

A large light blue circle containing the text 'Adoption Partnership' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. A small white heart icon is positioned above the letter 'o' in 'Adoption'. Below the main text, 'South East' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

**Adoption
Partnership**
South East

A smaller light blue circle containing the text 'By your side' in a white, sans-serif font. The words are stacked vertically: 'By' on the top line, 'your' on the second line, and 'side' on the third line.

**By
your
side**

ADOPTION PARTNERSHIP

Annual Report 2021

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1 – INTRODUCTION

In 2015 the Government set out its vision and commitment to deliver a regional adoption system where adoption agencies would come together to deliver adoption services on a larger scale. Adoption Partnership South East (APSE) is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) comprising of the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council, and it launched on 1st November 2020 and delivers adoption services on behalf of the three local authorities. There are now 31 RAAs established across the country.

The regional adoption agency is operated under the terms of a Partnership Agreement, which confirms the legal and governance arrangements; the budget; staffing and funding contributions for the three local authorities.

Legislation & Regulations

The work of the RAA is governed by:

- Education and Adoption Act 2016
- Care Planning, placement and Case and fostering services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
- Care Planning Regulations 2010
- Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011)
- Local Authority Regulations 2005
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Standards Act 2000

2. PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

The requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 underpin the principles and values of our service:

Principles & Core Values

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond and where possible this should be within their own family
- The Child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process
- The Child's wishes and feelings will be considered at all stages
- Delays in adoption can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided wherever possible
- The child's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language, and sexuality will be fully recognised, positively valued, and promoted when decisions are made
- The needs of disabled children will be fully recognised and considered when decisions are made
- The role of adoptive parents in offering a permanent family to a child who cannot live with their birth family will be valued and respected
- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and requires lifelong commitment from many organisations, professionals and individuals who must work together to deliver to meet the needs of the services
- Birth parents and birth families are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. They will be treated fairly, openly and offered a support service.

Equal Opportunities

The adoption service abides by equal opportunities legislation and the policies of each Partner. The service works positively and respectfully with all service users and partner agencies regardless of race, colour, religion, language, culture, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or age.

Every attempt will be made to secure an adoptive family which meets a child's emotional and developmental needs considering their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender, and disability considering the need to avoid undue delay.

3. THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE AGENCY

The agency is committed to fulfilling the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 by:

1. Ensuring the provision of a high-quality adoption service which guarantees the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children or young people who are looked after and who need adoptive placements
2. Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services
3. Working in partnership with adoptive families and other agencies ensuring the service is based on statutory requirements and good practice within the principles of value for money for the agency

Objectives of the agency

1. To recruit, assess and provide adopters that meet the needs of the children to be placed for adoption within the timescales laid down by National Adoption Standards
2. To provide information on the process to applicants interested in becoming adopters and on the children requiring adoption
3. To ensure that adopters receive appropriate preparation, training, support, and advice to enable them to offer the best possible standards of parenting, safety and protection for children or young people in their care
4. To minimise delay in family finding, always paying attention to the needs of the child
5. To provide information on the services available to all those affected by adoption recognising that as adoption has lifelong implications for all those involved, their needs will change over time
6. To provide a range of adoption support services to birth relatives, adopted adults, adopters, and their children in partnership with other agencies
7. To provide information on the service that is available to those wishing to adopt from abroad
8. To ensure that any decisions are transparent and fair
9. That concerns about the service are addressed and that information about the complaint's procedure is made available

10. That the organisation regularly reviews the services it provides, consults with, and learns from, those in receipt of their services through comments, compliments, and complaints.

Impact of COVID on Service Delivery

Maintaining a good service and developing it further during the first year of the RAA's existence, has been a priority. Staff can take credit for managing to make the transition into an RAA and achieving good outcomes for children during this period of great change and a pandemic. Management and staff are positive and work together well to overcome challenges but also celebrate success.

Several adjustments were needed due to Covid, some of which have been very successful, and will be maintained, whilst others will not. Staff and parents have embraced the roll out of improved technology, and it has enabled social workers to undertake assessments and provide support to families remotely, despite the pandemic. The use of technology has also enabled people based in different parts of the RAA region, to meet safely.

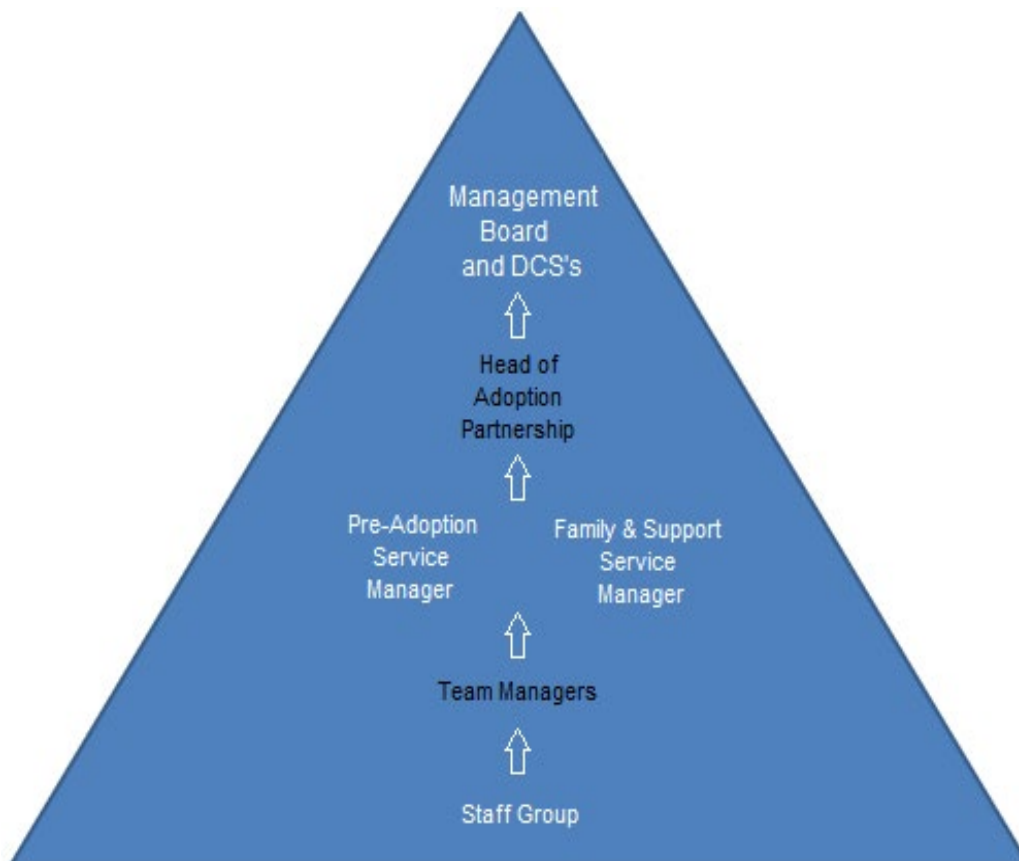
Social worker visits to families have returned to in person visits and the teams are physically meeting on at least a monthly basis.

There has been a delay in the timeliness of children's care proceedings and adoption hearings due to the pandemic and this is reflected in the data section.

Current practices are reviewed regularly to ensure we can plan strategically to deliver a quality service and respond to changes as and when they are required.

4. GOVERNANCE & SERVICE STRUCTURE

- The Head of Service reports quarterly to a Partnership Management Board, which is comprised of Director of Children's Services and Senior Officers from each partner local authority with representation drawn from the wider professional network. The Chair is rotated on an annual basis and for the period 1st November 2020 to 31st October 2021, the Chair of the Board was Director, Integrated Children's Services (Social Work), Children, Young People and Education Services (KCC), and she handed this over to Director of People (Children & Adults), Medway for the following twelve months.
- An Operational Managers group has met monthly, which includes the Head of APSE, Service Managers (APSE), Service Managers for Children in Care teams from Bexley, Kent & Medway, lead Finance Officer and lead Performance Officer for each partner local authority.
- KCC's Internal audit – undertaken January 2021 focused on the Governance of the RAA. The conclusion of the audit found overall an opinion of substantial internal control, governance and management of risk are sound overall.



Service Structure

Adoption Partnership South East is managed by a Head of Service, two Service Managers, one of whom is responsible for the pre-adoption order work streams and one who is responsible for overseeing family finding and adoption support.

There are nine teams within the Service structured as follows: (Structure chart attached appendix 1)

- One Initial Enquiries Team
- One Panel Team
- One Early Permanence team
- Two Recruitment, Assessment and Support teams
- One Family Finding team
- Three Adoption Support teams
- Each Team is supported by Business Support Officers who are line managed centrally by their respective local authorities.

Service Delivery

The RAA provides detailed information in its Statement of Purpose (SOP) (appendix 2). This explains our values and principles, the services we provide and the way we provide them. The information provided meets the requirement of National Minimum Standards for Adoption, and the related regulations (Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Misc. Amendments) Regulations 2003). It is available on the APSE website: [Adoption Partnership South East website](#).

Those enquiring about becoming an adopter or adoptive parents seeking support enter the Service by contacting the Initial Enquiries Team, or enquirers can access information via the website.

A recruitment strategy is in place and is reviewed regularly (appendix 3)

Adoption Panel Team

A Panel Team supports the Agency's approval process for adopters and the Local Authority Partners when pursuing adoption as the care plan for children. The team has a quality assurance role and support the four adoption panels that cover the region.

Weekly adoption panels are held virtually, and each panel has a designated independent Chair and Vice Chair and is supported by a Panel Advisor (Senior Social Worker) from within the Panel Team.

The panels are comprised of a range of representatives, including:

- People affected by adoption (adult adoptees and adopters)
- Local Authority Members
- Independent Panel Chair
- Independent/Vice Chair
- Adoption Social Workers
- Children's Social Workers
- Medical Advisers

The Agency has been conscious that the panel membership has not been diverse enough; largely white British, with two members from ethnic minorities (other than the Medical Advisors) and has now recruited new members to the panel to address this. Whilst we have more females than male panel members, we have male members on every panel, and two of our three new members currently being recruited are male. All three new members are from ethnic minorities, and we are seeking a single adopter to join the panel. There is representation from the LGBTQ community sitting on panel.

Early Permanence

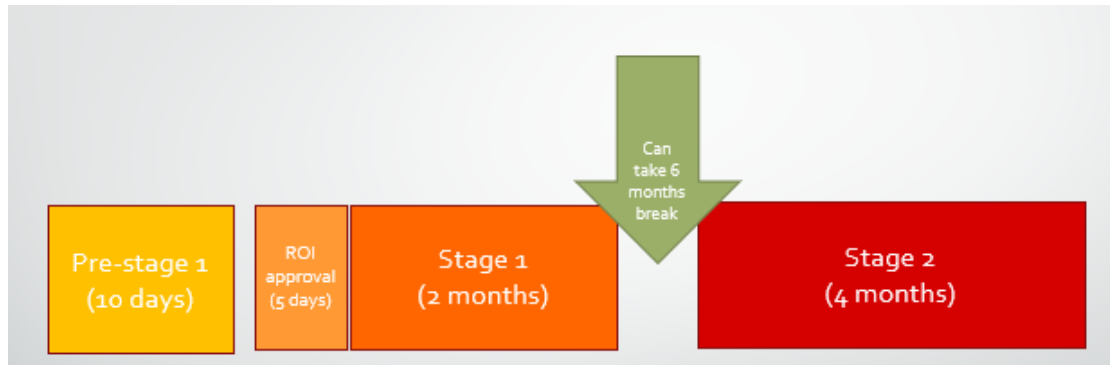
Adoption Partnership South East has an Early Permanence scheme which provides early permanence foster placements to young children who have a potential adoption plan and are either subject to care proceedings or have been relinquished by their parents at birth. These placements will go onto become an adoptive placement via matching and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) Decision, should the court agree the adoption plan and grant a placement order, or the parents have signed adoption consent for a relinquished child.

The adoption service has a dedicated team; Early Permanence team which include permanency planning social workers, who track, and support locality children's teams care planning in identifying children who might need an early permanence placement. The team also has recruitment and assessment social workers who recruit, assess, train, and support early permanence carers. These carers are approved adopters who are also assessed and trained to be approved to foster a specific child as part of the Early Permanence scheme.

Recruitment, Assessment and Support Team (RAS)

There are two Recruitment, Assessment and Support Teams in APSE and staff within these teams undertake the recruitment, assessment, training, and support of potential adopters, wishing to adopt children in care, and are known as 'Agency Adopters'.

The adopter assessment process is a two-stage approach, prescribed by government regulations.



These teams also undertake assessments of extended members of a family wishing to adopt, i.e., step parents and these are known as 'non-agency' adopters.

Family Finding

The Regional Adoption Agency has a dedicated Family Finding Team which consists of one Team Manager and Senior Practitioners/Social Workers. A family finding social worker is allocated to a child when the local authority identifies that adoption should be the care plan. The family finding social worker works closely with the child's social worker to identify their needs and proactively seek to find adopters who can meet them. This includes liaising with the internal recruitment & assessment team and if necessary, with external adoption agencies.

The family finding team is child focused and seeks to ensure children's adoption plans are progressed in a timely way.

The agency has taken on the full responsibility for completing the Life Story Book for children who are placed for adoption, and these are created through a collaboration between family finding social workers, adopters' adoption social workers, children's social workers and with the adopters to ensure they are equipped and feel comfortable and confident with the book, so it can be used to support their child with their life story.

Adoption Support

Adoption Partnership South East has a comprehensive adoption support service for those affected by adoption.

The RAA will ensure that adopters have access to local support networks and specialist organisations, through a variety of subscriptions to other agencies, including Coram BAAF, National Association for Therapeutic Parenting (NATP), New Family Social, and We Are Family. We have a mailing list with whom we share information and publicise events and other resources as well as using social media to share information with adoptive parents and others.

The agency has two specialist adoption social work teams and one therapeutic team, comprising of clinicians who are qualified in a range of clinical interventions. The agency will also 'spot purchase' external provisions when the internal clinical team are not able to provide the service needed.

The adoption support service provides adoption support services in line with the "Adoption Passport" according to individual circumstances.

Access to a support and advice line service

To seek support parents can request support easily by contacting the RAA's Initial Enquiries Team and they will be offered a support & advice line call with a social worker in the adoption support service within 5 working days. This is a scheduled call in which they can discuss their concerns and the appropriate follow up action can be identified. Sometime this results in the issue being resolved on the call, or signposting to another service, or agreement that an adoption support assessment is required, which will be completed by a social worker in the adoption support team.

Service for adoptive families

- Access to an assessment of need, resulting in a support package based on the family's identified needs, including consideration of making an application to the Adoption Support Fund.
- Access to support groups
- Access to a learning and development programme and workshops
- Access to therapeutic support groups
- Access to Theraplay trained workers
- Access to support with education via Virtual Schools in each local authority
- Assistance and review of contact arrangements between adopters and birth relatives

Service for adopted children & young people

- Social groups and activities, delivered by Virtual School Kent's Participation & Engagement Team
- Offering training and advice for schools to help teachers understand adopted children's needs
- Working with children in their adoptive families around understanding their life stories

Service for those affected by adoption

The RAA commissions independent services from Barnardo's to support those affected by adoption. The Service is a bespoke service to families eligible to receive support

from Adoption Partnership South East. The Service is called Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Service known as CAFIS. Services are provided to four groups of people affected by adoption:

- i. Service for birth parents
- ii. Support for birth relatives
- iii. Access to information and intermediary services
- iv. Contact Service

5. THE CHILD'S JOURNEY

The Department for Education (DfE) have recently published data showing information on children looked after in England, including numbers of children looked after who were adopted. The data is taken from the annual data collection which is provided by local authorities in England:

- In 2021, the number of Children Looked After (CLA) by local authorities in England rose to its highest level at 80,850, up 1% on last year and continuing the rise seen in recent years.
- 2,879 were adopted between April 2020 – March 2021
- The number of CLA who were adopted fell by 18% in 2021, continuing a fall from a peak in 2015. The large decrease this year is likely driven by the impact on court proceedings during the pandemic, where cases progressed more slowly or were paused.
- On average, it takes 2 years and 2 months for a child to be adopted and this time has been increasing, up from 1 year and 11 months in 2018. In 2021, the average time between a child entering care and being placed for adoption was 1 year and 4 months, it then takes a further 10 months for an adoption order to be granted and the adoption to be completed.
- The average age of a child at adoption has risen by 3 months to 3 years and 3 months, back to the same level as in 2018.

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2021>

Adoption Partnership South East Data:

The table below shows the number of children within the Regional Adoption Agency who had an adoption plan during the last three years. The data captured from 2019-2021 has been submitted to DfE and published, whereas the data from November 2020 – October 2021, has not yet been published, but shows activity since the RAA was launched. This is known as 'service data'.

Indicator	Authority	2019-2020	2020-2021	Nov 20 - Oct 21
Agency decision makers best interest decisions	Bexley	>5*	7	11
	Kent	92	79	53
	Medway	34	37	20
Placement Orders	Bexley	>5*	7	12
	Kent	64	54	44
	Medway	20	27	23
Matches approved	Bexley	>5*	6	8
	Kent	60	64	53
	Medway	23	23	35
Children placed	Bexley	>5*	6	8
	Kent	61	64	53
	Medway	23	21	36
Adoption Order granted	Bexley	>5*	7	11
	Kent	63	42	36
	Medway	19	14	21

* >Data suppressed due to low number

Agency Decision Maker Best Interest Decisions

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is usually a Director of Children's Services or an Assistant Director who agrees that adoption would be in a child's best interest and should be presented to a court as the local authority's care plan.

In 2020/2021 there was an increase, in the number of adoption plans agreed by the Agency Decision Maker for Bexley children compared to the previous year; from >5* to 7, and a further increase of 4 children, to 11 from November 2020 - October 2021. Kent agreed the plan for adoption for 79 Kent children, 14% less than in the same period in previous year (92) and a further decrease of 26 between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway saw a 9% increase, from 34 children to 37 in 2020/2021, followed by a decrease to 20 from November 2020 - October 2021.

Placement Orders

A Placement Order is the legal order granted when a court agrees that adoption should be the care plan for a child. There were 7 Placement Orders granted for Bexley children in 2020/2021 compared to >5* compared to the previous year and this increased to 12 children from November 2020 to October 2021. 54 Placement Orders were granted for Kent children in 2020/2021 which was 10 fewer (16%) than in 2019/2020 and this further to 44 for the period November 2020 - October 2021. Medway saw a 35% increase in Placement Orders granted, from 20 to 27 in 2020/2021, which slipped down to 23 for the period November 2020 – October 2021.

Matches Approved

Between 01 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, Bexley saw an increase from >5* to 6 children matched with adopters in 2020/21 and this increased further to 8 children between November 2020 – October 2021. 64 Kent children were matched with an adoptive family, during this period, an increase of 7% more children than in the previous year when there were 60 children matched. This decreased to 53 children between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway had the same number of matches approved, 23, in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 but a significant increase of 52% to 35 children between November 2020 - October 2021.

Children Placed for Adoption

Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, 6 Bexley children were placed for adoption compared to >5* in 2019/20, with an increase to 8 children during November 2020 - October 2021. 64 Kent children were placed with an adoptive family, in 2020/2021, 5% more children than in the previous year (61 children), reducing to 53 between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway had 2 fewer children placed for adoption in 2020/21 (21) when compared to the previous year, but this increased to 36 between November 2020 to October 2021.

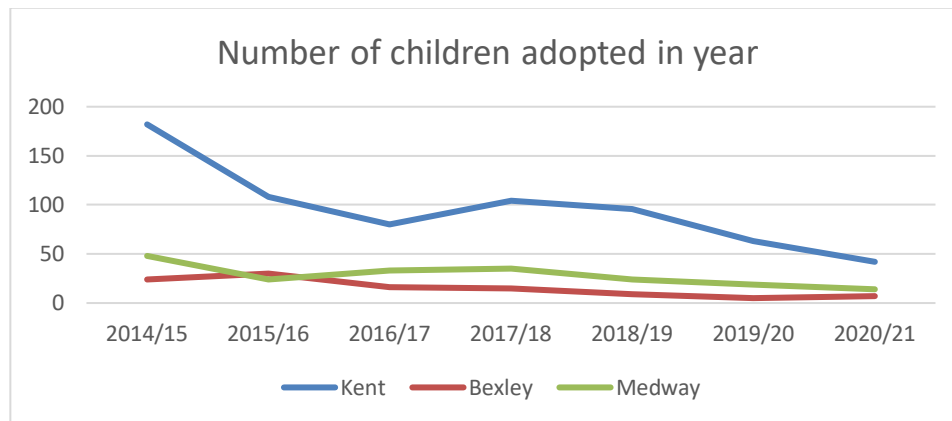
Sibling placements - Within the group of 97 children placed, 29 were part of a sibling group: Bexley: 3 siblings (1 group of 3), Kent 10 siblings (5 pairs), Medway 16 siblings (8 pairs).

Children Waiting

As of 30th November 2021, there are 31 children within the RAA who have a Placement Order, who are not yet placed with an adoptive family.

Of this group, 13 children are booked on to adoption panel for a match, and 8 have a potential link. There is active family finding taking place for the remaining 8 children.

Adoption Orders Granted



Bexley saw a slight increase to 7 Adoption Orders granted for children in 2020/2021 compared to previous year's figure published >5*, and this increased to 11 between November 2020 - October 2021.

42 Adoption Orders were granted for Kent children during 2020/2021, which reduced to 36 between November 2020 – October 2021.

Medway also encountered a reduction, in Adoption Orders granted in 2020/2021 to 14, compared to 19 in 2019/2020, but saw an increase to 21 adoption orders granted between November 2020 – October 2021.

Timeliness of children's plans

Timescale indicator	Authority	2019/20	2020/21	From target 2020/21 (days)	Nov 20 - Oct 21
Placement order to matching decision, children matched in a year	Bexley	55	59	-62	67 average days in year, (50 average for those where a PO granted after Nov)
	Kent	74	144	+23	131 average days in year, (70 average for those where a PO granted after Nov)
	Medway	181	262	+141	167 average days in year, (112 average for those where a PO granted after Nov)
Placement order to matching decision, children adopted in year	Bexley	66	52	-69	55
	Kent	95.6	80	-41	98.9
	Medway	218	237	+116	228
Became in care to placed for adoption, children placed in year	Bexley	241	412	-14	409
	Kent	309.4	452	+26	455
	Medway	463	459	+33	420
Became in care to placed for adoption, children adopted in year	Bexley	287	412	-14	443
	Kent	336.7	316	-110	406
	Medway	502	519	+93	435

Placement Order to Matching Decision

The target time from the local authority receiving court authority (Placement Order) to place a child for adoption to the approval of a match with an adoptive family is 121 days, 4 months, for children adopted. Adoption leadership board data shows that nationally the timescale was 206 days in 2020-2021.

For children who have been adopted, the data shows that in 2020-2021 Bexley's saw a decrease in the average number of days it took to match children from 66 in 2019/2020 to 52 days in 2020/2021, increasing slightly to 55 during November 2020 – October 2021. Kent also saw a decrease in the average number of days from 95.6 in 2019/2020 to 80 days in 2020/2021, followed by an increase to 98.9 days between November 2020 – October 2021. Medway's saw an increase from an average of 218 days in 2019/2020 to 237 days in 2020/2021, and a reduction to 228 for children adopted in the last twelve months.

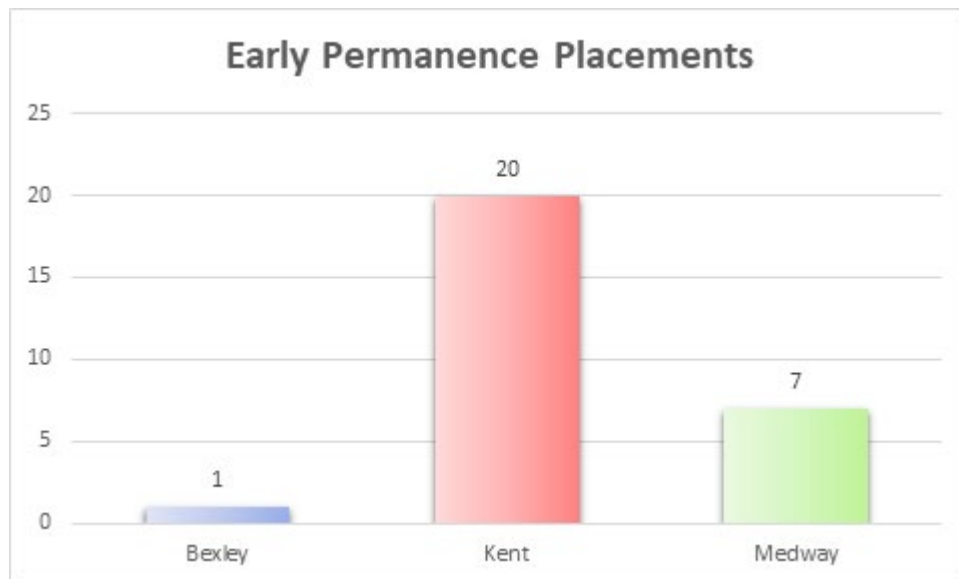
When seeking to review more recent or current performance, the table above shows an improvement in the timeliness between a Placement Order being granted and a match agreed with adopters between November 2020 – October 2021. In respect of Bexley children, it took on average 59 days for children to be matched in year in 2021/2021, whereas this reduced to an average of 50 days for those whose Placement Order was granted between November 2020 – October 2021. Kent children also saw an improvement from an average of 144 days for those matched in year in 2020/2021 to an average of 70 days for those whose Placement Order was granted between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway saw the biggest improvement with children whose Placement Order was granted between November 2020 – October 2021, being matched on average in 112 days, as opposed to an average of 262 days in 2020/2021.

Became in Care to Placed for Adoption

The current DfE threshold for children becoming in care to placement is 426 days, 14 months, for children adopted in year. Regarding this measurement, the timeliness for Bexley's children increased in 2020/2021 to 412 days, compared to 287, the previous year, with a slight increase to 443 days during November 2020 – October 2021. Kent's timeliness decreased by 6% to 316 days in 2020-2021 but saw an increase to 406 for November 2020 – October 2021, whereas Medway's duration increased slightly to 519 in 2020/2021, compared to 502 days in 2019/2020, and decreased to an average of 435 days between November 2020 – October 2021.

Adoption leadership board data shows that nationally there was a 34 day increase in timescale for this measure to 494 days in 2020-2021.

Early Permanence



Between Nov 2020 – October 2021 28 children have been placed in an Early Permanence placement (1 Bexley child, 20 Kent children and 7 Medway children). Two of these children placed have not remained with their early permanence carers, one child was returned to the parents and one child placed in a different placement due to difficulties within the placement.

Adoption Partnership South East have exceeded the aim to place 20% of the children placed for adoption in an Early Permanence placement. The service has a focus on Early Permanence due to the benefits of these placements to the children. The placements avoid additional foster placement moves for children and give the opportunity for children to attach to the carers and received consistent and secure care whilst decisions are made. The Early Permanence team ensure potential carers are assessed, trained, and supported robustly, due to the scheme requiring the carers to take to risk of uncertainty regarding whether the child will remain with them. There is an additional training within the recruitment and assessment of the carers and monthly support groups for carers whilst they foster a child.

Disruptions

Between November 2020 – October 2021, three children experienced an adoption disruption. This refers to children who were placed within prospective adopters but returned to foster care and were not adopted by those adopters. A disruption meeting was held for all three children, chaired by an independent person, in line with procedures.

6. THE ADOPTER JOURNEY – ADOPTION DATA

Adopter activity	Nov 20 – Oct 21
Enquiries in year	257 Households
Stage 1 starts in year	79
Stage 2 starts in year	77
Stage 2 ends in year	83
Adoptive families matched in year	82
Adoptive families with placements in year	82

Average timescales for newly approved adopters in the 2-stage adopter recruitment process, excluding fast tracks

Timescale	Target	Nov 20 -Oct 21
Enquiry to Stage 1 Start (days)	N/A	65
Stage 1 Start to Stage 1 End (days)	61	139
Stage 2 Starts to Stage 2 End (days)	121	125

The target duration for stage 1, pre-assessment, is 2 months, 61 days.

Between November 2020- September 2021 figures indicate that Adoption Partnership South East was outside this timescale with an average of 139 days.

However, stage 1 is adopter led, during this stage the agency undertakes statutory checks and references. The prospective adopters also complete their own home learning and attend a 3-day preparation course.

On reviewing the applications which exceeded 61 days there were specific themes identified which caused these delays:

- Applicants having difficulties getting appointments with their general practitioner for the adult health assessment to be completed. Due to the

pressure caused by the pandemic general practitioners have been under these delays are understandable.

- Applicants having a change in personal circumstances, such as job change, a bereavement or health issue. The increase of these changes of circumstances is likely to have been increased due to the pandemic.
- In some of the cases there had been change of manager and or social worker due to the transition into the Regional Adoption Agency. These changes caused some delay in the progression of cases, especially with the bringing together and aligning practice.
- Regular tracking of assessment cases has been implemented by the managers in the service to ensure these timescales improve.

Priority is given to assessing prospective adopters who can provide homes for our children who have more complex needs i.e., have a known disability, hereditary/genetic illness in the birth family, and slightly older children, plus some siblings. This is part of our sufficiency strategy to reduce the time children are waiting for adoptive families and to ensure we are approving families that match the needs of Bexley, Kent, and Medway children with adoption plans.

This is translated in to practice by identifying in Stage One, prospective adopters who are considered as potentially a good match for a child/child that requires an adoptive placement, and, in such circumstances, the assessment of the prospective adopter(s) will be fast tracked. This does not always result in the match with the child progressing, as information exchanged during the assessment, may result in a different view being reached, but it has resulted in some very good outcomes for children and adopters.

The target duration for Stage Two, assessment, is 4 months, 121 days. Adoption Partnership South East took on average 125 days to complete stage 2 assessments between November 2020 – October 2021, which is 3 days over the target timescale.

During this period 83 households were approved as adopters, which has ensured sufficiency of adopters for Bexley, Kent, and Medway children. In total 97 children were placed with adopters during 1st November 2020 – 31st October 2021 and all but four of these children were placed within the Regional Adoption Agency. One of the four children placed outside of the region, joined a sibling who had already been adopted.

Adopter Gap – sufficiency

As of 30th November 2020- The RAA has 36 'approved and waiting adopters' who are not linked with a child, of these, 14 of these are currently being considered for children.

7. ADOPTION SUPPORT DATA

As of 31st October 2021, APSE was supporting over 500 adopted children and their families either directly or indirectly.

The data below shows the number of families who contacted the Initial Enquiries Team for support and were offered a support and advice line appointment between November 2020 – October 2021:

LA	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	TOTAL
Bexley	3	1	3	0	1	2	2	2	0	1	1	4	20
Kent	12	12	12	10	20	18	24	13	23	14	17	12	187
Medway	0	5	1	3	7	2	6	0	1	1	1	1	28
TOTAL	15	18	16	13	28	22	32	15	24	16	19	17	235

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

Adoption support assessments (households) carried out between November 2020 – October 2021:

Local Authority	Number of adoption support assessments
Bexley	17
Kent	135
Medway	19
TOTAL	171

Adoption Support Fund

Type of application	Number of applications
Internal provision	59
External provision	170
TOTAL	229

Data from February 2021 when RAA ASF portal went live

8. VOICE OF THE CHILD – PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT

The RAA commissions the Participation & Engagement Team within KCC's Virtual School, 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. A separate report outlining the range of participation and engagement taking place is attached (appendix 4).

The report includes detailed information on the following:

- i. Young Person's Council
- ii. Participation Activity Days and Virtual Sessions
- iii. Participation Events
- iv. Further Activities to promote the Voice of the Child in School

Feedback on the virtual activities has included:

"Thank you, I liked making the bears and doggies with the other children. When we were talking and laughing at the same time it was like being back with my friends, it was so much fun!"

"Thank you for hosting yet another amazing morning's workshop. The aquarium tour was a really good experience... We've learnt a lot from the comfort of our sofa! VSK yet again, you have offered something so great for our children which we'd never normally get a chance to do."

Feedback on face-to-face activities has included:

Lots of positive feedback was received from young people and parents:

"Please pass our thanks on to everyone involved. The children and Mummy had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It has given us the opportunity to open the conversation about adoption in a very relaxed way which is normally a highly emotive subject for xxx. The one area we really felt he needed support was to realise his situation is special but he's by no means unique. When he realised all the children were adopted he had a smiley lightbulb moment. He now feels he's part of a special club rather than 'different'."

"What a lovely group of young people, the effort they put into the activity days is amazing, their effort is outstanding along with the excitement and smiles they bring along spreads through the children, they have done an amazing job and VSK could not be VSK without them all."

Feedback from children and parents on the summer picnic included:

'The best thing about today was, slime making, having a balloon model made, swing ball, space hoppers and having space to run round'

'Seeing everybody face to face and catching up'

'We loved everything, Captain Fantastic party entertainer, making slime and making other friends who are adopted too'

9. ADOPTER VOICE

An Adopter Advisory Board - meets quarterly and membership is drawn from a range of adoptive parents from across the region. The purpose of the Board is to provide a stakeholder perspective to the RAA and to act as a conduit between those living the adoption journey and policy and decision makers within the RAA. Membership of the Board is drawn from a wide range of adopters to best reflect the broadest experiences within adoption, including adopters who had children placed some years ago and are parenting older children, to recently approved adopters. The Board consists of same sex adopters, single adopters, sibling group adopters and adopters of children with complex needs etc. A member of the Adopter Advisory Board sits on the Partnership Board to represent the voice of adoptive families.

Social Gatherings - There are twice yearly social events organised to facilitate adoptive families coming together. There is an annual summer picnic which saw 33 families, 56 children attend. A Christmas party, which could not be held last year due to the pandemic, but there is one planned in December 2021 and already over 200 people booked to attend.

Compliments

There are several forums for receiving feedback outlined below and some comments which are used to inform and improve practice and service delivery.

- Adopters' views at the time they attend the adoption panel for approval and a match
- The views of others who attend the adoption panel including social workers from Kent and other adoption agencies if placing the child via inter-agency route
- Adopters' views after they have adopted - an 'after adoption' feedback form is sent to each family after the adoption order is granted
- Panel members attending panel training
- Adopters attending the preparation training
- Adopters attending the Post Adoption Support Team Learning & Development training.

Examples of feedback received by the Adoption service:

"After calling you, we called round a few more agencies (you were our first), but none of them compared to you. Your warmth and genuine interest in us as a couple spoke volumes. The thanks is really all from us." Adoption enquiry.

"Thank you for all you have done for our child and the family, you have helped us get through the most difficult part of our lives and we all appreciate everything you have done for us. You will always be part of that journey and thought of with love. We will never forget you." Approved adopter.

“You have really helped fill in so many gaps of what I feel has been missing for us over the years getting to understand our child’s needs more. Having that time to properly sit, talk and unpick aspects of her thoughts, feelings and behaviours has helped all of us as home work better together. We are incredibly grateful for everything you have done, and your help has far exceeded any expectation of the support I thought we might have received.” Adoptive parent.

Complaints

The Partnership has agreed that Kent County Council will be the lead partner on all complaints which relate either wholly or in part to the Adoption Partnership South East. Most of the concerns or issues raised in relation to the service provided by the Regional Adoption Agency are resolved through a problem-solving approach within the service and the service aims to respond quickly and with sensitivity.

Between 1st November 2020 – 31st October 2021, six complaints were received. All were dealt with at Stage 1:

- Two related to the adoption process
- Two related to support provided
- Two related to issues post adoption

10. NATIONAL WORKSTREAM

There are now 31 RAAs across the country, with only 5 local authorities not yet in the programme, and the expectation is that 3 of them to be in a 'live' RAA in January.

Recent publications that impact on our work include the Case for Change Review, the National Adoption Strategy: achieving excellence everywhere and the APPG for Adoption and Permanence, Strengthening Families. The key messages from the research focus on the recruitment of adopters, improving care planning, and the need to provide comprehensive and timely adoption support.

The Head of Adoption Partnership South East is engaged in the national forum of RAA Leaders and involved in several work streams with a view to delivering on the priority areas identified. One such area is to develop an Outcome Measurement Tool to measure the effectiveness of the Adoption support Fund (ASF). A pilot will take place in January 2022 and APSE will be a part of this.

A recently published report by the DfE on the Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (October 2020) [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/94422/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies-second-report.pdf) noted some early signs of improvements in relation to the impact of RAA's since the first evaluation was undertaken in 2018. The qualitative and quantitative data reflects some of the findings within our own RAA. These include, the RAA being less reliant on inter-agency placements, and placing more children within our area, and greater consideration of routes to early permanence, such as fostering to adoption. The report identified that RAA's are taking a more strategic approach to marketing, developing inclusive websites to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity, which is important for adopter engagement. The evaluation recognised a drive to more strategic approach to commissioning adoption support, resulting in improved early intervention and universal offers.

11. CONCLUSION

This report reflects the commitment and hard work of staff within Adoption Partnership South East. The move to a Regional Adoption Agency during a pandemic presented challenges, but staff rose to those challenges. The service is child focused and strives to provide a timely, qualitative, and responsive service to achieve good outcomes for children and families. Hearing and responding to the voice of the child and the voice of adoptive parents is important to us and during the coming twelve months there are plans in place to develop and improve these further.

The service recognises the value of working together, both internally, and with the professional network within each of the partner local authorities and other organisations.

A significant amount of preparation took place before the launch of the RAA on 1st November 2020 which has proven to have been extremely helpful. The legal agreement provides clarity, and the service is supported by a robust governance framework, which is constructively challenging and supportive.

The service has successfully transitioned from three local authority adoption services in to one regional adoption service and is entering its next phase of consolidation and further development with enthusiasm and a commitment to children and their families.

Sarah Skinner

Head of Adoption Partnership South East

November 2021

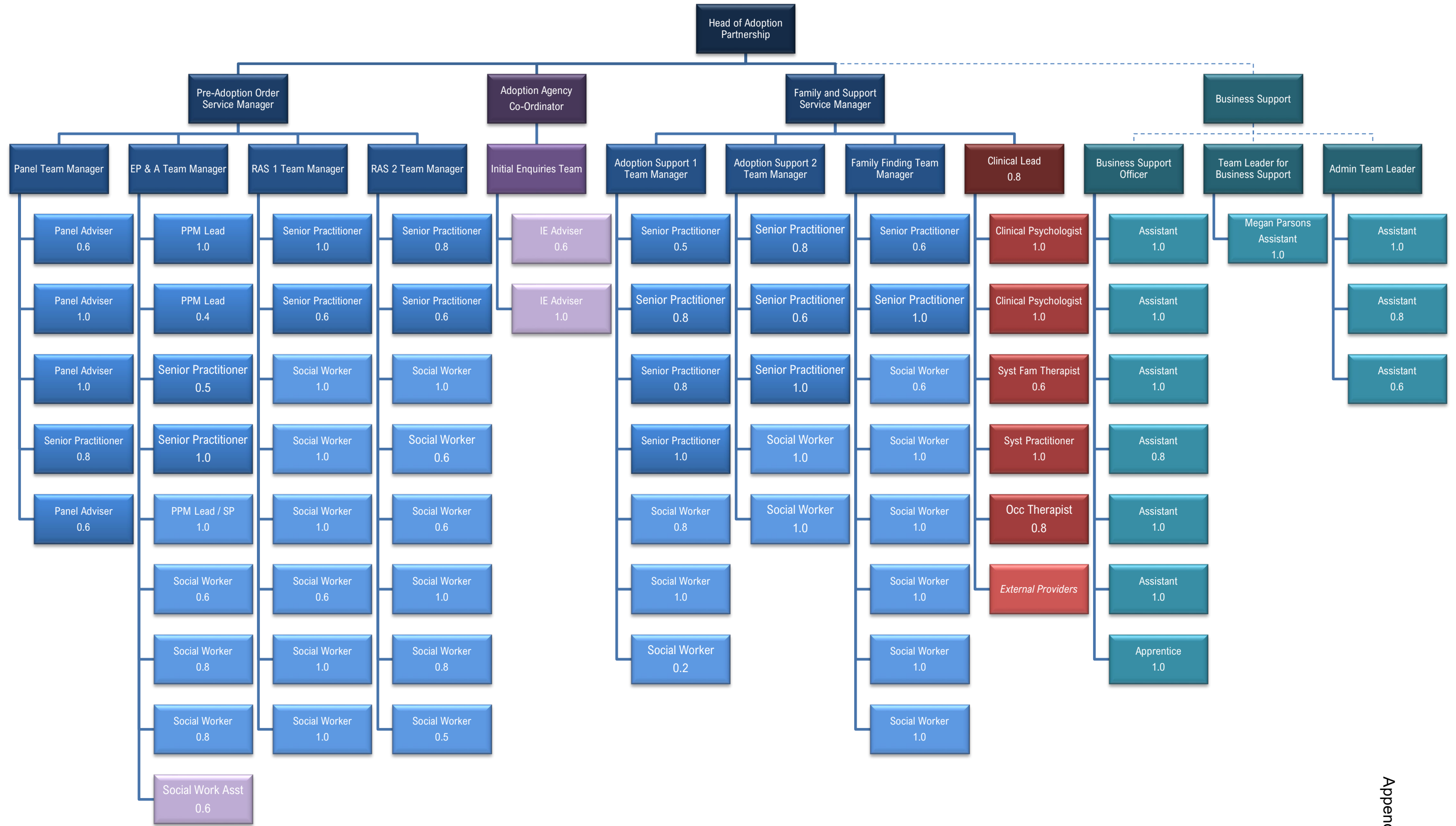
12. APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – RAA Structure

Appendix 2 – Statement of Purpose

Appendix 3 – Recruitment Strategy 2022

Appendix 4 – VSK Participation Team Annual Report





STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

2022 - 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a requirement of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services, that an adoption service produces a statement of purpose, including its aims and objectives, a description of the service it provides and the facilities that it provides. It can be used by children and young people and families as a guide to what they should expect a service to provide and to do.

This document is the Statement of Purpose for Adoption Partnership South East, a Regional Adoption Agency, which was established on 1st November 2020. It is a shared adoption service working on behalf of the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council.

The regional agency is operated under the terms of a Partnership Agreement, which confirms the legal and governance arrangements; the budget; staffing and funding contributions for the three local authorities.

The Statement of Purpose has been produced in accordance with:

- Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
- Care Planning Regulations 2010
- Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011)
- Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Local Authority Regulations 2005
- Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (Amendment) Regulations 2011
- Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012
- Care Planning, placement and Case and fostering services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Standards Act 2000.

Adoption Agencies are inspected against these standards by Ofsted.

2. PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

The requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 underpin the principles and values of our service:

Principles and Core Values:

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond and where possible this should be within their own family
- The Child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process
- The Child's wishes and feelings will be considered at all stages
- Delays in adoption can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided wherever possible
- The child's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language, and sexuality will be fully recognised, positively valued, and promoted when decisions are made
- The needs of disabled children will be fully recognised and considered when decisions are made
- The role of adoptive parents in offering a permanent family to a child who cannot live with their birth family will be valued and respected
- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and requires lifelong commitment from many organisations, professionals and individuals who must work together to deliver to meet the needs of the services
- Birth parents and birth families are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. They will be treated fairly, openly and offered a support service.

Equal Opportunities:

The adoption service abides by equal opportunities legislation and the policies of each Partner. The service works positively and respectfully with all service users and partner agencies regardless of race, colour, religion, language, culture, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or age.

Every attempt will be made to secure an adoptive family which meets a child's emotional and developmental needs considering their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender, and disability considering the need to avoid undue delay.

3. THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE AGENCY

The agency is committed to fulfilling the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 by:

1. Ensuring the provision of a high-quality adoption service which guarantees the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children or young people who are looked after and who need adoptive placements
2. Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services
3. Working in partnership with adoptive families and other agencies ensuring the service is based on statutory requirements and good practice within the principles of value for money for the agency.

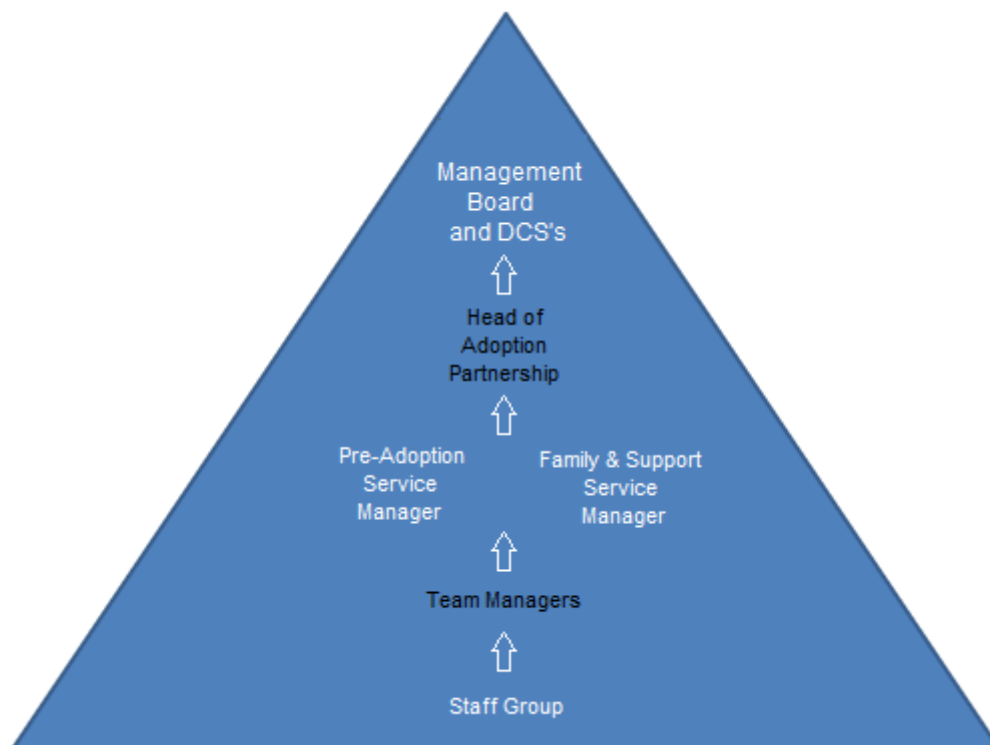
Objectives of the agency

1. To recruit, assess and provide adopters that meet the needs of the children to be placed for adoption within the timescales laid down by National Adoption Standards
2. To provide information on the process to applicants interested in becoming adopters and on the children requiring adoption
3. To ensure that adopters receive appropriate preparation, training, support, and advice to enable them to offer the best possible standards of parenting, safety and protection for children or young people in their care
4. To minimise delay in family finding, always paying attention to the needs of the child
5. To provide information on the services available to all those affected by adoption recognising that as adoption has lifelong implications for all those involved, their needs will change over time
6. To provide a range of adoption support services to birth relatives, adopted adults, adopters, and their children in partnership with other agencies
7. To provide information on the service that is available to those wishing to adopt from abroad
8. To ensure that any decisions are transparent and fair
9. That concerns about the service are addressed and that information about the complaint procedure is made available
10. That the organisation regularly reviews the services it provides, consults with, and learns from, those in receipt of their services through comments, compliments, and complaints.

4. ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Governance:

The Head of Service reports quarterly to a Partnership Management Board, which is comprised of Director of Children's Services and Senior Officers from each partner local authority with representation drawn from the wider professional network. The Chair is rotated on an annual basis and for the period 1st November 2020 to 31st October 2021, the Chair of the Board was Director, Integrated Children's Services (Social Work), Children, Young People and Education Services (KCC), and she handed this over to Director of People (Children & Adults), Medway for the following twelve months



Adoption Partnership South East is managed by a Head of Service, two Service Managers, one of whom is responsible for the pre-adoption order work streams and one who is responsible for overseeing family finding and adoption support. There are nine teams, and the agency has a total of 90 members of staff working within it.

The service is staffed as follows:

	Head of Service	Service Manager	Project Officer	Team Manager	Senior Practitioner	Panel Adviser	PPM Lead	Social Worker	Agency Coordinator	Social Work Assistant	Senior Therapist	Initial Enquiries Advisor	Business Support Lead	Business Support Officer	Business Support Apprentice	TOTAL
Service Management	1	2	1						1							5
Panel				1		5										6
Early Permanence				1	2		4	4		1						12
Recruitment & Assessment 1				1	3			6								10
Recruitment & Assessment 2				1	3			4								8
Family Finding				1	3			6								10
Adoption Support 1				1	4			2								7
Adoption Support 2				1	3			4								8
Adoption Support Clinical Team				1							4					5
Initial Enquiries												3				3
Business Support													3	12	1	16
																90

5. THE WORK OF THE ADOPTION SERVICE

Adoption Partnership South East provides an adoption service directly and indirectly to:

- Children in need of an adoptive family
- Birth families directly and indirectly
- People wishing to become parents of a non-related child through adoption.
- Reconstituted families wishing to adopt a related child
- Prospective and approved adopters
- Adults who have been adopted seeking their records

The service undertakes the following tasks:

- Recruitment of prospective adoptive
- Assessment and preparation of adopters
- Support for families waiting for a child to be placed with them
- Family finding for children who need a permanent home through adoption. The family finding team become involved with every child where adoption may be the plan during the decision-making process and takes the lead in family finding at the earliest point possible
- Advice, guidance, and support to adoptive families during the matching process
- Advice, guidance and support to children and their adoptive families after an adoption order has been granted which can include attending workshops and training, and accessing online support groups
- Adoption support assessments for adoptive families
- The commissioning and delivery of therapeutic support, using the Adoption Support Fund.
- Relative/stepparent adoption assessments
- Those wishing to adopt from abroad are referred to another Regional Adoption Agency that provide a service under commissioning contracts.
- Commissioning of independent services - The adoption keeping in touch (contact) service and access to adoption archives for families has for many years been delivered through a voluntary adoption agency for Kent families. This service has recently been commissioned to provide a service to all families who fall within the remit of the RAA. It enables adopted children to keep in touch with their birth families.
- Support and signposting to counselling services for adopted adults wishing to find out about their birth families and an Intermediary service are also provided by a voluntary adoption agency. This service has recently been commissioned to provide a service to all families who fall within the remit of the RAA.

Information about all aspects of the adoption service can be accessed via the Adoption Partnership Initial Enquiries Team:

- <https://www.adoptionpartnershipsoutheast.org.uk/>
- Adoption.Partnership@Kent.gov.uk
- 03000 422373

All enquirers are followed through by an adoption advisor.

Office addresses:

- Bexley Council, Civic Offices, 2 Watling Street, Bexleyheath, DA6 7AT
- Kent County Council, Invicta House, Maidstone, ME14 1XX
- Medway Council, Gun Wharf, Dock Road, Chatham, Kent, ME4 4TR

6. THE SERVICE TO PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

Enquiries and first contact

Enquirers can access information on adopting with Adoption Partnership via the Adoption Agency website: www.adoptionpartnershipsoutheast.org.uk or make contact through the dedicated advice line. At first contact, enquirers are sent an online information pack and link to an information video. This pack provides enquirers with the information to help them decide if adoption is right for them and their family.

Consultation Sessions

Enquirers who decide they would like to progress their interest contact the Initial Enquiry team who open them up onto our system and complete an initial enquiry form with them. The enquirer is then booked on to one of our consultation sessions. These sessions are in person and run monthly, with an additional bi monthly event for enquirers interested in the Early Permanence scheme. The consultation sessions are small events giving enquirers an opportunity to meet an adopter and have a one-to-one consultation with an adoption social worker to discuss the next steps of adoption, the timing of this and answer any questions they might have.

Registration of Interest

Following the consultation session, the enquirer will be invited to contact the Initial Enquiry team and inform them of the decision as to whether they would like to start an adoption assessment. For all enquirers wishing to be assessed a Registration of Interest will be emailed on and on return of this document on of the recruitment team manager will sign it off and allocate to a social worker.

At this stage, the enquirer becomes known as a prospective adopter(s).

Stage 1 - Pre-assessment process

Stage One begins on the day that Adoption Partnership accepts the registration of interest from the prospective adopter(s) and should normally take 2 months to complete. The allocated social worker will contact the prospective adopters to complete the stage one agreement and arrange for a home visit to take place during stage one.

The stage one process will include the following:

- All the statutory references/checks will be completed including the DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check
- The prospective adopter(s) will complete an adoption medical as soon as possible. This will be considered by the adoption agency medical advisor, who will provide advice about any concerning medical issues

- The prospective adopter(s) will be expected to attend training/preparation sessions. This will give prospective adopter(s) more detailed information and will allow them to meet experienced adopters who can help answer questions that they have
- An adoption social worker will be provided to support prospective adopters on completing the stage 1 process and an agreement will be drawn up with prospective adopters detailing expectations

Preparation sessions

Prospective adopters will be invited to attend preparation sessions in Stage One and Stage Two. The process will be delayed if applicants are unable to attend initial preparation, and a clear indication of their availability will be ascertained. They will also be encouraged to access e-learning components on the First4Adoption website and will be given a one-year subscription to the PACT Adopter hub when they complete stage one.

Preparation groups for first time adopters usually run approximately 10 times per year based on need. Repeat adopter training is provided at regular intervals across the region, as is early permanence carer preparation group training.

Stage 2 – The assessment process

The stage two assessment process cannot begin until stage one has successfully been completed (apart from repeat adopters and foster carer adoptions, see next page).

Stage two begins when prospective adopters notify the agency of their wish to continue with the process. The prospective adopter(s) have 6 months from the completion of stage one to provide this notification. From the date of receipt of this notification, the stage two process is a 4-month long period during which a home study assessment is undertaken. This leads to a panel recommendation and an Agency Decision about suitability to adopt.

The prospective adopter(s) will be allocated an adoption social worker to complete their assessment. A Stage Two plan will be drawn up between the social worker and the prospective adopter(s) agreeing arrangements for the assessment process and a provisional panel date.

The assessment will involve a series of home visits utilising a variety of assessment tools and will include additional checks including school, nursery, ex-partner, employers, and personal referees will also be visited.

Based on the information in the assessment the adoption social worker will write a Prospective Adopters' Report (PAR). This is a very detailed report providing information about the prospective adopter(s) and their background. The report will reach a conclusion about the prospective adopter(s) suitability to adopt, and the applicants will have up to 5 working days to comment on their completed assessment before it is presented to the adoption panel.

If the agency reaches a decision during the stage 2 process that they cannot recommend approval and/or if the agency decision maker decides not to agree the approval, the prospective adopter(s) will be able to request a review by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). The IRM is an independent body that can scrutinize the decisions of adoption agencies.

Adoption by existing foster carers

Foster carers should notify the service in writing of their wish to be considered as adopters for a child or children in their care. If the child/children's plan is for adoption, this will be acknowledged and a meeting held between workers from the adoption and fostering teams and the child's social worker to consider how this should be progressed and will be discussed with the foster carers, who will also be informed of their legal rights.

A fast-track process will be provided for approved foster carers who want to be assessed as adoptive parents. Stage one and two of the adoption processes will take place concurrently to avoid delay. They will be offered training.

Repeat adopters

Families who have already been assessed as adopters can apply to adopt again as long as there is a year's gap following their child's adoption order being made and a 2-year age gap between their child and a potential new child. In this case, they would express an interest in adopting again and be offered a home visit to discuss their circumstances. If it is appropriate to proceed, they would then complete the registration of interest form and start the process. Depending on the circumstances of the family stage one and two of the process may run sequentially or concurrently. They would be offered training.

If their interest is in respect of a subsequent sibling or half sibling of a child they have already adopted, the timescales and age gap would not necessarily apply. This assessment would be given high priority and the home visit would involve the child's social worker too. In these cases, stage one and two would run concurrently.

Applications for adoptions from overseas

Inter-country adoption is a specialist area of work, as each country has its own rules and regulations regarding adoption. The Inter country Adoption Agency, a specialist Regional Adoption Agency is commissioned to provide a service for families living within the Adoption Partnership region. Applicants pay a fee for their assessment service, including the home study and then further fees for safeguarding checks etc.

Adoption panel

The main purpose of the Adoption Panel is to consider and make recommendations to the adoption agency on the following:

- People to be approved as adoptive parents
- Whether an assessment to approve adopters should continue following a brief report to panel
- Approval of the match between children and adopters and
- The placement of children for adoption where their birth parents desire adoption to be the plan.

Adoption Partnership South East holds weekly adoption panels; four adoption per month. The panels each have an Independent Chair with experience of adoption.

Membership of the panels meets the statutory regulations and takes its members from a central list. Members include those who have personal experience of adoption and others with relevant skills and experience and aim to reflect the diversity of the population of the district.

All applicants are invited to attend the Adoption Panel. The Panel makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker who will make their decision following careful consideration of the recommendations and all the information presented at panel. The Decision Maker must make their decision within 7 working days of the recommendation of the panel. They may make a different decision to that recommended by the panel.

Adoption Partnership South East has an Agency Decision Maker to consider the approval of prospective adopters; Decision Making for children to be placed for adoption is considered by the Agency Decision Maker in the child's home local authority.

Decisions are notified to a child's parent(s), guardian(s) and prospective adopter(s). Social workers will be informed of the agency decision within 2 working days

The decision will be confirmed in writing within 5 working days.

7. BEYOND APPROVAL

Matching and support

For adopters:

Adoption Social Workers ensure that adopters have access to local support networks and specialist national organisations such as the Adopter hub, PACT, Coram BAAF and We Are Family.

The adopter(s) social worker will help to identify suitable matches with an individual child or a sibling group and will provide support and guidance throughout the whole process. Prospective adopters are referred to Link Maker, with their agreement, if no match has been identified or sooner if it is felt appropriate to do so.

Each child where adoption is a likely plan will have an allocated worker from the family finding team. The family finder works closely with the child's social worker to consider matches for that child.

When a match is being considered, adopters are given the Child Permanence Report and all appropriate written information about the child, their background and assessed needs. The report will include details of any proposal for keeping in touch arrangements including contact, or exchange of information through the letterbox system with the birth family that will operate once the child is adopted.

Adopters meet with the child's social worker and other professionals relevant for that child; medical advisors; child's foster carers; to enable them to make an informed decision regarding their ability to meet the needs of the child.

Details of the level of parental responsibility that will be delegated to the prospective adopters will be outlined and any adoption support, including any financial arrangements will also be discussed. The proposals for the placement will then be set out in the adoption placement report, which will be seen by the prospective adopters before panel and comments and observations will be included in the panel documentation.

Process for the matching of a child

The child's social worker, the prospective adopters and their social worker will attend the Adoption Panel. The process for panel is the same as for approval with recommendations being made to the Agency Decision Maker who will make the decision on whether the adopters are suitable for a particular child.

If a match is agreed an 'introductions planning meeting' is arranged to plan for the introduction and placement of the child. This meeting will involve the foster carer for the child, the prospective adopters, and the relevant social workers. The meeting will establish that the adoptive family has all the information available about the child and will draw up a timetable and process for the introductions, monitoring and support.

There are some variations to this process if prospective adoptive parent(s) are taking the Early Permanency Route to adoption, are second time adopters or foster carers adopting the child they have been fostering. These differences will be carefully explained to prospective adoptive parents from the beginning of their adoption process with us.

Annual reviews of prospective adopters

If it is not possible to move to a match within 12 months from approval, the adoption social worker and their manager will conduct a review of the plans and checks, and references may need to be updated. If no placement has been made within two years of approval, an updated report will go to adoption panel for consideration.

Meeting birth parents

Most adopters will meet the child's birth parents either prior to placement, or once the child is placed and settled. They will be supported by their social workers in a suitable venue. The benefit of meeting birth parents is so adoptive parents can talk to their child about their birth family and aid the exchange of information.

After placement

Visits will be made by both the child's social worker and the family's adoption social worker. These are based on both statutory requirements and the individual needs of the child and prospective adopter(s).

The child remains a 'looked after' child until an Adoption Order is made. The child must be visited in the first week of placement, followed by weekly visits up to the child's first statutory review at 4 weeks post placement, when the pattern of visiting will be discussed and agreed but will be not less than six weeks. The child's review will determine when an application to adopt may be made and advice will be given by the worker for the prospective adopters. The Annex A report for court will be prepared by both the family's and child's social workers.

A Life story book is prepared by the family finding social worker and adoption social worker in conjunction with the adopters. The child's social worker is responsible for ensuring that a "later life letter" is completed before the Adoption Order is made, which will give an account of the circumstances of the adoption.

Adopters are provided with a peer mentor who is an adoptive parent, who can offer informal support and advice.

Keeping in touch contact service

Support with keeping in touch (contact) arrangements between adopted children and their birth families are commissioned by the agency from Barnardo's. The service is called Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Service (CAFIS). All contact arrangements will be reached having taken account of what is in the best interests of the child and will be specified in the Adoption Support Plan before a child is placed. Keeping in touch arrangements may include letterbox contact or face-to-face meetings between the child and members of his/her birth family, including parents, siblings, or extended family members.

Support and supervision of direct contact may be agreed and arranged where necessary and supported by Barnardo's CAFIS.

As a child grows and her/his needs change, a review of keeping in touch, (contact) arrangements will be facilitated by Barnardo's CAFIS to ensure the arrangement previously made continues to meet their needs.

8. ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

Adoption Partnership South East provides a comprehensive adoption support service for all those affected by adoption.

The adopters' social worker will ensure that adopters have access to local support networks and specialist organisations, through a variety of subscriptions to other agencies, including Coram BAAF, National Association for Therapeutic Parenting, (NATP) New Family Social, and We Are Family. We have a mailing list with whom we share information and publicise events and other resources as well as using social media to share information with adoptive parents and others.

The agency has 2 specialist adoption social work support teams, and one clinical team, comprising of Therapists who are qualified in a range of clinical interventions. The agency will also 'spot purchase' external provisions when the internal clinical team are not able to provide the service needed.

The adoption support service provides adoption support services in line with the "Adoption Passport" according to individual circumstances.

For adoptive families:

- Access to a support and advice line
- The adoption support team will undertake an assessment of need with the 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.
- Access to support groups
- Access to a learning and development programme and workshops
- Access to therapeutic support groups
- Access to Theraplay trained workers
- Access to support with education via Virtual Schools in each local authority
- Assistance and review of contact arrangements between adopters and birth relatives
- Twice yearly social event for adoptive families

For adopted children and young people:

- Social groups and activities
- Offering training and advice for schools to help teachers understand adopted children's needs
- Working with children in their adoptive families around understanding their life stories
- Signposting to other organisations designed to help adopted children

Services for those affected by adoption

The RAA commissions independent services from Barnardo's to support those affected by adoption. The Service is a bespoke service to families eligible to receive support from Adoption Partnership South East. The Service is called CAFIS - Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Service

For birth relatives:

- Birth parents whose children have a plan of adoption or who have been adopted can access a confidential and independent advice and counselling service through Barnardo's CAFIS
- Support with keeping in touch (contact) arrangements between birth families and their adopted child is provided through Barnardo's CAFIS, as outlined above. All contact arrangements will be reached having taken account of what is in the best interests of the child and will be specified in the Adoption Support Plan before a child is placed. Keeping in touch arrangements may include letterbox contact or face-to-face meetings between the child and members of his/her birth family, including parents, siblings, or extended family members
- Support and supervision of direct contact may be agreed and arranged where necessary and supported by Barnardo's CAFIS
- Enabling parents to record on their child's file whether they wish to have contact with their child from the age of 18

For adopted adults:

- Access to their birth records is delivered through Barnardo's CAFIS. A self-referral process is in place
- Discussion and advice is available from Barnardo's CAFIS for those affected by adoption regarding potentially wishing to make contact with birth relatives

Information about our Adoption Services can be accessed via our Adoption Partnership Advice Line:

- 03000 422373
- <https://www.adoptionpartnershipsoutheast.org.uk/>
- adoption.partnership@kent.gov.uk

Barnardo's CAFIS can be contacted via:

- 01795 532081
- CAFISkent@barnardos.org.uk

9. MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF THE ADOPTION SERVICE

Adoption staff receive regular supervision and annual appraisals of their performance. Training needs are identified and met through in-house training or through externally commissioned trainers.

A management information system and government score card is in place which ensures reporting of accurate information about adoption.

Adoption Agencies are monitored by external inspections carried out by Ofsted.

There is regular adoption panel training to ensure that panel members keep up to date with current issues. Panel members also have annual appraisals.

Regular feedback is received from the Adoption Panels and twice-yearly meetings are held between the Management team, Panel Chairs and Agency Decision Makers.

The Head of Service submits a quarterly report to the Partnership Board and provides an annual review and Business Plan which can be presented to individual local authority scrutiny boards or Executives.

A quality assurance framework is in place with regular auditing of files, plus evaluation feedback from adoptive parents and other service users. This is held centrally and is undertaken at key points in the adoption process.

10. COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS

We welcome feedback from the children and families we support.

There are several forums for receiving feedback outlined below which are used to inform and improve practice and service delivery.

- Adopters' views at the time they attend the adoption panel for approval and a match
- The views of others who attend the adoption panel including social workers from Kent and other adoption agencies if placing the child via inter-agency route
- Adopters' views after they have adopted - an 'after adoption' feedback form is sent to each family after the adoption order is granted
- Panel members attending panel training
- Adopters attending the preparation training
- Adopters attending the Post Adoption Support Team Learning and Development training.

All prospective adopters engaging with the Agency and all birth parents of child for whom the Agency is planning adoption are provided with written information about Complaints Procedures, including contact details for the Complaints Team. All young people, for whom there is an adoption plan and who are of an appropriate age and understanding are also informed of the Complaints Procedures and informed of the role of the Children's Rights Service.

The agency aims to resolve any concerns as quickly as possible. However, if we have not been able to provide a solution within the service, the formal complaints procedure can be activated. The Partnership has agreed that Kent County Council will be the lead partner on all complaints which relate either wholly or in part to the Adoption Partnership South East. The complaints team can be contacted via [Kent County Council website](#).

Details of the Registration Authority

OFSTED CONTACT DETAILS

Ofsted National Business Unit Piccadilly Gate Store Street, Manchester,
M1 2WD

Telephone: 0300 123 1231 Email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk Web: www.ofsted.gov.uk

11. QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

Sarah Skinner, Head of Service, has overall responsibility for Adoption Partnership south east. Sarah was awarded a BA (Hons) Social Science from Bristol Polytechnic in 1985. She then went on to study at Warwick University in 1987 where she graduated with a MA Applied Social Studies and CQSW. This was followed by completion of the Advanced Social Work Diploma, Goldsmith University 1991. Sarah has over 34 years post qualification experience in children's social care including adoption, but also experience in a variety of different teams including policy and performance, Independent Reviewing Service, and Virtual Schools. Sarah is part of the RAA Leaders Forum and completed the RAA Leaders Programme in 2021.

All Social Workers have a social work qualification and are registered with the Social Work England and have relevant experience in children and families' service. The Clinical Therapists working within the Service are also suitably qualified and experienced practitioners. All staff have the necessary Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check completed.

Adoption Partnership South East



Adoption
Partnership
South East

Recruitment Strategy 2022/2023

Introduction

Adoption Partnership South East, a Regional Adoption Agency, which was established on 1st November 2020. It is a shared adoption service working on behalf of the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council.

'Permanence, stability, quality of care and avoidance of delay are the factors which most affect children's welfare and their future chances in life' (DfE, 2016¹).

Reducing the time, it takes to match, and place children ensures that they are given the best chances for the future. To achieve this Adoption Partnership South East needs to ensure it recruits a pool of adoptive families who can meet the diversity of needs of the children who require adoptive families.

Our priority is to secure permanence for children living within our region who need a permanent family who are unable to live within their birth families and for whom and adoption is agreed as the best alternative.

Principles and Values

The work of the RAA is governed by the Education and Adoption Act 2016, Adoption and Children Act 2002, Children and Adoption Act 2006, Children Act 1989

¹ DfE (2016). *Adoption A Vision for Change*. Department for Education [Online], available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/512826/Adoption_Policy_Paper_30_March_2016.pdf (accessed 22-Nov-16)



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Principles and Core Values

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond and where possible this should be within their own family
- The Child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process
- The Child's wishes and feelings will be considered at all stages
- Delays in adoption can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided wherever possible
- The child's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language, and sexuality will be fully recognised, positively valued, and promoted when decisions are made
- The needs of disabled children will be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are made
- The role of adoptive parents in offering a permanent family to a child who cannot live with their birth family will be valued and respected
- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and requires lifelong commitment from many organisations, professionals and individuals who have to work together to deliver to meet the needs of the services
- Birth parents and birth families are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. They will be treated fairly, openly and offered a support service.

Equal Opportunities

The adoption service abides by equal opportunities legislation and the policies of each Partner. The service works positively and respectfully with all service users and partner agencies regardless of race, colour, religion, language, culture, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or age.

Every attempt will be made to secure an adoptive family which meets a child's emotional and developmental needs considering their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender, and disability considering the need to avoid undue delay.

The Adoption Marketplace

The Adoption recruitment Service operates in a competitive marketplace with Adopters viewed as a valuable resource. The Adoption Strategy will form the basis of a response to stave off competition in the marketplace to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of Bexley, Kent and Medway's children. A pool of approved adopters more than the number of children with an adoption plan within the agency waiting for an adoptive placement, enables early linking. This reduces time spent on family finding, resulting in less delay with matches being approved at panel within 1- 2 months of placement orders being granted. Those children who are part of sibling groups or who have medical uncertainties or complex needs can take longer to place. The agency subscribes to Link Maker which supports earlier family finding. There are systems in place for long term placements and rescinding of placement orders if care plans change to permanent fostering.

Adoption Services need to be able to respond to changes in the needs of children who are entering care to take account of changing demographics and ensure appropriate adopters are being recruited. To remain competitive in the changing marketplace, Adoption Partnership South East will need to be flexible and responsive in its planning, marketing, and delivery of services.

The development of the Adoption Strategy and subsequent Marketing Plan will be the foundation for creating a flexible and a responsive service, as they will take account of the numbers of children needing services, future trends, physical resources, policy and legislative changes.

The Adoption Recruitment process

Enquiries and first contact

Enquirers can access information on adopting with Adoption Partnership via the Adoption Agency website: www.adoptionpartnershipsoutheast.org.uk or make contact through the dedicated advice line. At first contact, enquirers are sent an online information pack and link to an information video. This pack provides enquirers with the information to help them decide if adoption is right for them and their family.

Consultation Sessions

Enquirers who decide they would like to progress their interest contact the Initial Enquiry team who open them up onto our system and complete an initial enquiry form with them. The enquirer is then booked on to one of our consultation sessions. These sessions are in person and run monthly, with an additional bi-monthly event for enquirers interested in the Early

Permanence scheme. The consultation sessions are small events giving enquirers an opportunity to meet an adopter and have a one-to-one consultation with an adoption social worker to discuss the next steps of adoption, the timing of this and answer any questions they might have.

Registration of Interest

Following the consultation session, the enquirer will be invited to contact the Initial Enquiry team and inform them of the decision as to whether they would like to start an adoption assessment. For all enquirers wishing to be assessed a Registration of Interest will be emailed out and on return of this document one of the recruitment team managers will sign it off and allocate to a Social Worker.

At this stage, the enquirer becomes known as a prospective adopter(s).

Stage 1 - Pre-assessment process

Stage One begins on the day that Adoption Partnership accepts the registration of interest from the prospective adopter(s) and should normally take 2 months to complete. The allocated social worker will contact the prospective adopters to complete the stage one agreement and arrange for a home visit to take place during stage one.

The stage one process will include the following:

- All the statutory references/checks will be completed including the DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check
- The prospective adopter(s) will complete an adoption medical as soon as possible. This will be considered by the adoption agency medical advisor, who will provide advice about any concerning medical issues
- The prospective adopter(s) will be expected to attend training/preparation sessions. This will give prospective adopter(s) more detailed information and will allow them to meet experienced adopters who can help answer questions that they have
- An adoption social worker will be provided to support prospective adopters on completing the stage 1 process and an agreement will be drawn up with prospective adopters detailing expectations.

Preparation sessions

Prospective adopters will be invited to attend preparation sessions in Stage One and Stage Two. The process will be delayed if applicants are unable to attend initial preparation, and a clear indication of their availability will be ascertained. They will also be encouraged to access e-learning components on the First4Adoption website and will be given a one-year subscription to the PACT Adopter hub when they complete stage one.

Preparation groups for first time adopters usually run approximately 10 times per year based on need. Repeat adopter training is provided at regular intervals across the region, as is early permanence carer preparation group training.



Stage 2 – The assessment process

The stage two assessment process cannot begin until stage one has successfully been completed (apart from repeat adopters and foster carer adoptions, see next page).

Stage two begins when prospective adopters notify the agency of their wish to continue with the process. The prospective adopter(s) have 6 months from the completion of stage one to provide this notification. From the date of receipt of this notification, the stage two process is a 4-month long period during which a home study assessment is undertaken. This leads to a panel recommendation and an Agency Decision about suitability to adopt.

The prospective adopter(s) will be allocated an adoption social worker to complete their assessment. A Stage Two plan will be drawn up between the social worker and the prospective adopter(s) agreeing arrangements for the assessment process and a provisional panel date.

The assessment will involve a series of home visits utilising a variety of assessment tools and will include additional checks including school, nursery, ex-partner, employers, and personal referees will also be visited.

Based on the information in the assessment the adoption social worker will write a Prospective Adopters' Report (PAR). This is a very detailed report providing information about the prospective adopter(s) and their background. The report will reach a conclusion about the prospective adopter(s) suitability to adopt, and the applicants will have up to 5 working days to comment on their completed assessment before it is presented to the adoption panel.

If the agency reaches a decision during the stage 2 process that they cannot recommend approval and/or if the agency decision maker decides not to agree the approval, the prospective adopter(s) will be able to request a review by the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). The IRM is an independent body that can scrutinize the decisions of adoption agencies.

Adoption by existing foster carers

Foster carers should notify the service in writing of their wish to be considered as adopters for a child or children in their care. If the child/children's plan is for adoption, this will be acknowledged and a meeting held between workers from the adoption and fostering teams and the child's social worker to consider how this should be progressed and will be discussed with the foster carers, who will also be informed of their legal rights.

A fast-track process will be provided for approved foster carers who want to be assessed as adoptive parents. Stage one and two of the adoption processes will take place concurrently to avoid delay. They will be offered training.



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Repeat adopters

Families who have already been assessed as adopters can apply to adopt again if there is a year's gap following their child's adoption order being made and a 2-year age gap between their child and a potential new child. In this case, they would express an interest in adopting again and be offered a home visit to discuss their circumstances. If it is appropriate to proceed, they would then complete the registration of interest form and start the process. Depending on the circumstances of the family stage one and two of the process may run sequentially or concurrently. They would be offered training.

If their interest is in respect of a subsequent sibling or half sibling of a child they have already adopted, the timescales and age gap would not necessarily apply. This assessment would be given high priority and the home visit would involve the child's social worker too. In these cases, stage one and two would run concurrently.

Marketing Strategy

Most applicants state that they have been thinking about adoption for some time before deciding that the time is right to contact an adoption agency. An advert may provide the

'tipping point' for contacting the Adoption Service. Adoption Partnership South East therefore aims to use a variety of methods to attract potential adopters and to maintain a high-quality adoption service, reminding the public of the children requiring adoptive families and the support they can expect should they take on the role of an adoptive parent.

Feedback received from approved adopters indicates that reassurance to become adopters was important to them, it is therefore key that any information material presents clearly that Adoption enquiries are welcome from a wide range of the community irrespective of marital status, age, sexual orientation, or colour for example. Also hearing directly from adopters who have been through the adoption journey was most useful when considering if they wanted to proceed forward. These points were considered when planning our recruitment campaign and things like adopters' stories have been factored into information on the Adoption Partnership South East website as well as at the consultation sessions.

Other feedback revealed the importance to adopters of feeling valued and welcomed. Feedback from information events is that Enquirer's felt the Adoption Service was welcoming and informative.

The Marketing Strategy is reviewed at least every 6 months to ensure it is meeting the needs of children. Where there are concerns the frequency of marketing and reviewing the success of the service would need to be addressed more frequently. There is a need to maintain the momentum of recruitment activity and so ensure a high level of public awareness of Adoption Partnership South East as an Adoption agency.



Adoption Recruitment Campaign

The Adoption Recruitment Team works closely with the Communication Officers, Press Officers and digital and website teams regarding advertising and promotion of the adoption service to raise awareness; provide information and attract new enquiries.

Adoption Partnership South East's website provides information to the public about adoption and how to enquire. It also provides a platform for the recruitment team to promote the Adoption service, advertise upcoming events and announce national Adoption events such

'#you can adopt' national recruitment campaign, LGBT Pride and National Adoption Week. Adoption Partnership South East is also advertised on the First4 Adoption website.

Advertising and marketing strategies that produce high levels of interest and quality leads will need to be regularly employed. This will be done by ensuring we have an active social media presence on Facebook and advertising through of media forums such as radio when there are national campaigns. There will also be times when we will recruit families who are not yet approved for children and then prioritise their assessments.

Recruitment Targets

Our aim is to recruit and approve the right people who can meet the often-complex needs of our children who have a plan for adoption. We aim to ensure we have enough adopters for the children so that the best possible matches can be made for each child who needs an adoptive family within a timescale appropriate for the child.

To ensure there is a sufficient pool of adopters in the region, adoption forecasts the number of adopters needed each financial year. This is done by looking at the number of children granted placement orders the year before and the number of adoptive placements made, then adding an additional 20% to this number. The priority is to recruit families able to parent sibling groups, children with complex needs or disabilities, older children, children from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups and Early Permanence carers. In cases when sibling groups cannot be adopted by one family due to the children's individual needs, we seek adoptive families committed to maintain contact between the children on a regular basis. This requires careful matching of adopters for the whole sibling group.

Recruitment Calendar

There are monthly consultation sessions held throughout the year.

Evaluation and Review of Adoption Recruitment Strategy

The Recruitment Strategy will be regularly evaluated. The Adoption Service will carefully consider any feedback through the systems in place. The recruitment campaign is reviewed to assess effectiveness. The Initial Enquiries Advisors are managed within the adoption service so there is a constant overview of the number of enquires at any one time. Realistic budgets will be set and reviewed annually by the Head of Service to support all recruitment activity, including advertising costs.

The targets set for the total number of Adopters to be recruited and approved during the year will be reviewed quarterly to assess if the annual target will be met.





VSK Participation Team Annual Report for the Adoption Partnership Southeast

November 2020 – October 2021



Participation Officers

Jo Carpenter - Participation and Engagement Manager
Sarah Newman – Senior Participation Support Officer
Andrea Wood – Senior Participation Support Officer
Sophia Dunstan - Participation Support Officer
Louise Codman - Participation Support Officer
Amelia Kury - Youth Engagement Support Officer

Participation Support Assistants

Amy Barden (ML)
Alex Gordon (ML cover)
Robert Barton
Tom Byrne

Apprentice Participation Workers

Shyanne Ali
Alisha Church
Kayleigh Leonard
Charmaine Chapman
Karly Muchmore
Victoria Biggs
Nathan Moody

1. Participation Team Overview:

During the past year the Participation Team has continued to work to expand to reach wider networks of young people with the aim to match some of the successes it has had around positive participation with our care experienced young people with other cohorts of children and young people and ensure positive outcomes are achieved. The team is now supporting young people who have been adopted, who are or have been in care, and are looking to further support children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

The Adoption Partnership Southeast and the Participation Team have continued to strengthen the agreement they made in April 2019 for the Team to support with participatory activities and help ensure that the voice of the adopted child was embedded in the Adoption Partnership's working practices. With the establishment of Adoption Partnership Southeast, the Regional Adoption Agency, in November 2020, the Participation Team's remit was expanded to also include hearing the voices of previously looked after young people living in the London Borough of Bexley and Medway, as well as Kent. Team members took part in the RAA launch event sharing information about existing participation opportunities and showcasing the work of the Adoptables group. Children and young people from all three areas can now attend the Adoptables group as well as face to face and virtual activities and events. The Participation Manager has also attended the Adoption Board to speak to members about the importance of participation and how the team works alongside Adoption to ensure they hear what young people think about the service, and what changes they think need to be made.

The Adoption Partnership have previously funded one apprenticeship post which has helped support the Participation Team's aim to expand and reach wider networks of young people. The post holder was very successful in her role and achieved a Level 3 Public Service Operational Delivery qualification and has been retained as a permanent member of the Participation Team. A new apprentice funded by the Adoption Partnership was recruited in November 2020. Having been adopted herself her knowledge and perspective have been a great addition to the team, and she has worked as the lead apprentice for Adoption. Other members of the Team also work to support this workstream.

The team strive to work in an inclusive way and are involved in several KCC staff groups as a source of support and additional learning. We have members of the team involved in the Mental Health Support Network, Aspire, Rainbow and the Green Guardians. Our apprentice who leads on Adoption work has recently taken up a post as co-chair of Rainbow and has supported work to increase knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ issues both within the Participation Team and beyond.

2. Young Person's Council – The Adoptables

Membership of our Young People's Councils has remained strong with meetings taking place throughout the county to provide opportunities for as many young people as possible to get involved in meetings. Meetings this year have taken place virtually and have more recently moved to meeting up in person as Covid-19 restrictions have

lessened as this is what the majority of young people told us they would prefer.

Welcome (back) meetings took place the week of the May School Holiday with meetings being held outside alongside some fun activities to give young people the opportunity to reconnect, meet other people who they may have only met via a screen and welcome back some young people who have not liked virtual meetings.

Virtual focus groups on particular subjects have also been run between face-to-face meetings to ensure that we capture the views of young people who find it difficult to travel to meetings or prefer meeting up virtually.

Young people's views and feedback has been widely shared with Elected Members, Directors and staff in a variety of services to ensure that they are aware how young people feel and so that any changes to future services incorporate the views of the young people themselves.



The Participation Team have taken the lead for young people and children's participation and engagement activities within first Kent Adoption and now, Adoption Partnership Southeast since 2019. Both the Adoption Partnership and the Participation Team are committed to hearing the voices of adopted young people so that they can make a meaningful contribution to service development and delivery. We recognise the value of adopted children and young people being able to meet as a group and talk about their experiences of being adopted and how their views and opinions can make positive changes to services within the safe space of a more formal participation activity.

To this end, the Participation Team facilitate the Adoptables, a group for adopted young people aged 12 – 18, which has been running in Kent since 2016 and is now open to Young People living in the London Borough of Bexley, Kent and Medway. Young people have the opportunity to talk about their experiences of adoption with other young people who may have had similar experiences to themselves, form positive relationships and develop self-confidence, and contribute their ideas about how adoption can be improved for children and their families, which is shared with senior staff within the Adoption Partnership.

The group met virtually via Microsoft Teams between September 2020 and April 2021 due to the COVID pandemic, but we were delighted to hold our first face to face meeting with 13 members during the May Half Term 2021. This session included a more formal meeting followed by a pizza lunch and fun activities and team games in the afternoon. We were also pleased to welcome Sarah Skinner, Head of the Regional Adoption Agency to this meeting.

Topics discussed by the group at meetings in the last year include:

- **The qualities young people think adoptive parents should have** - This session grew out of the #YouCanAdopt Campaign which aims to break down misconceptions around who can adopt. Members of group discussed the characteristics they thought prospective adopters should have. These included being openminded, kind and caring, confident, understanding, and always being on their child's side. Their ideas were incorporated into a short animation which is now shown to prospective adopters at Adoption information events and can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/473773118/f1f27b5448>

- **The Adoption Partnership Southeast Website** - Senior staff within the Adoption Service asked the group to provide feedback on the new Adoption Partnership Southeast website. They liked the website particularly for its design and use of photographs. Their improvement suggestions included adding photographs of older children to emphasise that adoption is a life time journey, adding appropriate information and signposting for young people around key adoption topics and adding information about participation events and activities, as well as positive stories from young people.
- **Preparation Sessions** - The Adoptables group contributed some ideas from their perspective as adopted young people for topics they thought should be included in preparation sessions for prospective adopters. These included supporting their children around contact and relationships with their birth families, feelings around stigma and supporting young people to talk about adoption with other young people.
- **Adoption Guides for Young People** - The group looked at and evaluated the Kent Adoption Service's 'Adoption Guides for Young People' alongside other versions from other local authorities with a view to these being renewed and updated. Their views were mixed but some points stood out around ensuring documents for children weren't too long, that language was appropriate and not patronising, that birth families are treated with respect in such documents and that they show a realistic depiction of adoption and the future.
- **Support Networks for Young People** – The group members discussed those people in their lives they would go to for advice and guidance. These included their parents, friends and siblings.
- **Returning to School** – Members of the group discussed their feelings about returning to school; what they were looking forward to and what worried them. Many were looking forward to in person teaching again, as they felt that they had missed out on learning last year, and seeing their friends. Worries included bullying and feeling lonely at school and not getting on with classmates and teachers. They also spoke about how teachers can help adopted young people, for example by being sensitive when planning lessons and making sure there are people in school who really understand adoption.

The group have also discussed more general topics, such as the design of the KCC Youth Participation Charter and contributed to the Social Care Review via the APPG for Adoption and Permanence's 'Strengthening Families Inquiry'.

This year, 20 young people have attended meetings, including one young person from Medway. We continue to work hard to increase membership, particularly from Medway and Bexley and look forward to re-establishing regular face to face sessions for 2021/22.

3. Participation Activity Days and Virtual Sessions:

Our Participation Activity Days continue to be the most popular way to engage with young people. They are an opportunity for them to try something new, meet other young people who are in similar situations to them, and find out more about how they can get involved in the work of the Participation Team.

Virtual Activities and Social Groups - Virtual activities and social online meet ups ran from November 2020 through to June 2021, they proved hugely popular and a great way that we could still engage and meet with children and young people when we weren't able to meet up with them face to face. Although the demand for these did start to decrease as lockdown restrictions eased, some sessions are continuing to run as virtual after school clubs moving forward. These sessions were open to adopted young people living in Bexley, Kent and Medway.

In this period the team have run 61 different activity sessions with 662 places booked. Sessions have included a range of activities to appeal to different ages and interests including fun science experiments, bingo, gaming, theatre workshops, arts and crafts, baking, street dance workshops and children's entertainer and Christmas parties. 209 adopted young people have attended these sessions.



Feedback on the virtual activities has included:

“Thank you, I liked making the bears and doggies with the other children. When we were talking and laughing at the same time it was like being back with my friends, it was so much fun!”

“Thank you for hosting yet another amazing morning’s workshop. The aquarium tour was a really good experience...We’ve learnt a lot from the comfort of our sofa! VSK yet again, you have offered something so great for our children which we’d never normally get a chance to do.”

Although virtual sessions have not been seen as a replacement for any face-to-face activities, they are one of the positives that have come out of having to work differently during the pandemic. The virtual sessions have been an opportunity to engage with a larger number of children and young people although it has to be noted that some of our older young people were not keen to engage this way, although attempts were made to find activities that would interest them.) A smaller cohort of young people have advised that they like meeting up online after school with members of the Participation Team as they live in locations where they would not be in a possible to travel to meet up after school. Activities like gaming were researched and risk assessed to ensure they were safe and now run regularly with groups of young people who might not choose to attend a regular activity day.

Face to Face Activity days - Over the summer holidays the Participation Team were really pleased to be able to run our summer programme of activities which was open to Adopted young people. All the activity days booked up quickly. There were lots of fun activities to choose from, horse riding, rock climbing, archery, dry skiing, snow tubing, footgolf, arts & crafts, animal encounter sessions and water sports. In total 23 separate activities were run outdoors around the county over the school holiday.



Despite only having a small window of opportunity this year to meet young people for activities in person, the Team still managed to run face-to-face events that 176 adopted young people attended. Lots of positive feedback was received from young people and parents:

“Please pass our thanks on to everyone involved. The children and Mummy had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It has given us the opportunity to open the conversation about adoption in a very relaxed way which is normally a highly emotive subject for xxx. The one area we really felt he needed support was to realise his situation is special but he's by no means unique. When he realised all the children were adopted he had a smiley lightbulb moment. He now feels he's part of a special club rather than 'different'.”

“What a lovely group of young people, the effort they put into the activity days is amazing, their effort is outstanding along with the excitement and smiles they bring along spreads through the children, they have done an amazing job and VSK could not be VSK without them all.”

4. Participation Events:

The Team have been particularly pleased that as summer approached, lockdown restrictions eased allowing us to be able to run some events in person. The Team remained creative when there were more restrictions in place and has supported Services with virtual events such as the launch of the Regional Adoption Agency.

Corporate Parenting Team Challenge Day - After the disappointment of having to cancel Team Challenge Day 2020, The team were finally able to announce Corporate Parent Team Challenge Day 2021 on 29th July at Kent Show Ground. The day was the first chance for a long time, that everyone was able to meet face to face. The day was an opportunity for Corporate Parents to spend some time with our young people. The event was well attended by Corporate Directors, Elected Members, Senior Management, KCC staff, along with young people.



Mixed teams of corporate parents and young people made up 8 teams who competed against each other to become Corporate Parent Team Challenge Day Winners 2021. The day included an inflatable assault course, a bungee run, penalty shoot-out and a school, sports day style race. Our colleagues at Young Lives Foundation took first place.

As well as a chance to have fun, it was also a real chance for everyone to meet up again and reconnect after a very challenging 18 months.

Adoption Picnic - The summer Adoption Picnic was the first opportunity for the Participation Team and the Adoption Partnership Southeast to meet up together with adoptive families. It was well attended by 33 adoptive families, 56 children attended in total. It was a chance for families to meet up in the fresh air whilst the children were entertained by a party entertainer, take part in arts and crafts activities, fun science experiments with lots of time for ball games and fun sports. The team were also able to talk to lots of parents about our Adoptables Group and activities available for adopted children.

Feedback from children and parents included:

'The best thing about today was, slime making, having a balloon model made, swing ball, space hoppers and having space to run round'

'Seeing everybody face to face and catching up'

'We loved everything, Captain Fantastic party entertainer, making slime and making other friends who are adopted too'



Black History Month - For the first time this year, we held a Black History Month Event for Children in Care, the Sons and Daughters of Foster Carers and Adopted Young People during the October half term. This event was devised in conjunction with an adoptive parent who offered advice and suggestions about activities and how to mark the month in meaningful way.

On the day, the children first took part in an interactive storytelling and drama session to learn about the life of Mary Seacole and her legacy in the UK. They explored both the prejudices and challenges she experienced during her life because she was a mixed-race woman and her achievements in the face of this adversity before thinking more generally about why we celebrate and recognise Black History Month in the UK. All the children really enjoyed the session and were engaged throughout taking on the different roles of people in her life and thinking about how Mary must have felt at different times. This session was followed by an African Drumming Session where the children learnt a little bit about the cultural heritage of African Music and the Djembe drum and its place in the UK before learning to play different rhythms as a group. We were really pleased that we and our young people could be part of the many activities that took place throughout Kent County Council to mark Black History Month this year.



Support to Preparation Sessions for Adoptive Parents - This year, an Apprentice Participation Worker has supported three preparation sessions for adoptive parents alongside another young person. These informal sessions give the prospective adopters the opportunity to ask questions such as about their experiences in school as adopted young people, how parents can support contact with birth family and be an advocate for their children. The young people who have taken part believe their participation helps prospective parents to think about things that they might not have thought about otherwise in their journey towards adoption.

Support for Adoption Selection and Recruitment Activities – Between November 2020 and November 2021, an apprentice participation worker from the Participation Team has supported 8 Interview Panels for social workers within the Adoption Partnership, ensuring that her views as an adopted young person and those of the young people we work with are represented.

5. Further Activities to promote the Voice of the Child in School:

NNSP - At several of our young people's meetings we discussed young people's thoughts around VSK's work to achieve the National Nurturing Schools Programme award and desire to become the first virtual school to achieve this accreditation. We had great attendance at these meetings with a good representation of children and young people from all ages and abilities, some who we would describe as 'thriving' at school, others who we know at times struggle. Young people were supported to come up with VSK's own set of nurture principles and they discussed at length what nurture meant to them, and we explored times when they felt the principles had helped or supported them. Their 6 principles were:

- Whatever changes you face we are here to guide you.
- No matter what age, everyone is at a different stage
- VSK can help you find your voice
- How you behave tells us how you feel
- VSK can be your safe space
- Nurture helps you feel happy and healthy

The young people's experiences were used by the Participation Team to inform the film we have made explaining VSK's journey to date to achieving the Nurture accreditation.

<https://vimeo.com/525540056/4242a27634>



SEND - The Team gathered feedback from young people with SEND about their experience of learning throughout lockdown, how they felt about home learning and going back to school. They spoke about how the pandemic had affected their education. Feedback was varied:

- Some felt their learning had improved and they had had time to catch up
- Others spoke about missing direct input from teachers

- Some had been less stressed as they weren't going out to school and had enjoyed lockdown as life less pressured.
- Others missed their friends and found the transition from Year 6 to Year 7 difficult as there were fewer transition activities available leading up to the move from primary to secondary.

6. Conclusions:

The Participation Team feels it has made progress again this year despite the challenges of working during the pandemic and not being able to meet young people in person for most of the year. The team has worked creatively to overcome or find ways around these challenges. Now that restrictions have eased, and that the vast majority of children and young people we work with have told us they prefer face-to-face interaction, we have reflected upon the experience and recognise that there is a cohort of children who find engaging with them in a virtual way more appealing or they find it more accessible. There have been cohorts of children who we have made connections with who would never have come along to an activity day but do enjoy interacting with our apprentices in a gaming session and this has led to some positive participation work too.

The Team remain passionate about the work we do and believe that the investment in the team has made a positive difference to Integrated Children's Services ability to know more about the collective view of specific cohorts of children and young people that influences the design and delivery of services as well individual stories. The Team are keen to increase engagement with children and young people who are living in the borough of Bexley and Medway moving forward to ensure that a wide and diverse network of views and opinions are heard.

Report Author:

Jo Carpenter – VSK Participation & Engagement Manager

Joanne.Carpenter@kent.gov.uk

03000 411876