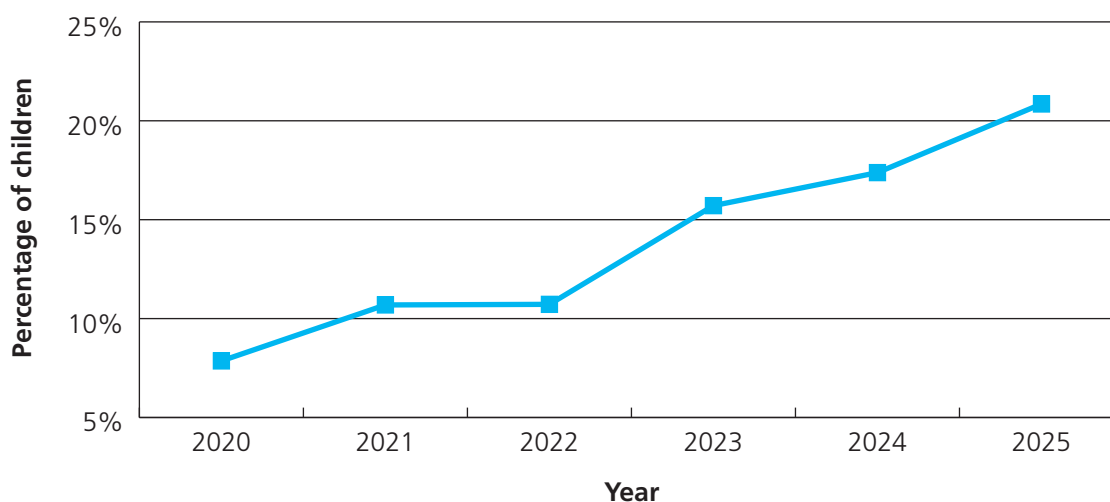
- Heads of Service in our **Legal Panel**, or
- the Deputy Director of Children's Social Care in our **Resource Panel** (for adolescents)

These panels give strong leadership and careful oversight. They also support multi-disciplinary decision-making. This means we listen to different experts, to see what extra support might help a child stay safely with their family.

We make careful decisions so we explore all options for the best care arrangements. This helps more children live with friends and family if parents cannot safely care for them.



**PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN CARE WHO ARE IN FAMILY AND FRIEND PLACEMENTS 2020–2025**



Each year, investing in specialist services has helped us reduce the number of children in care.

If an **11–17-year-old** might need to enter care because family relationships break down, we look first at the **Keeping Families Together (KFT)** team. This team gives intensive support in the home. The team is multi-disciplinary.

If we are very worried about a child's safety and need quick change, we consider our **SWIFT Team** first. SWIFT means **Southwark Works Intensively with Families, Together**.

The SWIFT team agrees special (bespoke) support with families. They check if families can make positive changes. This can help stop legal proceedings being needed.



The team also received **100% positive feedback** from families.



We also invest in other support:

- A clinical service with mental health clinicians in each social work team
- A specialist **Family Group Conferencing** service to help families find solutions other than care
- The **Pause** service for women who have already had children removed, to reduce the chance of more removals

## What we still need to achieve

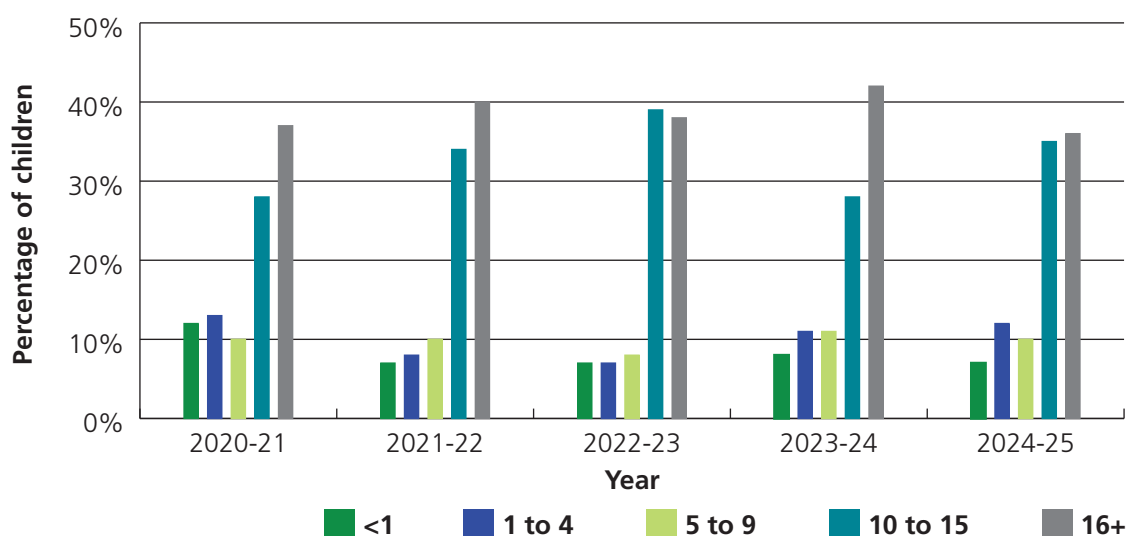
Our services have helped more children stay at home, but we know we must do more so families get the right help at the right time.

We still see that most children coming into care are older. Research shows that many children entering care from age **13** had serious vulnerabilities. This included school issues like fixed-term or permanent exclusions, and many had an education, health and care plan.

This research shows we must keep investing in early help and prevention. It also shows we need joined-up work across partners, from early childhood through adulthood.

We also need to do more to help children who return home from care to stay safely with parents and carers. In 2024/25, **26** children entered care again within the previous 12 months. This is **13%** of all children who entered care that year. Our goal is to strengthen and expand evidence-based reunification work and do better than national benchmarks. In 2026, we will pilot a dedicated **Reunification Team** to give extra support so family care lasts.

**PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN ENTERING CARE BY AGE BAND DURING YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH (2021–2025)**



## Social Care Reforms – Families First Partnership Programme

**The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024–25<sup>2</sup> aims to “write children’s best interests into law and make child-centred government a reality”. The Bill suggests changes to improve child safeguarding and raise education standards.**

From **July 2023**, 10 local authorities tested new ways of working and key strategic commitments. The aim is a new “end-to-end” children’s social care system. This would help different services work together better and



remove barriers and “hand-offs” (when responsibility is passed on). The system focuses on prevention and early help.

Since **March 2025**, Southwark has been co-designing reforms with frontline staff, safeguarding partners, children, young people, and families. We want their voices at the centre of new service design, and we want plans that fit Southwark’s local community. We want to learn as we go, and we believe a “test and learn” approach is right for Southwark.



<sup>2</sup> Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024: policy summary (December 2024)

## STRATEGY PRIORITY 2:

# Growing Up Safe and Independent in Society

## Our commitment

**We will give children the tools, skills, resources, and support they need to become more independent. We will also protect them from risks and threats in an increasingly complex world.**

## What we said we would do:

- put in place more ways to protect care leavers from exploitation and abuse
- keep investing so young people can “stay put” with carers after 18 if they want
- work with our Housing Service to ensure care leavers get as much help as possible to find housing that is suitable and good for their future
- invest in stronger life skills programmes for all children in care
- develop deposit support schemes and savings accounts for children



## How we have delivered:

We helped more care leavers stay with their former foster carers after the age of 18 – this is called ‘**staying put**’.

The percentage of care leavers aged 17–18 in Southwark living with former foster carers rose to **26%**, up from **22%** last year. This compares to the national average of **17%**.

We have made sure our Children’s Services and Housing Services work closely together to support young people leaving care.

Joint work by a specialist **Experienced Practitioner** with Housing Services created a **pre-tenancy accommodation pathway** for young people waiting for social housing. This included:

- housing independence workshops on tenancy sustainment
- in-person drop-in sessions for any housing issues

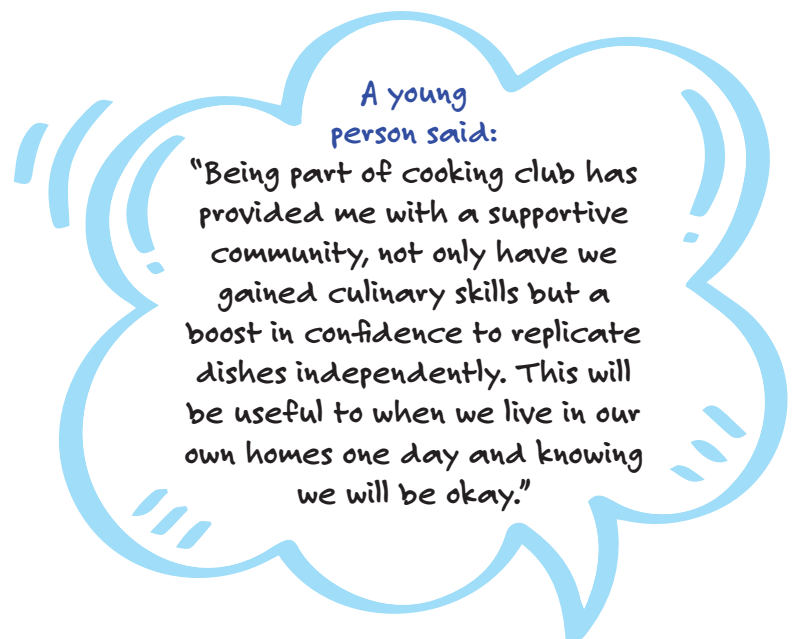
We also delivered training for new Housing staff on processes and policies linked to care-experienced young people.



We run a monthly **Housing Panel** where **20 care leaver applications** for bidding numbers for social housing are fast-tracked.

The percentage of our 19–21 year old care leavers in suitable accommodation stayed high at **94%** in December 2025. This compares to **88%** across London and **89%** in England.

This year we have invested in transforming the **Talfourd Place Care Leavers’ Hub**. The rooms, co-designed and decorated with young people, are now warm and welcoming. The space is open for planned activities, workshops and one-to-one sessions.



An Experienced Practitioner for Youth Work runs regular activities at the Hub. There is also special support from Children’s Rights Officers for care leavers with SEND and disabilities, including the **SEND cook club**.

In **October 2025**, the service launched the care leaver independence skills programme. This included sessions on cooking, money (finance), essential home skills, and housing.

## What we still need to achieve

We know we need more local accommodation for young adults. We will keep working to create more affordable independent housing for care leavers.

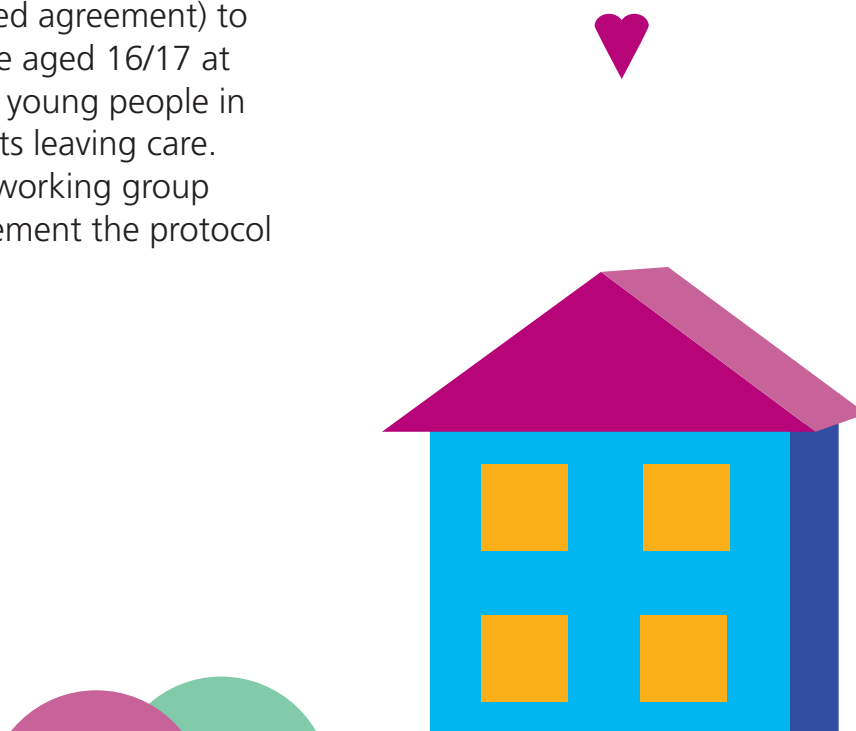
In 2025, a new **Housing, Health and Care Board** was set up. Senior leaders meet regularly to coordinate work and improve outcomes for care leavers. The Board will oversee joined-up working to make the move to independence smoother and improve access to suitable independent housing.

We are strengthening the relationship between Children's Services and Housing. We are creating a stronger joint protocol (a shared agreement) to support young people aged 16/17 at risk of homelessness, young people in care, and young adults leaving care. A new cross-council working group will finalise and implement the protocol by **April 2026**.

The Council's Strategic Director for Resources is leading a whole-council approach to using council buildings and assets in new ways to improve outcomes. A review is looking at empty (void) housing, former school caretaker lodges, and other housing assets. This will help us see opportunities to create:

- new dedicated independent housing for care leavers
- supported accommodation
- possible extra properties for internal foster carers

This is a positive example of the whole council working together to meet corporate parenting duties and improve outcomes.



# STRATEGY PRIORITY 3: Health, Wellbeing, Education & Opportunity

## Our commitment

We will use the borough's resources to make sure every child and young adult gets the support and advocacy they would expect from an excellent parent.

## What we said we would do:

- set high hopes, listen carefully, and create opportunities for new experiences linked to children's goals
- make sure children have the right digital devices and internet so they are not disadvantaged
- guarantee access to high-quality mental health support
- strengthen sport, leisure, and cultural activities
- deliver a full educational catch-up offer to reduce the impact of the pandemic



## How we have delivered:

Children and young people helping to shape our local offer is at the centre of our work. In 2025, we continued investing in our Children's Rights and Participation Team. This makes sure we can bring children together so their voices are heard.

Our Virtual School and Social Care teams reduced suspensions of looked after children from **95 in 2023/24** to **82 in the 2024/25** academic year.

- Boys are still about twice as likely to be suspended as girls.
- No looked after children were permanently excluded in 2024/25.

The number of care leavers in higher education rose again in 2025. By the end of December, **35 care leavers** were in higher education. This included a record number going to university or degree-level apprenticeships this year.

In August 2025, we launched our **Trailblazer programme** providing stronger employability support for care-experienced young people who are NEET. An Employability Pathway was co-designed with care-experienced young people, including council work experience, internships, apprenticeships, and entry-level roles.

We have qualified mental health clinicians attached to every looked after children and care leaver team. They work with social workers and personal advisers to better understand needs and help children access specialist mental health support when they need it.



Our Care Leavers Hub works with partners at the **NEST Open Access service** to provide emotional wellbeing support. This includes a drop-in clinic and regular presence in the Hub. This helps children and young people get advice, guidance, and therapeutic support for mental wellbeing.

**121** young people signed up for free gym and swim access for all children in care and care leavers up to age 25 at the council's in-house leisure centres. Services work closely together to increase take-up so children and young people can stay physically active.



"Thanks to my tutor and being given the chance to return to education in a supportive environment, I'm now going on to university to study social work. I hope other young people get the same opportunity to rebuild their confidence and change their future through education."

- Young person, aged 21

"I have a mentor in school to check up on me to see if am doing well in school. Overall, I like the school I am going to now and I improved a lot. Now, I'm in year 11 doing my GCSE. This is a big year for me. Kinda feeling nervous but I know I can do it!"

- Young person, aged 15

"Extracurricular activities play a huge role in shaping identity, confidence, and self-belief. When young people are given the chance to try new things, they can discover passions they may never have realised were possible. With proper access and encouragement, we could nurture more musicians, actors, tech developers, entrepreneurs, creatives, and innovators"

- Young person

<sup>3</sup> Annual Health Report for Looked After Children, Young People and Care Leavers (July 2025)

## What we still need to achieve

Attendance is still a key priority for the Virtual School and Social Care teams.

In 2024/25, persistent absence rates were **49% for girls** and **51% for boys**. This is different from 2023/24, when boys were almost twice as likely as girls to be persistently absent.

From December 2025, a role in the Virtual School will be focused on supporting the education needs of children in Southwark's new residential home, strengthening education support and stability in residential settings.

We will keep working across the council and with commissioned and anchor partners to create more routes into employment. This includes paid work placements, ring-fenced apprenticeships, and entry-level roles. We will also strengthen wraparound support, including mentoring.

From **January 2026**, we will create more chances for young people, especially ages 17–18, to gain key qualifications through an online functional skills course run by our Adult Learning Service.

A key part of moving into adulthood is understanding health and wellbeing history at age 18, and getting ongoing support to understand what it means for adult health. This year, **77 (78%)** Care Leaver Health Summaries were completed. This is much better than 2024 and will stay a focus for 2026.



# STRATEGY PRIORITY 4: Happy, Safe and Stable

## Our commitment

We will make sure every child has a say in where they live and who they live with. We want children to be safe, in permanent homes earlier, close to home, and supported to stay there as long as they need.

## What we said we would do:

- improve the range, quality, and number of local homes and options, so more children can live within or close to the borough
- listen more to children and change how we speak and think about them
- keep investing in support for children and carers through clinical services and partners
- provide better training for carers and increase the number of therapeutic carers



## How we have delivered:

In 2025, we opened the first council-run Children's Home in Southwark for over 20 years.

**Olive House** welcomed **three** young people in summer 2025 and received an **'Outstanding' Ofsted rating** in **December 2025**.

We plan to welcome **two more residents** at the start of 2026. This will help more children stay in the borough, near the people and places that matter to them.

Families have been welcomed into Olive House. This improved family time arrangements and helped stronger links with the local community and safeguarding partners.

Using what we learned from Olive House, the capital programme for our second Children's Home, **Evergreen**, should be completed in **spring 2026**, with an expected opening by the end of 2026.

Our **Permanence Lead** is supporting permanence for every child at the right timescale. By the end of the year, **94%** of eligible children had an agreed permanence plan.



Our Access to Resources Team (ART) does regular visits to supported accommodation and residential homes, alongside our Young Inspectors. This is a paid-role for care-experienced young people who are trained to join monitoring visits and ensure children and young people's voices are represented.

Young Inspectors will report back to the Corporate Parenting Committee every year.

Because of cost of living pressures across the country and changes in Southwark, it is harder to recruit foster carers and find suitable accommodation for them.

A fostering recruitment improvement programme and renewed campaign launched in 2024. By **31 July 2025**, there were **17 prospective carers** in assessment. This is a big increase compared to 2023/2024, when we recruited **4** new foster families.



We also explored new foster care pathways, including a partnership with **NowFoster**

**Weekenders**. This aims to increase carers who can offer monthly respite support and encourage younger people who may change careers in future.

We know it is important for children to stay connected to friends and family. We increased the number of children placed with foster carers as part of a sibling group from **2 in 2024** to **7 in 2025**.

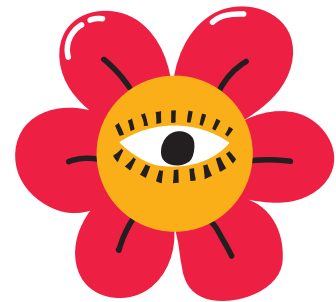
We also increased friends and family foster placements from **63 in March 2024** to **71 by March 2025**, so more children can live with family closer to home.



## What we still need to achieve

Finding permanence for children in care is still a priority. There are good examples of children returning home successfully. We will further develop our approach to sustainable reunification, especially for adolescents.

Southwark's fostering service will keep evolving to meet the needs of our children, young people and carers. Our key priorities for 2026 are on boosting recruitment, retention, and development of our foster carers.







# STRATEGY PRIORITY 5: Identity & Belonging

## Our commitment

**We will give children and young people chances to learn about themselves, their history, and their identity. We will help them live with carers who understand and reflect their cultural identity. We will also support safe and appropriate contact with families and personal history.**



## What we said we would do:

- give children better opportunities to reconnect with families, family networks, and important people
  - review how we assess, learn, and train foster carers about the needs of Black young people in care
  - address disproportionality in our carer population, bring more young people back to live in the borough and near their communities
  - deliver mandatory education for workers and managers on racism, anti-discriminatory practice, Black history, and inequality
  - improve equality data collection and monitoring, understand gaps, and understand why some groups are overrepresented in care
  - make sure life story work is completed with children and young people
- 

## How we have delivered:

We continued focusing on strong **Life Story Work** so children can understand their journey into care, where they lived, who they lived with, and who their family is, as early as possible.

We ran a week-long learning and development programme called **LearningFest** on Belonging: Permanence, Stability and Sustainability. This was for all Children's Services staff.

The **Caring Life App** is used well by internal foster carers. It stores key memories and creates a digital archive for children in care.

**35** care leavers were supported through **Lifelong Links** in 2025. This helps them connect with important people, build community links, reduce loneliness, and better understand themselves, culture, and identity.

In **October 2025**, we launched **Giving HOPE boxes** for babies entering care. These boxes help keep the bond between mothers and babies when a child is removed at birth. They recognise grief and trauma from separation and prioritise both needs. They also help create shared memories at the very start of a child's care journey.



A foster carer said:

"I feel [Life Story practitioner] did really well to support me to be a part of therapeutic work. She didn't just work with [young person], she worked with me and my emotions, helped me to be there for [young person] and left us wanting more. We felt included, it was about us."



Before Lifelong Links, a young person said:

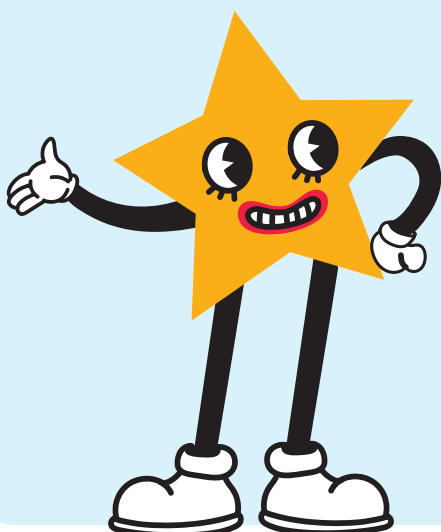
"I thought it was going to take ages, like years. I thought it was impossible, I was in denial. I wanted to still try."

Their foster carer said:

"I thought it was impossible, with all the family members we know about, how is this going to work? I had hopes that it would, but there was doubt. To me it is a miracle."

A young person said:

"The way that [Life Story practitioner] and [Lifelong Links practitioner] worked was similar, so it felt familiar and trustworthy. That helped a lot because trusting someone is a hard thing."



A young person said:

"I met my mum, maternal grandmother, my dad, paternal grandmother, and half-brothers. It's the best thing, the best feeling ever. It's filled a void in my heart, I was missing a piece and I'm just happy now, even just seeing them once. It's life changing."

Since we signed the **immigration support pledge** in **March 2024**, we have been delivered training in collaboration with the **South London Refugee Association** to staff across Children's Services can support children in care and care leavers to address and resolve immigration issues at the earliest opportunity.

We are taking a proactive approach to tackling racism, discrimination and inequality in Children's Services. Our **Southwark Stands Together Against Racism (SSTAR)** programme has made strong progress in delivering training for senior leaders, meeting quarterly with the Director of Children's Services to raise concerns about racism and discrimination, and delivering a Brave Spaces programme for staff to have open, respectful, and courageous conversations about race.

## What we still need to achieve

We see excellent Life Story Work, and many staff use creative and collaborative ways to help children understand their history. But it is not consistent enough yet. Through our Life Story workflow, we will embed and track completion so every young person has a detailed history from first contact onwards.

SSTAR is co-designing **Anti-Racist Practice Standards** across Children's Services. These standards will set clear expectations for practice, help challenge discrimination, and support a more inclusive culture across the division.





## STRATEGY PRIORITY 6:

# A Whole Borough That 'Cares to Care'

### Our commitment

**We will put delivering for children and young adults at the centre of everything the council and partners do.**

**We will broaden children's voices in decision-making and make Southwark a true corporate parenting borough.**



### What we said we would do:

- review commissioning, planning, and licensing to use Social Capital for children and young adults
- create a shadow Children & Young People's Cabinet, including care-experienced young people, to hold the council to account
- work with children and young people to create their own version of the strategy and a new pledge
- develop a Corporate Parenting Champions network across the council and partners
- challenge major borough organisations to adopt corporate parenting principles and keep promises to children
- improve how we listen and embed children's views into service improvement at every stage

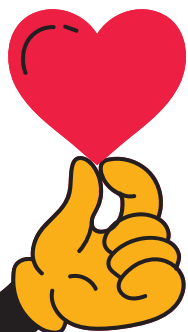
## How we have delivered:

SpeakerBox members attend the Corporate Parenting Committee and give direct insight and challenge.

Every committee meeting starts with a presentation from SpeakerBox young people. In 2026, we plan to move meetings to early evening so more young people who are in school or working can attend.

Over **60 employability opportunities** have been submitted from across the organisation. Teams across the council have delivered on their pledge to support young people with work experience and mock interviews.

In **July 2025**, the council launched a new **Social Value Framework**.



This sets out a refreshed, ambitious plan to create real, lasting benefits through how the council spends public money.

The framework encourages contractors to support care-experienced young people by signing the **Care Leavers Covenant** and offering mentoring, work experience, internships, traineeships, apprenticeships, job opportunities, and access to activities outside school.

The Experienced Practitioner for Social Capital in the 16+ service worked with local businesses to get devices and equipment. Over the year they obtained refurbished phones, data cards, refurbished laptops, and dongles/routers, which were shared with care leavers.

SpeakerBox and Southwark's Family Council worked together on the **Innovation Group**. This brings together children, young people, parents, carers, and workers to explore ideas that can improve services.



## What we still need to achieve

We have already begun developing our new Corporate Parenting Strategy (2026–2030). This new strategy will be co-designed with children and young people, with their experience and ambitions at the centre.



We want more support across the council, to grow the corporate parenting offer and raise awareness of ways to help children and young people across the organisation.

- We will develop the Corporate Parenting Champions network and a new training offer.
- We will create more chances for staff to volunteer time and skills, for example mentoring.
- We will keep building cross-council understanding of children and young people's experiences and needs.



# The work of the Corporate Parenting Committee



**Our Corporate Parenting Committee is chaired by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Refugees. It meets every three months to secure real, lasting improvements for care-experienced children and young people.**

The committee champions the voice of children in care and care leavers, who attended every meeting in 2025. Young people help shape the agenda and discussions, raise topics that matter, and influence plans and services.

## Items discussed in 2025

### February 2025

- Update on Mental Health Provision for Care Leavers
- Southwark Adoption Performance (2023–24) and Adopt London South Annual Report (2023–24)
- Attendance, Children Missing Education and Exclusion Report

### April 2025

- Workshop on Employability Support for Care Leavers

### July 2025

- Care Leavers Employability Pathway
- Annual Health Report for Children Looked After (2024–25)

### October 2025

- Virtual Headteacher's Annual Report (2024–25)
- Fostering Annual Report (2024–25)
- Update on Employability Support for Care Leavers



## Health

The committee regularly discusses the importance of good quality health and wellbeing services. Young people and committee members hold providers to account so they understand the unique challenges for children in care and care leavers.

Young people asked for more focus on mental health support for neurodivergent young people and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

The committee keeps mental health as a priority. It also makes sure children have chances to stay healthy by being active. The committee challenged health services about the rise in substance misuse among

looked after children, rising from **8% to 15.4%** over the last three years. A detailed report and action plan were created to address this.

The key priorities for the Integrated Care Board and NHS Trusts in 2026 will be ensuring that care-experienced children and young people are offered additional support around neurodiversity, SEND, and gender identity. They will also support in Southwark's Children's Homes, improving general mental health access, and continue to focus on keeping children safe.

## Education and employment

The committee monitors education and employment outcomes through the Virtual School and the 16+ service.

The committee receives the Virtual School Headteacher's annual report, including educational achievement and barriers.

The committee focused on persistent absence and helping children access and stay in education. It also focused on the rise in persistent absence among girls (49% girls and 51% boys), when previously boys were twice as likely.

The committee also focused strongly on employment support. It reviewed initiatives to prepare young people for work and help them access opportunities inside and outside the council. The committee argued for care-experienced young people's voices to be central in design.



## Fostering and placement sufficiency

The committee oversees the placement sufficiency strategy. This aims to make sure children can live in homes that meet their needs and help them stay linked to family, friends, education, and community connections.



Young people shared priorities of fewer moves and keeping children in the borough/local area when it is safe.

The committee receives an annual report on fostering, Special Guardianship, and Connected Carers, including quality, choice, stability, and recruitment/retention.

The committee focused on foster carer recruitment because recruitment fell from **6 in 2023/24** to **2 in 2024/25**. The service reported the renewed recruitment campaign (launched in 2024) led to **631 enquiries** in Q3 and Q4 2024/25, and **17 prospective carers** in assessment by 31 July 2025.

## Quality of practice and services

The committee oversees how effective services are and reviews results of regulatory inspections.

It also monitors action plans after inspections. An inspection of Children's Services is expected in early 2026.





## Listening and bringing our care-experienced children together

The council and committee are proud to celebrate children's achievements and champion their voices.

Two Children's Rights Officers support SpeakerBox so children and young people can take part, share views, and speak to senior leaders and the committee.

We make sure children's voices are heard in care plans (individually) and in senior leadership work (strategically). Participation is built into service improvement.

SpeakerBox's eight pillars will be central to the new Corporate Parenting Strategy:

- Education and Employment
- Non-discrimination
- Safety and Support Services
- Freedom of Expression
- Standards and Treatment in Care
- Voice of the Child
- Knowledge of Rights
- Health Services

Between **August and December 2025**, views from **240** children in care and care leavers were gathered through **Bright Spots Surveys**. When independently analysed, these views will be the foundation for co-developing the new strategy. Feedback sessions will be held with care-experienced young people to share results, listen to ideas, and explain what actions we will take.

A Young People's Panel for recruitment is now well established in Children's Services. Young people give views on candidates to help choose the best people.

In **December 2025**, we held our annual **Winter Ball** for children in care and care leavers. It was organised by the Care Service, Children's Rights Officers, and 16+ Service, with many volunteers. Children and young people of all ages attended. Feedback shows they enjoy these events and the chance to meet and socialise.

# Our priorities for 2026

We will be bold and ambitious as we refresh our Corporate Parenting Strategy. In line with our Southwark 2030 strategy, we will keep focusing on a good start in life by investing in prevention, reducing inequality, and empowering people.

Alongside the priorities developed with young people, our immediate priorities for 2026 include:

- improving the number and range of homes in Southwark so there are options for children and young people of all ages
- embedding the use of the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment (**CANS**)
- making sure permanence planning and reunification options are considered as early as possible
- addressing the reasons for home breakdown and instability, to improve resilience and children's experiences
- making sure children and young people in care and with care experience have every chance for the best start in life



We will achieve this by:

- opening a second children's home to increase residential provision
- analysing our offer of supported accommodation, to ensure we are meeting the needs of our young people
- ensuring local employers and partner organisations are embodying the corporate parenting responsibilities
- increasing support for children and families who are working with our services
- investing in foster care services and recruitment, to increase the number of fostering households and provide strong support for carers
- increasing routes into careers through mentoring, work training, work skills, and employment opportunities

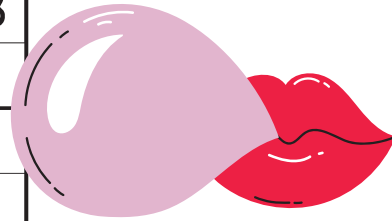


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If you would like to know more about SpeakerBox please contact [speaker.box@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:speaker.box@southwark.gov.uk)

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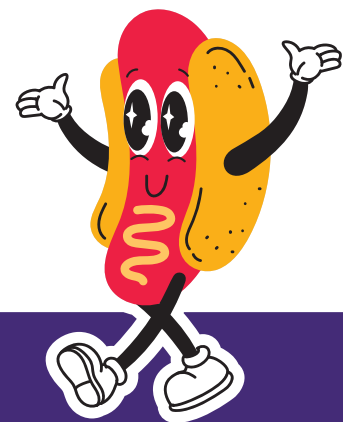
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