

## Medway Children's Improvement Board

<b>Title / Subject:</b>	Adoption Partnership South East, Regional Adoption Agency	<b>Date:</b>	June 2021
<b>Report For:</b>	Improvement Board	<b>Report By:</b>	Sarah Skinner, Head of Service

### 1.0 Introduction and Context (reference Ofsted recommendations where relevant)

The 2015 'Regionalising Adoption' paper published by the Department for Education set out proposals to move to regional adoption agencies by 2020 in order to make improvements in adoption performance. This was followed by the Education and Adoption Act 2016 which legislated for local authorities to no longer be required to maintain an adoption service within their area but enabled them to secure provision by other local authorities or registered adoption societies. Under this legislation, the Secretary of State may direct one or more local authorities to make arrangements for all or any of their adoption functions to be carried out on their behalf by another local authority or adoption agency.

To meet this requirement the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council formed Adoption Partnership south east, which operates under a robust governance structure where each local authority agreed to delegate to the Head of Service for Adoption Partnership south east, responsibilities for finance and staffing matters to ensure the effective operation of the partnership and adoption practice.

Adoption Partnership south east launched on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020.

### 2.0 Link to Improvement Plan

**Achieving Permanence for children who have an adoption plan or have been adopted.**

### 3.0 Progress made

#### Strengths – what is working well

##### i. Governance

Governance arrangements for Adoption partnership south east consists of a Strategic Partnership Board, which is held quarterly and is Chaired by one of the Directors of Children Services from within the partnership. There is also an Operational Management Board, which meets six weekly and reports in to the strategic board.

KCC's auditing Team commissioned an audit of the Governance of the RAA, and a report has recently been released, which will be shared with the RAA Partnership Board in June. The Internal Audit's overall Audit Opinion is **Substantial** - *Internal Control, Governance and management of risk are sound overall. The arrangements to secure governance, risk management and internal controls are largely suitably designed and applied effectively.*

A Business Plan has been drafted, which has been presented and signed off by the Adoption Partnership South East Management Board.

#### Achieving permanence for children – Pre-Order placements

##### ii. Child level data

Below are two tables showing Medway's child level activity for the 12 months prior to the RAA launching on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020 and activity since 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020.

Panel decisions 19/20	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	TOTAL
Matches	0	4	3	4	0	2	1	1	5	0	0	1	21
Decision that adoption is the plan for the child	1	2	2	2	3	2	4	0	3	2	4	6	31

Data Source: Performance and Information, Medway Council

Panel decisions 20/21	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	TOTAL
Matches	0	3	2	3	2	4	3	3	20
Decision that adoption is the plan for the child	0	4	0	3	2	1	2	3	15

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

Children achieving permanence – The data shows that 21 matches with prospective adopters were made in the 12month period, October 2019 - September 2020, compared with 20 during the seven-month period since the RAA was launched.

Children's adoption plans – the data shows that for the same period November – May in each year, 15 children had adoption plans agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.

Placement orders - Between April 2020 - October 2020 - 14 children had Placement Orders granted.

Of these children:

- 2 were matched before 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020
- 9 have been matched, since 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020,
- 2 children are to have their adoption plan reviewed
- 1 child is linked with prospective adopters.

Between November 2020 – May 2021 - 13 children had placement Orders granted

Of these children:

- 3 are matched with prospective adopters
- 4 are booked on to matching panel,
- 3 are linked (sibling of 2),
- 2 have no confirmed link, active family finding is underway, including nationally.
- 1 child's Grandmother has come forward seeking to be assessed,

## Performance

An Adoption Partnership south east Scorecard has been created to monitor performance, and this includes the targets set by DfE nationally which captures data in relation to children who have been adopted. However, the RAA Scorecard also captures 'real time' activity, i.e., the timeliness of progressing children's plans within each quarter, and then annually, rather than waiting for the adoption order to be granted. The aim is to examine current practice so improvements can be made, which will then impact on overall performance in the DfE Scorecard.

DfE Performance indicators have included A1 & A2:

A1 indicator (time from entry into care to placement for adoption) – DfE target is 426. This has changed to A10, but for the purposes of this report, A1 will be used, as it provides some comparative data with previous performance.

A2 indicator (average time between local authority receiving court authority to place and identifying a match) – DfE target is 121 days.

Data reported in the Medway Adoption Report for October 2019 to September 2020 stated:

*'The Medway performance on the A1 indicator (time from entry into care to placement for adoption) for the three years ending September 2020 is 507 days. This is behind the latest national figures of 486 days, but an improvement on last year's figure of 539.'*

*'Performance on the A2 indicator (average time between local authority receiving court authority to place and identifying a match) for the year end September 2020 year was **231** days, against a national average of 201 days.'*

It is not possible to compare performance exactly as we do not have 12 months' worth of data, and these children have not yet been adopted, but we can provide some indication of timeliness, by

using the A1 and A2 measurements as a benchmark, so the time between when a Placement Order was granted by the court and when a child was 'matched' with their prospective adoptive parents.

With respect to Medway children who had a Placement Order at the time the RAA was launched or granted since, the averages data shows an improvement in the timeliness, however, this is based on small numbers; 3 children for November 20 to May 21 and 11 for the previous period, so can only be used as a guide, but as more children are matched with prospective adopters during the year, this will be a helpful benchmark.

Taking the match date in lieu of an adoption date, the A1 and A2 for these children are

	A1	A2
November 20 to May 21	324	53
April 20 to October 20	363	173

Data Source: Performance and Information, Medway Council

The table below is taken from the RAA Scorecard for the period 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021, and shows a decrease in the average number of days a Medway child waited for a match to be agreed in the second half of the year.

	<b>Measure/Activity</b>	<b>Apr-Jun</b>	<b>Jul-Sep</b>	<b>Oct-Dec</b>	<b>Jan-Mar</b>	<b>R12 mths</b>	<b>Prev qtrs R12 mths</b>
RAA16	Ave (days) between court authority to place a child and agreeing a match	370	297	255	218	237	258

Data Source: Adoption Partnership South East scorecard, Q4 2020/21

## Disruptions

There have been two Medway children who have had an adoption disruption. One child had been placed for some time prior to the RAA, the child's care plan is no longer adoption. The other child had been matched in November 2020 and sadly the placement disrupted soon after she was placed with her adopters. Her adopters have decided they no longer wish to adopt. The child is now linked with adopters and this match is booked on matching panel.

### iii. Adopter data

#### Recruitment Activity

The RAA has a recruitment strategy which focuses on ensuring there is a 'sufficient' number of prospective adopters for the children with adoption plans across Medway, Bexley, and Kent. All but one of the children placed since November 20 have been placed with adopters within the RAA.

The RAA have held three virtual Information events, these have been well attended and generated many enquires. The table below show the logins to these events; the number of initial enquiries that were generated from them and the number of initial visits that took place.

Month	Number of logins for Virtual Event	Initial Enquiries completed	IVs booked
October	127	0	0
November	0	55	54
December	0	9	8
January	93	4	4
February	0	8	7
March	0	33	29
April	0	4	3
May	89	16	16
June	0	20	12
<b>Totals</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>133</b>

Below are two tables showing adopter approval activity. Table a shows Medway's adopter approval activity prior to the RAA launching October 2019-September 2020. Table B shows activity for the whole of the RAA between November 2020-May 2021.

Panel decisions 19/20	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	TO TAL
Adoptive families approved	0	1	0	0	1	0	3	3	1	0	0	0	9

Data Source: Performance and Information, Medway Council

Panel decisions 20/21	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	TOTAL
Adoptive families approved by AP	0	8	9	7	5	3	13	8	<b>51</b>

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

Support for new parents - The adopters' social worker will ensure that adopters have access to local support networks and specialist organisations, e.g., PACT, NATP, New Family Social and other services and are on the mailing list for any events organised through the adoption service. The adoption service also provides 12 months free membership of PACT UK to all new adopters.

## **Achieving permanence for children – Post-Order placements**

Adoption Support -Adoption Partnership south east has a comprehensive adoption support service for all those affected by adoption. The adoption support service provides adoption support services in line with the "Adoption Passport" according to individual circumstances. This includes individual support, accessing support groups and a Learning & Development programme.

#### iv. Access to a support and advice line

LA	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	TOTAL
Bexley	3	1	3	1	3	2	3	18
Kent	21	15	14	14	24	19	26	150
Medway	3	7	1	4	8	2	3	28

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

- 141 of these calls progressed to a S&A line call from Adoption Support (2hr call scheduled to discuss issues of concern)
- The average time between enquiry and S&A call is 6.9 days

#### v. Adoption Support Assessments

Following a S&A line call, if required the adoption support team will undertake an assessment of need with a family and will agree a support package based on the family's identified needs, including consideration of making an application to the Adoption Support Fund and will identify a suitable provider to support the family.

15 assessments have been completed since 15<sup>th</sup> February 2021, when the RAA Portal went 'live' in respect of Medway families, 4 are awaiting assessment.

Applications	Approved	Funds Applied	Funds Approved
25	15	£49,798.75	£28,386.30

#### vi. Participation & Engagement

The RAA commissions the Participation & Engagement Team within KCC to provide a service to all adopted children and young people across the region. This was in place for Kent's adopted children and young people prior to the RAA being formed. It has since been rolled out and the team is working hard to encourage new membership.

Since November 2020, The VSK Participation have facilitated 49 Virtual Activities via Microsoft Teams (including arts and crafts, science experiments, dance, animal encounters, bingo, gaming and much more). These have taken place after school and during the school holidays.

522 spaces have been booked in total across the 49 activities.

Breakdown (based on the address of their current home provided by the parent)

Local Authority	Number of Spaces Booked
Kent	458
Medway	41
Bexley	18
Greenwich	4
Bromley	1

104 Children and Young People aged between 4 and 14 have taken part in at least one virtual activity since November.

Breakdown (based on the address of their current home provided by the parent)

<b>Local Authority</b>	<b>Number of Young People who have taken part in at least one activity</b>
Kent	87
Medway	9
Bexley	6
Greenwich	1
Bromley	1

The VSK Participation Team have facilitated 6 'Adoptables' Meetings since November 2020. 16 young people aged between 12 and 18 have joined at least one meeting. One of these young people currently lives in Medway.

## **vii. Contact**

Support regarding letterbox and contact arrangements – the RAA support post adoption contact across the RAA and for Medway families this is provided from within the team. Since 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020, there have been 93 transactions in total, 52 from adopters and 41 from birth families. This involved 66 adoptive families.

## **Practice Development**

- Adoption Plans - Child Permanence Reports - robust independent adoption agency advice is provided to Medway's social worker's and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to ensure adoption care plans comply with regulations and all the necessary information is available for a Decision to be made in a timely way. Any concerns are fed back to the child in Care Service Manager, and the ADM.
- Timely decisions regarding 'matching' and securing permanence for children -Adoption Panels are held weekly (previously every four weeks in Medway) and proposed 'matches' for children can be booked on the first available panel, which results in plans progressing to matching panels in a timely way.
- A dedicated Early Permanence team is part of the service, of which the PPM leads are part of. This team specifically recruits and assesses early permanence carers. These carers are assessed and received specialist preparation training so that they can be approved to foster a child prior to adoption being confirmed as the plan. Once the order is granted by the court agreeing the child is placed for adoption the child remains with the carers and the placement is progressed as an adoption placement in the usual way. Since the launch of the RAA, 5 Medway children have been placed in these types of placements.
- A Permanency Planning Lead (PPM) has been created in the RAA to ensure a dedicated focus on permanence planning; this role within Medway has made good connections with Medway Social workers, team managers and the looked after service manager. The PPM lead has built a solid Medway network and is now invited to a variety of meetings to ensure she is aware of all Medway children requiring permanence under 7 yrs.

- The PPM lead holds a tracker for Medway children which she updates regularly, to help her identify the children requiring permanence. The PPM lead is invited to and attends the fortnightly permanence panels. This involves her providing adoption oversight and consultation when the teams are care planning for children. The permanence panels are the main tracking system in Medway along with Final evidence meetings which the PPM lead also attends. The PPM lead currently has 62 children on the Medway tracker whom she is monitoring closely. The PPM lead receives weekly updates of all the unborn babies on the Medway system, so the Early Permanence placements can be considered. The PPM lead offers support and advice to social workers and managers when they are planning for adoption and is the link to the panel team. Virtual drop-in sessions have recently been started for Medway SW's and managers, this will be monitored for effectiveness and can be expanded to IRO's.
- Robust Family Finding – the two Service Managers within the service robustly track and monitor children who have a plan of adoption with their Team Managers and together, on a weekly basis. A Family Finding social worker is allocated a child as soon as the Agency Decision Maker agrees the plan of adoption and they will work with the child's social worker from this point to become familiar with the child's needs, and to identify potential adopters, so that if a Placement Order is granted, the plan of adoption can progress as quickly as possible. They will also undertake 'early family finding' where the court have given consent, and they will seek agreement to recruiting nationally for adopters, when a child has complex needs and there are no internal matches.
- A sense of identity – is advocated for children who are placed for adoption and the RAA follows the Joyce Rees model for life story books, (LSB) and undertakes to draft a LSB for a child prior to them being placed, and the adoption social worker will then work with the prospective adoptive parents to complete this ahead of the adoption order being granted.
- The children's guides to adoption need re-writing – Adoption Partnership have engaged the support of the Participation & Engagement Team, within Virtual School Kent, and more directly, the 'Adoptables' group to review existing guides and offer advice about how these might be re-written. This work is currently underway.
- The provision of independent counselling for birth parents, as per statutory guidance - this is a new commissioning arrangement in respect of the RAA, previously just provided to Kent birth parents. Six referrals have been submitted in respect of Medway birth parents.
- Alignment of Policies and Practice has identified where differences exist or did exist and the RAA has worked with Medway and the other two Partner Local authorities to ensure consistency of service delivery, taking the best practice from each and sharing these. The Adoption Partnership Service Managers have attended the Looked After Children's Service meeting to update and advise the service on these.

## **Areas for improvement – challenges and barriers and solutions**

- i. Medway's Medical Adviser has expressed feeling overwhelmed by the volume of work he is being tasked with, as demand is out stripping his capacity – this has been escalated to the Designated Doctor and Designated Nurse and to the CCG.



- ii. COVID – has impacted on delays in court so there are children waiting longer for adoption order hearings, than would previously have been the case. This is now improving as restrictions ease.
- iii. Adoption Support inherited staffing vacancies at the point of going live so there has been pressure on this part of the service. Recruitment has been successful and there are currently no vacancies, although recruitment is underway to fill one post which will become vacant in July.
- iv. Case recording system for Adoption records – there are concerns regarding the case management system in Medway as Mosaic doesn't allow more than one case record to be created for a child, so it is not therefore possible to open an adoption file for children who have an adoption plan agreed or open a post adoption case record after they have been adopted. Agreement has been given for one case management system to be used for all children who receive a service from the Adoption Support Teams and Liquid Logic has been commissioned to provide this system, which will resolve the latter problem, but the first remains.

## **4.0 Conclusion**

Going through the move to the RAA during a pandemic has been challenging, but Adoption Partnership south east is successfully delivering adoption services across the region. It enjoys a relatively stable workforce and staff have adjusted to the changes well and are positive and feel part of their team and the service.

The Service is in a good position in terms of the budget and is looking to consolidate the developments it has made thus far and work towards making further improvements, to ensure children's adoption plans progress as swiftly as possible and they are secure in their adoptive families for the duration of their childhood and beyond.

Managers within the RAA and the local authorities meet on a regular basis to share and develop good practice and discuss issues of concern. These meetings are a good opportunity to develop relationships between the RAA and the partner local authorities, to ensure all Partners view Adoption Partnership south east as the delivery arm of adoption services.