

The logo for Adoption Partnership South East is contained within a light blue circle. It features a white heart icon above the word "Adoption", followed by "Partnership" in a larger font, and "South East" in a smaller font below it.

**Adoption
Partnership**
South East

The slogan "By your side" is presented in white text within a light blue circle. 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 2022

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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.

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
- Children and Families Act 2014
- Adoption: Statutory Guidance 2013
- Care Planning, placement and Case Review 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:

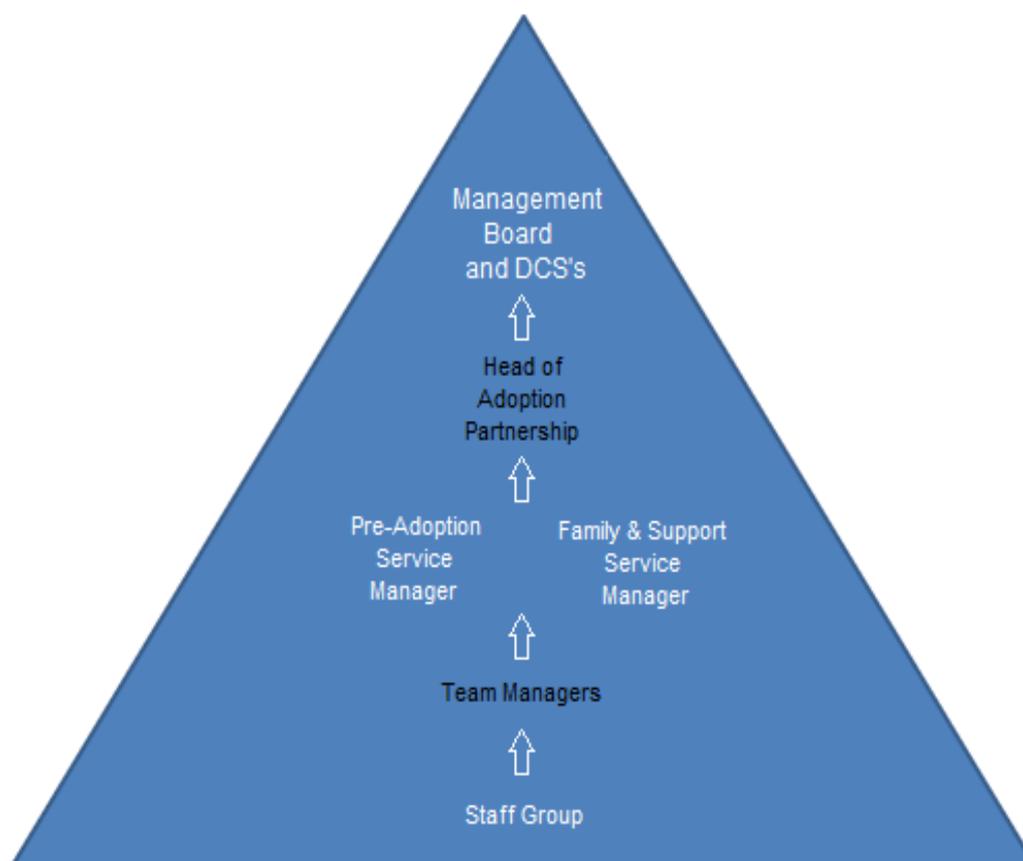
1. Ensuring the provision of a high-quality adoption service which guarantees the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children or young people who are looked after and who need adoptive placements
2. Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped 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.

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 a 12-month period.
- An Operational Managers group meets quarterly which includes the Head of APSE, Service Managers (APSE), Head of Service and Service Managers for Children in Care teams from Bexley, Kent & Medway, lead Finance Officer and lead Performance Officer for each partner local authority.



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 Advisory 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 3). 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](#).

Advisory Team

An Advisory Team includes the Adoption Advisory Officer, Initial Enquiries Advisors, and the Mentoring Support Advisor. This team acts as the front door for the service and received enquiries from people interested in finding out more about adoption and from adoptive parents seeking support.

An Adoption Advisory Officer role has replaced the Adoption Co-ordinator role due the expansion of responsibilities and staffing within the team. Responsibilities include additional liaison with prospective applicants, pre-Stage 1 to improve timeliness in line with DfE performance targets, line management of a newly created Mentoring Support Adviser role and to provide enhanced oversight and involvement in the management of the Adoption Support Fund budget and a newly implemented Outcome Measurement Tool as required by DfE.

A Mentoring Adviser role has been created to actively recruit and support adopter volunteers, willing to support others going the assessment process and adopters who have been matched and placed with a child, but not yet adopted.

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 a diverse panel membership, which is reflective of the community within Bexley, Kent, and Medway, including minority ethnic members and members from the LGBT community. We continue to have more females than male panel members and are seeking to recruit a single adopter to join the panel.

The Panel Chairs provide a six-monthly report to the Agency (appendix 3).

Early Permanence Team

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 may go on to become an adoptive placement via matching and a 'Decision' by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), should the court agree the adoption plan and grant a Placement Order, or the parents sign adoption consent for a relinquished child. These placements avoid additional foster placement moves for children and provide the opportunity for children to attach to the carers and receive consistent and secure care whilst decisions are made

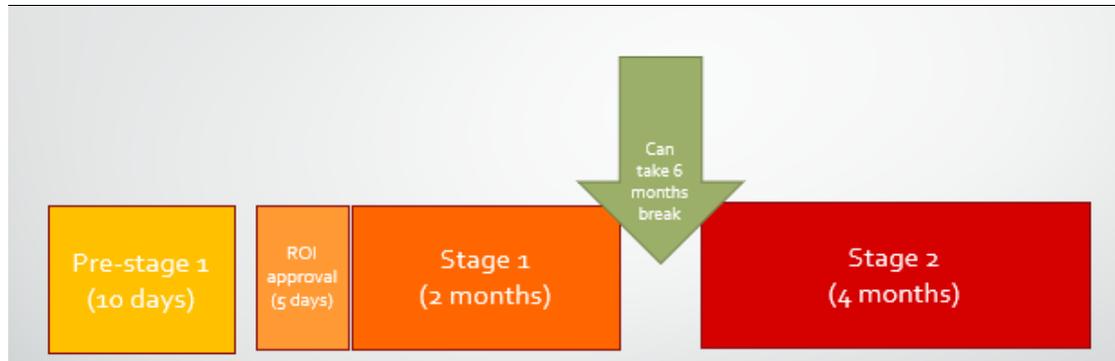
A dedicated Early Permanence team within the adoption service, consists of permanency planning social workers, who support local authority children social work teams with their care planning in identifying children who might need an early permanence placement. The team also has recruitment and assessment social workers who recruit, assess, train, and support early permanence carers.

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.



*ROI: Registration of Interest

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. A recruitment strategy is in place and is reviewed regularly (appendix 4).

Family Finding Team

The Regional Adoption Agency has a dedicated Family Finding Team which consists of one Team Manager, senior social workers, and 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 Teams

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. The service has an adopter mailing list with whom information is shared including training, social events, and other resource.

The agency has two specialist adoption social work teams and one therapy 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.

A Social Work Assistant post has been created to assist Adoption Social Workers in their role of supporting adoptive families. The SWA will be working alongside the social work teams to provide support to individual families. A key role will be to provide oversight of therapeutic interventions provided by external providers.

[Access to a support and advice line service](#)

Parents can request support easily by contacting the RAA's Advisory 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, both internal and external
- Access to a learning and development programme and workshops
- Access to therapeutic support groups
- Access to therapists and a range of therapeutic interventions
- 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. Keeping in touch contact service



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5. THE CHILD'S JOURNEY

ASGLB Data

The Adoption & Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) data return is completed by every local authority (LA), regional adoption agency (RAA), and voluntary adoption agency (VAA) in England on a quarterly basis. The latest publicly available data covers the period from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. In Q4 2021/22, the response rate from LAs for both the child-level and adopter-level sections were 100%. The response rate for the adopter-level section from VAAs was 100%.

Analysis indicates that nationally, for the period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022 there were a total of:

- **3350** Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decisions, a decrease of **3% (100n)** from 2020/21
- **2860** Placement Orders (POs) granted, a decrease of **2% (50n)** from 2020/21
- **2960** Adoption Orders (AOs) granted, an increase of **3% (90n)** from 2020/21
- **4010** Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) granted, an increase of **6% (210n)** from 2020/21
- **6970** permanence orders (i.e. AOs & SGOs), an increase of **4% (270n)** from 2020/21
- **1980** children with a PO waiting to be matched at the end of Q4 2021/22, a decrease of **6% (120n)** from 2020/21
- **1030** children with a PO waiting to be matched for 18 months or more since entering care at the end of Q4 2021/22, a decrease of **2% (20n)** from 2020/21
- **260** children with a PO waiting to be matched for 18 months or more since granting of their PO at the end of Q4 2021/22, a decrease of **26% (90n)** from 2020/21
- **3740** registrations, a decrease of **22% (1020n)** from 2020/21
- **2990** approvals, a decrease of **4% (140n)** from 2020/21
- **2640** prospective adoptive families not yet approved at the end of Q4 2021/22, a decrease of **16% (510n)** from 2020/21
- **2470** approved adoptive families waiting to be matched at the end of Q4 2021/22, an increase of **17% (370n)** from 2020/21

<https://coram-i.org.uk/asglb/data/>

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 and outlines their adoption journey.

Indicator	Authority	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022
Agency decision makers best interest decisions	Bexley	5	10	10
	Kent	92	80	58
	Medway	34	37	18
Placement Orders	Bexley	<5*	10	6
	Kent	65	54	48
	Medway	20	27	16
Matches approved	Bexley	<5*	6	7
	Kent	56	63	51
	Medway	23	23	26
Children placed	Bexley	<5*	6	5
	Kent	60	64	49
	Medway	23	21	27
Adoption Order granted	Bexley	5	7	7
	Kent	63	42	47
	Medway	19	14	22

* <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 10. 2021/2022 remained the same as the previous year at 10. Kent agreed the plan for adoption for 58 Kent children in 2021/2022, 27.5% less than in the same period in previous year (80). 2020/2021 had also seen a decrease compared to the previous year (92 in 2019/2020). Medway saw a 9% increase, from 34 children to 37 between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, followed by a decrease to 18 in 2021/2022 in respect of children who had an adoption plan agreed.

During the 6 months since April 2022, we have seen an increase in the number of adoption plan decisions agreed by ADM's; with 71 forecasted between 1st April – 30th September, which is broken down as 9 Bexley children, 44 Kent children and 18 Medway children, compared to 48 for the same period in 2021 which was broken down as Bexley: 9, Kent: 26 and Medway:13 children.

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 10 Placement Orders granted for Bexley children in 2020/2021 compared to <5* the previous year. This decreased to 6 children in 2021/2022. 54 Placement Orders were granted for Kent children in 2020/2021 which was 11 fewer (17%) than in 2019/2020. This decreased again to 48 for 2021/2022 (11% lower than 2020/2021). Medway saw a 35% increase in Placement Orders granted, from 20 to 27 in 2020/2021, which slipped down to 16 during 2021/2022.

Matches Approved

Bexley saw an increase to 6 children matched with adopters in 2020/2021 (from <5* in 2019/2020) and this increased further to 7 children in 2021/2022. 51 Kent children were matched with an adoptive family during 2021/2022, a decrease of 19% from the previous year when there were 63 children matched. 2020/2021 was an increase in comparison to 2019/2020 when there were 56 matches. Medway had the same number of matches approved, 23, in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 but this increased to 26 in 2021/2022.

Children Placed for Adoption

During 2021/2022, 5 Bexley children were placed for adoption compared to 6 in 2020/2021. 6 had been an increase on the previous year when <5* were placed. 49 Kent children were placed with an adoptive family in 2021/2022, 23% fewer children than in the previous year (64 children). In 2019/2020, 60 children were placed for adoption. Medway had 2 fewer children placed for adoption in 2020/2021 (21) when compared to the previous year, but this increased to 27 in 2021/2022.

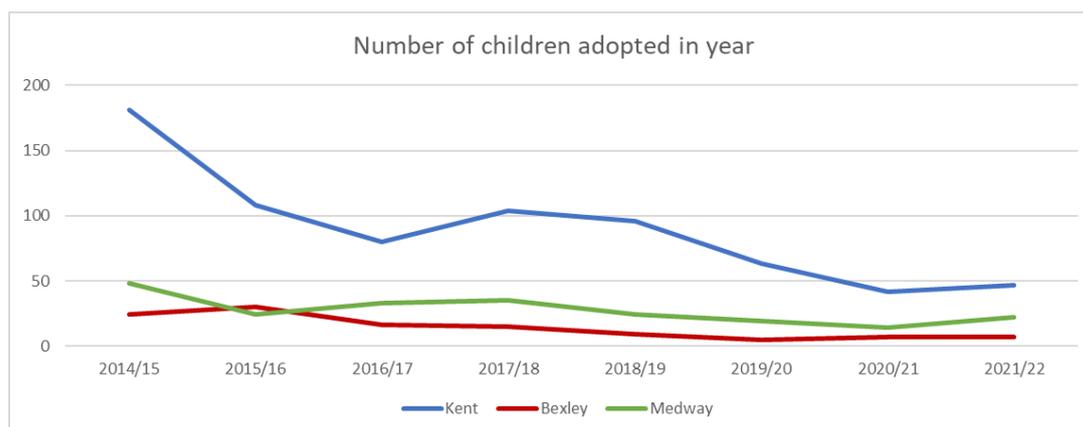
Sibling placements - Within the group of 81 children placed in 2021/2022, 24 were part of a sibling group placed together for adoption: Bexley: 0 siblings, Kent 10 siblings (5 pairs), Medway 14 siblings (7 pairs).

Children Waiting

As of 31st March 2022, there were 28 children within the RAA who had a Placement Order, who were not placed with an adoptive family. For 3 children (2 Bexley, 1 Kent), the adoption plan was changed away from adoption and 2 children (Medway) will remain with their current foster carers.

The remaining children have all now been linked, matched, or placed with prospective adopters and 16 new children, coming through with a Placement Order, since April 2022 have also been linked or matched. As of 23rd September 2022, there is active family finding taking place for a sibling group of 2 children (Kent, who have a Placement Order and are not linked or matched with prospective adopters).

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 of 5. For 2021/2022, this remained at 7.

42 Adoption Orders were granted for Kent children during 2020/2021, which increased to 47 in 2021/2022. Both years saw a reduction compared to the 63 in 2019/2020.

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 22 adoption orders granted in 2021/2022.

Timeliness of children's plans

Timescale indicator	Authority	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	From target 2021/22 (days)
Placement order to matching decision, children matched in a year	Bexley	57	61	153	+32
	Kent	74	144	117	-4
	Medway	203	252	161	+40
Placement order to matching decision, children adopted in year	Bexley	66	52	67	-54
	Kent	96	80	132	+11
	Medway	218	237	209	+88
Became in care to placed for adoption, children placed in year	Bexley	291	444	377	-49
	Kent	303	452	443	+17
	Medway	482	451	495	+69
Became in care to placed for adoption, children adopted in year	Bexley	306	412	407	-19
	Kent	337	316	472	+46
	Medway	503	519	402	-24

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 average timescale was 199 days in 2021/2022.

For children who have been adopted, the data shows that in 2021/2022, 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 67 during 2021/2022. Kent also saw a decrease in the average number of days

from 96 in 2019/2020 to 80 days in 2020/2021, followed by an increase to 132 days in 2021/2022. Medway saw an increase from an average of 218 days in 2019/2020 to 237 days in 2020/2021, and a reduction to 209 for children adopted in 2021/2022.

When seeking to review more recent or current performance, the table above shows an increase in the timeliness between a Placement Order being granted and a match agreed with adopters in 2021/2022. In respect of Bexley children, it took on average 57 days for children to be matched in year in 2019/2020. This increased to an average of 61 days for those whose Placement Order was granted in 2020/2021 and increased again to 153 days for Placement Orders granted in 2021/2022. This was due to the complex needs of the children concerned. Kent children also saw an increase from an average of 74 days for those matched in year in 2019/2020 to an average of 144 days for those whose Placement Order was granted during 2020/2021. The average improved in 2021/2022 and dropped to 117 days. Medway saw the biggest improvement with children whose Placement Order was granted in 2021/2022, being matched on average in 161 days, as opposed to an average of 252 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 306, the previous year, with a slight improvement to 407 days in 2021/2022. Kent's timeliness improved from 337 days in 2019/2020 to 316 days in 2020/2021. There was a decrease in timeliness in 2021/2022 to 472 days. Medway's duration increased slightly to 519 in 2020/2021, compared to 503 days in 2019/2020, and decreased to an average of 402 days in 2021/2022.

Impact of Covid

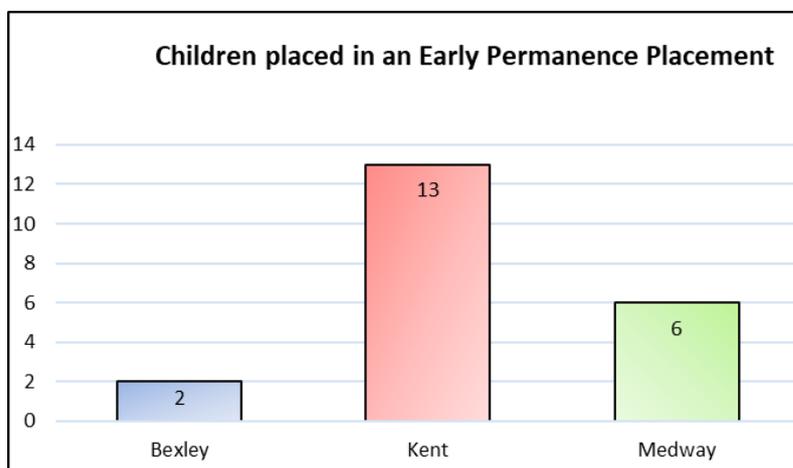
Covid has impacted on the length of time care proceedings and adoption hearings have taken during the last two years. The Adoption & Special Guardian Leadership Board data shows nationally the number of children moving in to and through the adoption process continues to decline and those children who already have a best interest decision, i.e. ADM plan of adoption are waiting longer for permanence.

Life Story Books

Children's social workers are responsible for undertaking life story work with a child in care. Prior to the launch of the RAA, the adoption teams were assisting children's social workers to complete their life story books, although this varied

in how it was undertaken. The RAA has taken full responsibility for completion of life story books across the region for all children matched with adopters since April 2021. This resulted in 56 children receiving their life story book, for whom an adoption order had been granted, between April 2021 - March 2022.

Early Permanence



Between 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022-2020, 21 children were placed in an Early Permanence placement (2 Bexley child, 13 Kent children and 6 Medway children).

Adoption Partnership South East have continued to exceed the aim to place 20% of the children placed for adoption in an Early Permanence placement.

Disruptions

Between March 2021 – April 2022, one child 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. Further assessments have taken place and her care plan has been revised.



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6. THE ADOPTER JOURNEY – ADOPTION DATA

Adopter activity	2021/22
Information Packs Sent / Virtual Information Events Attended	477 Households
Enquiries in year	137 Households
Stage 1 starts in year	66
Stage 2 starts in year	73
Stage 2 ends in year	79
Adoptive families matched in year	73
Adoptive families with placements in year	74

Adoption Partnership South East have developed their process for those wanting to find out more information about adoption. A digital information pack has been produced which can now be sent out to enquirers, this pack includes video clips, a presentation with a voice over and details written information for enquirers to read, watch and listen to in their own time. The packs have been designed to be accessible to all; giving a range of methods to receive the information. These packs have replaced our virtual information events. Enquirers can now make an informed decision in their own time and then complete a formal enquiry and book onto one of the consultation sessions. These sessions provide an opportunity to meet with social workers and adopters to discuss the process, hear about personal experiences and ask questions, in a supportive physical meeting. The sessions take place across Bexley, Kent, and Medway monthly. Following this the enquirer can formally register their interest and start stage one of the assessment process.

A high number of initial contacts and packs being sent out is important to ensure a wide range of people are being reached who are exploring adoption. This number as would be expected will reduce as people find out more about the process and the needs of children being placed for adoption. The process is designed to be accessible and welcoming as well as having a focus to ensure applicants have a full understanding of children's needs across the region.

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

Timescale	Target	2021/22
Enquiry to Stage 1 Start (days)	N/A	70
Stage 1 Start to Stage 1 End (days)	60	156
Stage 2 Starts to Stage 2 End (days)	121	136

The target duration for stage 1, pre-assessment, is 2 months, 60 days.

During 2021/2022, figures indicate that Adoption Partnership South East was outside this timescale with an average of 156 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.
- Applicants' availability to attend stage one preparation groups.

As part of this review the pre-stage one process has been modified to have direct liaisons from our initial enquiry team with potential applicants; discussing the right time for them to start stage one, discussing their availability to attend the preparation groups, time to complete the homework and check out timeframes for booking an appointment with their GP's. This is to ensure that when an applicant starts stage one at the right time for them with the hope this part of the process can be completed within the prescribed two-month timescale.

Priority continues to be given to assessing prospective adopters who can provide early permanence placements and homes for 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.

The target duration for Stage Two assessment, is 4 months, 121 days. Adoption Partnership South East took on average 136 days to complete stage 2 assessments in 2021/2022, which is 15 days over the target timescale.

During this period 79 households were approved as adopters, which has ensured sufficiency of adopters for Bexley, Kent, and Medway children. In total, 81 children were placed with adopters during 2021/2022 and 77 of these children were placed within the Regional Adoption Agency.

Of the 79 households approved during April 2021- March 2022, 65 were part of a couple, and 14 were single applicants. 66 applicant households identified themselves as heterosexual, 13 identified as being from the LGBT community. 130 identified as white British and white any other background and 16 identified as being from a black, or Asian or other ethnic group.

Adopter Gap – sufficiency

It is important to have a range of adoptive placements available to allow children to be matched with adopters who are most able to meet them. The adopter gap i.e., the number of adopters 'approved and waiting' remained constant between 25 - 30 at any point in time during 2021-2022 and this remains the case. They are supported by their adoption social worker during this period of waiting and supported to look outside of the region if they wish to see if they can meet the needs of a child from another area.

Training and support

A range of training is provided for prospective adopters, which includes Stage 1 prep groups, Stage 2 prep groups, early permanence prep training, post approval training, related by adoption - for support network, early permanence support groups, and stay and play support groups. These sessions were attended by over 350 households, between January – May 2022.

Mentors - We have 39 trained mentors, who offer support to prospective adopter's pre-adoption order, plus interest from others who have expressed an interest in becoming a Mentor and will be offered a consultation and training. We have targeted the recruitment of mentors to meet the needs of groups of adopters and this has been well received, with the newer mentors being mainly early permanence carers, foster carers who have adopted foster children or adopters with birth children.

7. ADOPTION SUPPORT DATA

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 April 2021 – March 2022:

LA	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	TOTAL
Bexley	2	2	2	0	1	1	4	1	0	1	0	3	17
Kent	18	24	13	23	14	17	12	18	2	23	8	18	190
Medway	2	6	0	1	1	1	1	3	17	3	2	3	40
TOTAL	22	32	15	24	16	19	17	22	19	27	10	24	247

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

Adoption support assessments (households) carried out between April 2021 – March 2022

Local Authority	Number of adoption support assessments
Bexley	11
Kent	143
Medway	14
TOTAL	168

Adoption Support Fund Applications Between April 2021 – March 2022

Type of application	Number of applications
Internal provision	76
External provision	208
TOTAL	284

Training

A range of opportunities for parents to access training are provided by the service, which include:

- Incredible years training, (12-week course)
- Meeting the complex needs of adopted children, (6-week course)
- Non-violent resistance course (10-week course)
- Sensory integration (6-week course)
- Understanding developmental trauma (12-week course)
- Life story book workshops (2-day course)

Support Groups

A range of opportunities are available to adoptive parents to meet and seek support. Some are from other adoptive parents, such as We Are Family; a commissioned charity, which provides an on-line adopter community and meet up groups for parents and others are provided directly by the service. These also include virtual monthly drop-in-sessions with colleagues from the Virtual Schools in the region.

Partnership working with virtual schools

Each local authority within the partnership has its own virtual school. The Virtual Heads meet with the Head of Service and other managers from the RAA on a quarterly basis. They have attended a service meeting with the adoption staff group to upskill colleagues and there is more of this planned, with it being focused and in response to service requests. There is a regular update from the virtual schools in the twice-yearly newsletter circulated to parents on the adopter mailing list; with the summer topic being that of activities to support transition and recommended free on-line resources. Coffee sessions for adopters are supported by all three virtual schools and they have now begun to extend their offer beyond the working day to enable more parents to attend, with the first one having already happened.

There is a wider regional working sub group for the south east, and this ensures practice is shared quickly. The Virtual Schools have, in conjunction with their south east regional virtual schools network produced a booklet for adoptive parents, which is very comprehensive and informative.

Adoptive parents are advised about the virtual schools and signposted to their website, by the adoption service when appropriate. Although their services cannot provide a one-to-one service for every adopted child, they do speak with adoptive parents and work with adoption social workers. One of the Virtual School's Assistant Heads sits on an access to resource panel twice monthly to offer an educationalist perspective on cases requiring external funding and discussion.

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.

The team facilitates and organises various events for adopted children and young people, including:

- i. Young Person's Council - The Participation Team continue to work to support the work of the Adoption Partnership Southeast and help ensure that adopted children and young people living in Bexley, Kent and Medway have opportunities to take part in a wide range of participatory activities. We aim to support the Adoption Partnership so that the voice of adopted young people is embedded in all working practices. 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.
- ii. Participation Activity Days and Virtual Sessions - The Participation team organised a range of virtual and face to face participation activities for adopted young people living in Bexley, Kent, and Medway. During the autumn and winter months, the team organised 34 virtual activities with 201 places taken up and during the summer of 2022, 7 activity events were held for children and young people, including one for under 7's, and 155 places were taken up.
- iii. Participation Events - The adoption summer picnic is an annual event, where adopted children and their families are invited to a relaxed, fun day where they can meet other families as well as staff from the Adoption Service and Participation Team. In the summer of 2021, a total of 33 family groups with 56 young people attended and this year's picnic saw an increase to 43 families, with 63 children attending, and included families from across the region. A Christmas Party was held in December 2021 which 62 families with 96 children attended and this brought families together with staff for a fun filled afternoon.

Feedback on the activities has included:

"Just wanted to send an extra thank you for our time at the picnic yesterday. It was so lovely to spend time with our pals and see so many other families enjoy their time. It was lovely to catch up with some of the Adoption Team too that we've met over the years.

"My child has really benefitted from all your hard work in providing these activities and events this past year. In chatting to {the children's entertainer} Captain Fantastic yesterday, I mentioned that often it's our children who would

feel less fortunate due to being adopted. But since lockdown last year with all that you have provided, I do think she's been far more fortunate than many of her friends. She has tried things she'd never have even considered doing nor had the opportunity to do before. After all, without attending a VSK Captain Fantastic party we wouldn't have known about him and then she wouldn't have had such a fab (or fantastic!) 12th virtual birthday party. We'll let you know if she's successful with her Blue Peter Sports badge after trying all the new sports.

"She has made some good new friends this summer and we will continue to stay in touch. We spent the rest of the day with one family yesterday thanks to the girls getting on so well at the Team Challenge afternoon and then skiing together. I already knew the Mum as an adoption mentor but it's lovely that the girls have become good friends who can spend 6 hours with each other having fun! We made links with another family at climbing as they also have a daughter of the same age and they had been at Bewl Water together too. We may have established a new support group for parents coping with 12-year-old girls!"

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 parents with a range of different experiences of parenting and of adopting. A member of the Adopter Advisory Board sits on the Partnership Board to represent the voice of adoptive families.

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 electronic form has recently been designed to capture adoptive parents' feedback after the adoption order is granted
- Panel members attending panel training
- Adopters attending the preparation training
- Adopters receiving adoption support services - an electronic form has recently been designed and is sent to parents, seeking their feedback after they have received a service
- The service also gathers feedback from adopters through national surveys and research. Recently the adopter barometer was published, and this has been shared across the service and will inform future developments.
<https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=ebb3a36d-cc0d-45dd-aca9-7dd1d5dbbd23>

Examples of feedback received by the Adoption service:

“The adoption social worker was always there to support us. She really cared about everything and we knew that safeguarding the child was paramount for her.” (Feedback from a recently assessed adopters with a child placed)

“My adoption social worker has been amazing throughout – always responding to my questions and being available to help resolve issues. The training days were really useful, and it was really useful to network with other (at the time) prospective adopters. We have since kept in touch and it is nice for our children to now meet with other families with adopted children.....I am so grateful for the (still ongoing) support I have received from my adoption social worker. She has been with me every step and I really appreciate it.”.
(Feedback from a recently assessed adopters with a child placed)

“Yes- fast and much quicker than we had expected.”

“Phoned about EP placement the day of approval and bought baby home 3 days later.”

“Lots of information about post adoption services received.”

“Very good support pre, during and after the process (2nd time round) we were very lucky with our social worker (same 1 for both our kids) and despite having 3 different child's social workers within 1 year we still had good overall support and positive outcome.”

“I'd like to personally thank you for all your hard work and for listening, you've made a huge difference to us all.”

“You've been a wonderful support and advocate and we'll really miss working with you.”

“The service you guys provide is consistently outstanding.”

“Thank you for all the work you have done for us.”

“I'm very grateful for the support and counsel which you are giving us.”

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 April 2021- 31st March 2022, six Stage 1 complaints were received. One was received from a family living in Bexley, three from adoptive parents living in Kent and two from parents living in Medway. Of these only two Stage 1 complaints were upheld, and one was partly upheld. One complaint that was not upheld at Stage 1, went to a Stage 2 complaint, but this was not upheld.

10. Independent feedback

Ofsted

Kent County Council underwent an Inspection of its children's services in May 2022 and was awarded 'Outstanding'. The adoption service was assessed as part of the inspection, and Managers, social workers and adoptive parents were interviewed by Inspectors. This experience highlighted how far the RAA had come in relation to bringing staff together who had come from one of the three local authority adoption teams and integrating new members of staff into the service. Those interviewed spoke positively and with confidence about the service and during their meetings, were able to articulate clearly how they work productively within the RAA and with the local authority partners, within a partnership model to meet the needs of children and families.

The report commented on the work of the service:

*Adoption is appropriately considered if this is the right plan for children.
Children are sensitively prepared and supported on their journey to adoption.
Adopters are very positive about their training, preparation and support for them and their children.*

Adoption Support Brief Service Review

Earlier this year, RAA's were offered the opportunity of having an independent review of their adoption support services undertaken by an Independent Consultant commissioned by the National RAA Leadership group. This took place in August 2022 and the summary of strengths identified the following:

- The RAA is led by a head of service who has an excellent understanding of the strengths and areas for development within the RAA and has a good understanding of current national drivers.
- Senior managers are committed to CPD and are willing to protect time for this
- The service is committed and skilled at working with service users to maximise their involvement.
- Staff across the RAA are committed to providing a good service and are aspirational about continuous improvement
- The layered offer of support is clear and underpinned by a theoretical approach which staff understand
- VS leads are working well together
- There is a clearly articulated and implemented referral and assessment process
- The service had been innovative in commissioning We Are Family

- Adopter engagement is highly developed and impacts positively on service design and delivery
- Children's participation has been given a high priority
- The RAA has a robust offer to adopted adults which includes intermediary services
- The service has a robust offer to birth parents which includes consultation and feedback
- There is innovative work ongoing in relation to supporting and maintain contact
- The website ensures good provision of information, and this is backed up with routine communication via newsletters and emails.
- The agency has a good grasp on identifying the level of need
- In house provision of therapy, though limited to Kent families is extremely well developed and comprehensive

A development plan and key priorities will be integrated into the business plan and progress reviewed by the RAA governance board.



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11. THE NATIONAL WORKSTREAM

There are now 32 RAAs across the country, with only 2 local authorities not yet in the programme. A national project team has been created with DfE funding which supports the work of RAA's and aims to deliver the government's national adoption strategy: Achieving excellence everywhere. RAA leaders work collaboratively on developing and improving practice and delivering improved outcomes for children and families nationally and they have developed a 3-year plan with 3 key priorities: Recruitment, Child's Journey, and 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.

Managers from within Adoption Partnership South East are involved at several levels with the work of the national team. The Head of Service sits on the governance board and both she and the Service Managers are involved in several of the practice working groups that are in place to deliver on the national priorities.

The national team will soon publish their first annual report, which will be shared with the governance board.

12. ON-GOING & FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Adoption Partnership South East is committed to building on the successful transition to a regional adoption agency, taking advantage of opportunities that arise to develop the service and work to continuously improve the services offered.

- Adoption Partnership South East has recently been successful in submitting two expressions of interest for DfE funding streams to support early permanence and the matching of children in our region. The value of the early permanence funding secured amounts to £221,740 for the period September 2022 – March 2025. The value of the matching bid amounts to £283,629 for the same period. A third bid has been submitted to develop a multi-disciplinary centre of excellence in the service and we await the decision. If successful, the funding will be for the period April 2023 – March 2025.
- These bids incorporate funding for staff development, and training including the role out of Dyadic Developmental Practice, known as DDP training. DDP is a therapeutic parenting approach and model for practice that uses what is known about attachment and developmental trauma to help children and families with their relationships. This can be used to inform and strengthen adopter assessments, preparation, placement transitions and adoption support.
- APSE is involved in a DfE pilot, looking at an Outcome Measurement Tool to measure the effectiveness of the Adoption support Fund (ASF). This began in January 2022 and will go on to April 2023, when it will become mainstream.
- Understanding the data –the analytics team within KCC, has agreed to undertake a piece of work which will analyse child level data from the 3 local authorities from March 2019 to present. The primary focus of this analysis is to examine children’s journeys through this process to see if there is any variation between the three local authorities in the proportion of children who are placed with an adopter following an adoption plan and how long it has taken to move through each stage of this process over the last three years. There will be an additional focus on what impact Covid-19 may have had on the adoption process.
- Online audit tool – a monthly practice audit tool came online in September 2022 and is currently being embedded in the service.
- Online service satisfaction surveys have been created for both the pre-order and post order parts of the service, to capture the views of those who have received a service. This feedback will help inform service improvement and developments.
- Annual conference in November 2022

13. CONCLUSION

This report reflects the commitment and hard work of staff within Adoption Partnership South East. The three local authority adoption services have successfully come together since November 2020 and established one service. The governance board provides regular, consistent, and effective scrutiny of the service and facilitates challenge.

The governance board has recognised the positive impact of the RAA for children and those affected by adoption, and this has been echoed by experienced inspectors and consultants who have reviewed our work, either as part of a larger inspection or focused solely on the service. Managers and staff within the service are committed to building on successes and ensuring good work continues, whilst working on areas of improvement and development.

During the coming year, the RAA will continue to work closely with partner agencies across Bexley, Kent, and Medway to develop the close working relationships already established and will also look outwardly and work collaboratively with other regional adoption agencies in the south east and with the national team to share good practice and initiatives.

Sarah Skinner

Sarah Skinner

Head of Adoption Partnership South East

October 2022

14. Appendices:

Appendix 1 Structure Chart

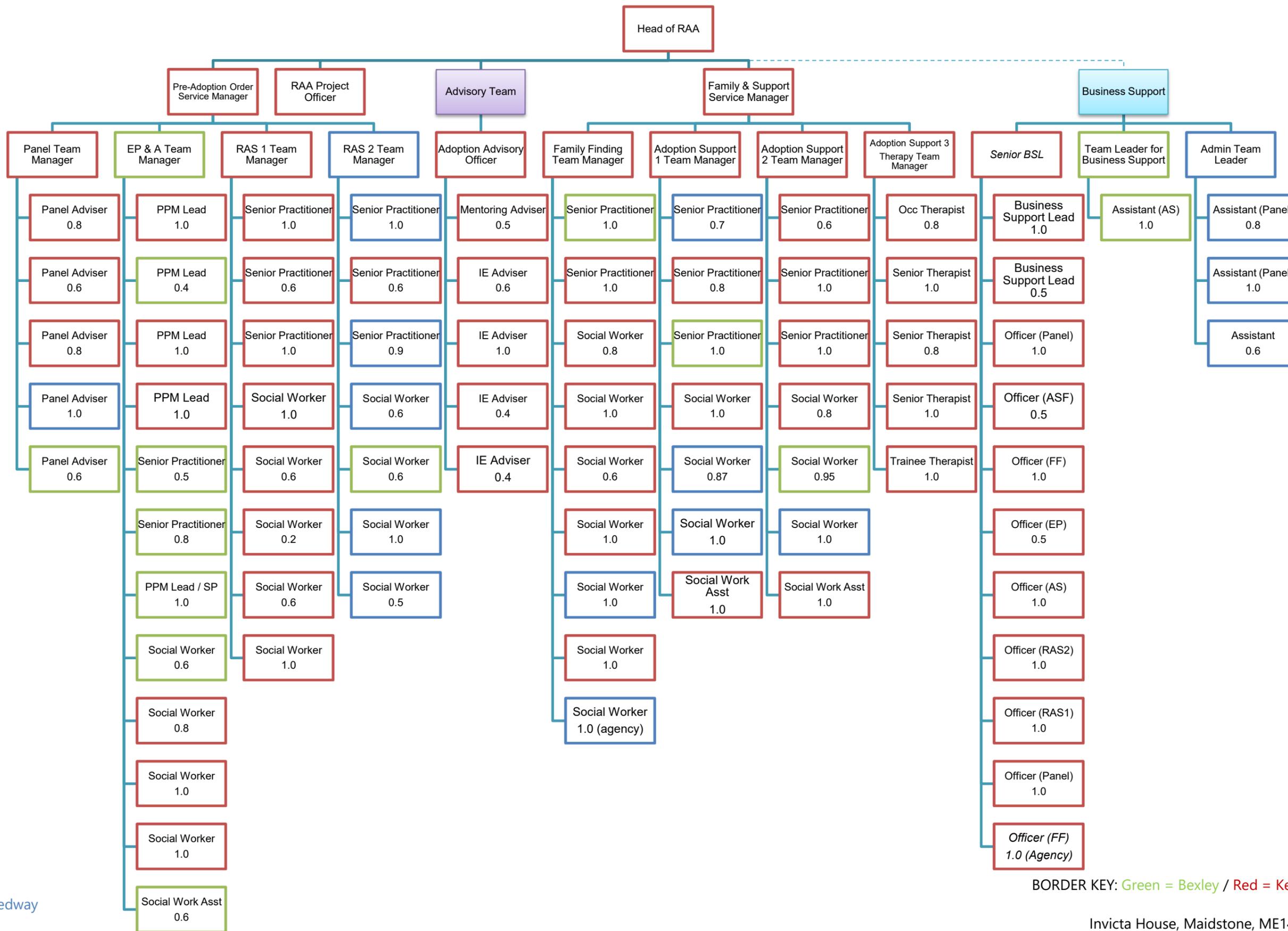
Appendix 2 Adoption Panel Chair Report

Appendix 3 Statement of Purpose

Appendix 4 Recruitment Strategy 2022/23



Structure Chart



Blue = Medway

BORDER KEY: Green = Bexley / Red = Kent /



Adoption Partnership South East

Adoption Panel Chair Report

1st November 2021 – 31st March 2022

Document Owner	Katy Bennett, Panel team manager, Adoption Partnership.
Document Author	Cathy Yates, Independent Panel Chair Frances Moffat, Independent Panel Chair Sandra Neilan, Independent Panel Chair Lloyd Glover, Independent Panel Chair Katy Bennett, Team Manager, Adoption Service Amy Coombs, Service Manager, Adoption Service
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1. Introduction

This report covers the work of Adoption Partnership's four adoption panels for the period from November 2021 until the end of March 2022.

The report is adhering to NMS17.2 "that adoption panels provide quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to the panel"

Adoption Partnership South East is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) working across Bexley, Kent and Medway. Adoption Partnership has four panels which currently take place virtually using Microsoft Teams; this offers flexibility to applicants and ensures that children's matches are heard in a timely way. The adoption panels consider and make recommendations regarding new approvals for prospective adopters for Adoption Partnership, the matches of children from Bexley, Kent or Medway with an adopter, approval of an adoption plan for a relinquished baby and deregistration of approved adopters. All panel adopter approval recommendations are considered and ratified by the Head of Adoption Partnership, Sarah Skinner. Children's matches and plans for relinquished babies are ratified by the relevant Local authority Assistant Director.

The panels are chaired by experienced professionals and the independent members of each panel include a range of people with personal and professional experience of adoption (for example an adoptive parent, an adopted adult, health care professionals and foster carers). The four Adoption Partnership panels are formed from the previous Bexley, Kent and Medway Panels. The panels also benefit from having social workers from Bexley, Kent and Medway sitting on them. All members are subject to an enhanced DBS check.



The Panel team is managed by Katy Bennett and is part of the Pre-Adoption Order Service within Adoption Partnership, which is managed by the Service Manager Amy Coombs.

2. Update on previous recommendations

The previous Panel Chairs' report highlighted the following recommendations:

- Continue to increase representation in panel membership of those from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.
- Increased representation of single adopters.
- Undertake consultation to inform a review of virtual panels in 2022.
- Service user feedback to be sought and provided for all those attending panel.
- Plan a face-to-face training day for panel members in spring 2022, incorporating training needs identified during the annual reviews.

We have recruited two new panel members during this period; one who has adopted very recently so has a current experience of the recruitment and assessment process, and a council member from Kent (meaning we now have council members from all three Local Authorities represented on our panels). We continue to seek a single adopter to sit on panels, and this recommendation is reiterated. We have also noted a need to increase the age range of those sitting on panels and hope to recruit some younger members.

We have continued to develop ways of obtaining feedback from those attending panels and this is explored further at section 6.

Our next step is to devise a consultation form specifically covering the issue of virtual panels with the aim of robustly reviewing the efficacy and quality of the experience going forwards. There are no current plans to resume face-to-face panels at this point. However, we have had a very successful panel member training day in March



2022 that enabled many panel members to meet face-to-face for the first time. The training covered transitions to adoption, birth family contact, and unconscious bias, as well as providing an update to panel members about the work of the wider service, learning and themes from RAAs across the country. The training was well-attended and received excellent feedback. A further event is planned for autumn 2022. Panel members have asked that future topics include how to manage deferred cases, learning from disruptions, and assessing multi-occupancy/multi-generational households.

3. Membership of panel and membership changes (See Appendix A)

Each panel includes an independent panel chair, vice chair, medical adviser, panel advisor, independent panel member, social work representative and panel administrator. Each of our four panels has a lead panel adviser and a lead panel administrator, and we ensure that agency updates and progress of matches are fed back to panels regularly.

Appraisal of panel members is carried out on an annual basis, with meetings chaired by the panel chair and supported by either the panel team manager or one of the panel advisors. This incorporates feedback on their performance, strengths, and areas for development by both the panel member, and the agency.

The formation of the Adoption Partnership panels has combined the skills and knowledge from the original Bexley, Kent and Medway panels, which has led to an experienced, varied and skilled panel membership. All panels offer a high commitment from members and quality discussions, informed by a knowledge base drawn from members of wide-ranging experience. This includes social workers in children's services, adoption and fostering, foster carers, Local Authority councillors, adopters and adopted adults.



Medical advisers from across Bexley, Kent and Medway sit on our panels on a rotational basis.

Since November 2021, one independent panel member has stood down due to other commitments as they were retiring. We have welcomed a new independent member, a new council member, and a new social worker to our panels.

Two medical advisors joined the panel membership in January 2022 and are an asset to the existing medical expertise we have on our panels.

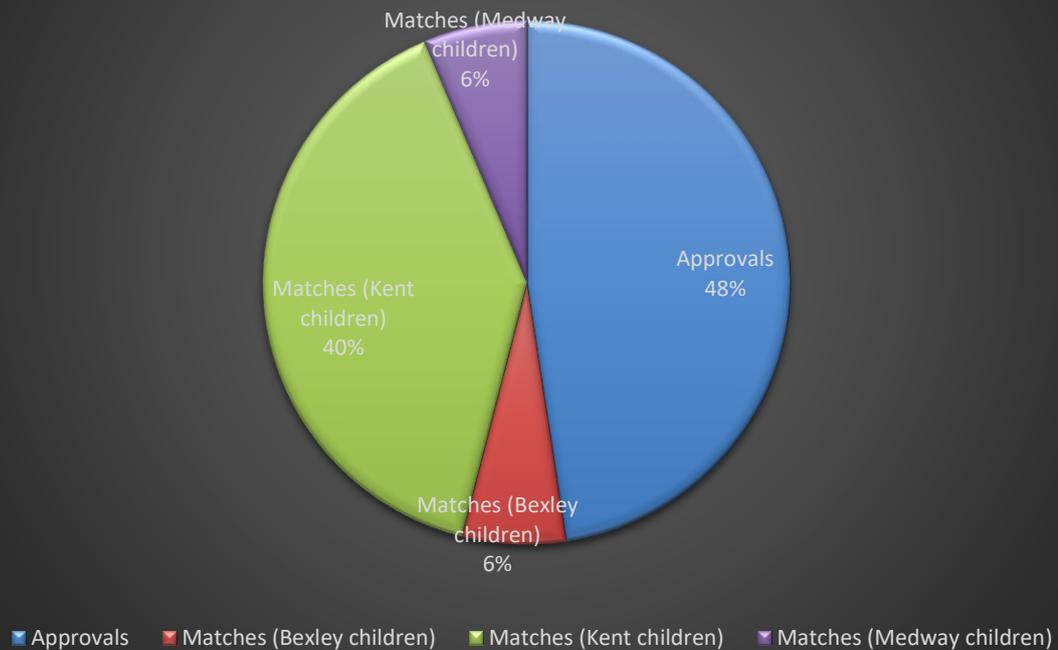
Appendix A includes a full list of all Panel members and their roles

4. Breakdown of types of cases heard by panel

In total 63 cases were heard at panel between 1st November 2021 and 31st March 2022.



Panel activity 1st November 2021 - 31st March 2022



Adopter approvals	30
De-registrations	0
Total matches	33
Approvals of plans of adoption (relinquished babies)	0

One case was deferred due to the panel members requiring more information before recommending the approval of the adopters; this information was obtained quickly, and the case was presented back to panel within four weeks, when the panel unanimously recommended their approval.

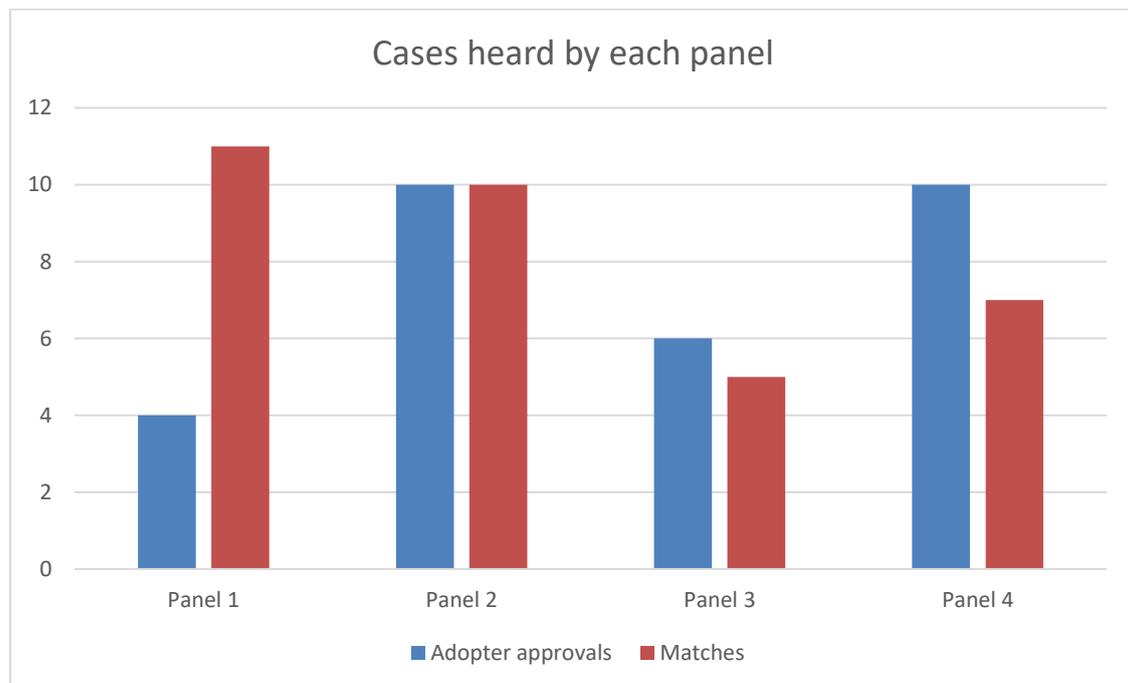


In another case, both the panel and the agency decision maker agreed to decline the approval of an applicant. This applicant has made a referral to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism.

Children matched with another RAA/VAA in the period between November 2021 and March 2022:

TOTAL = 3 (1 Kent, 2 Bexley)

Cases heard by each panel

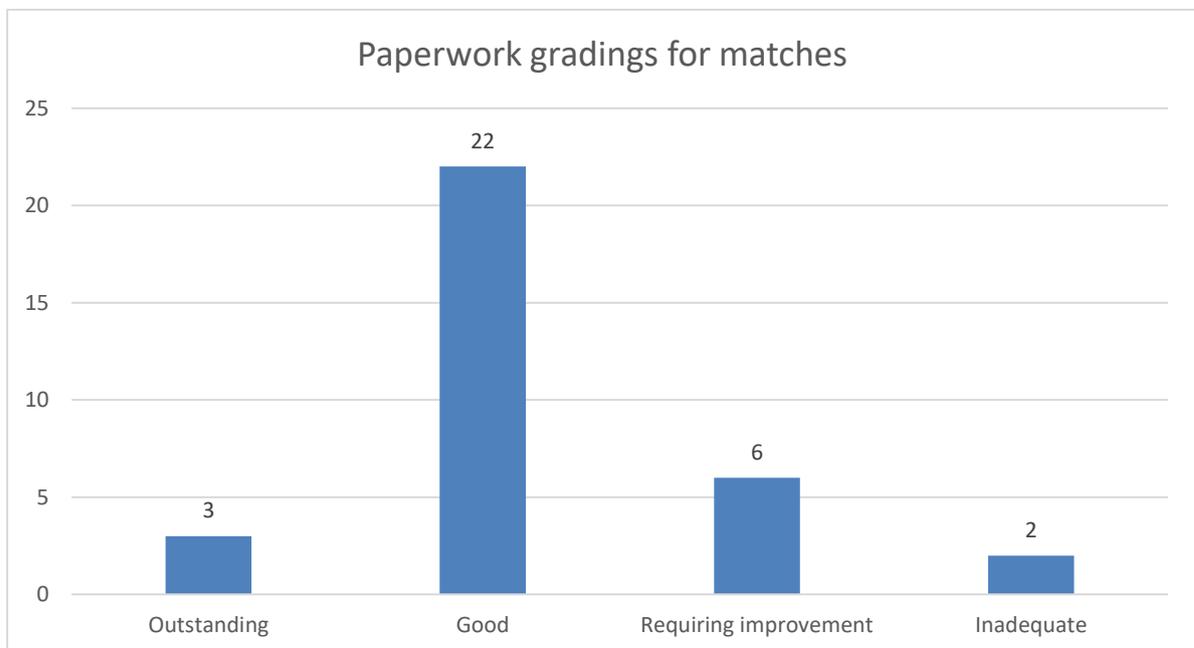
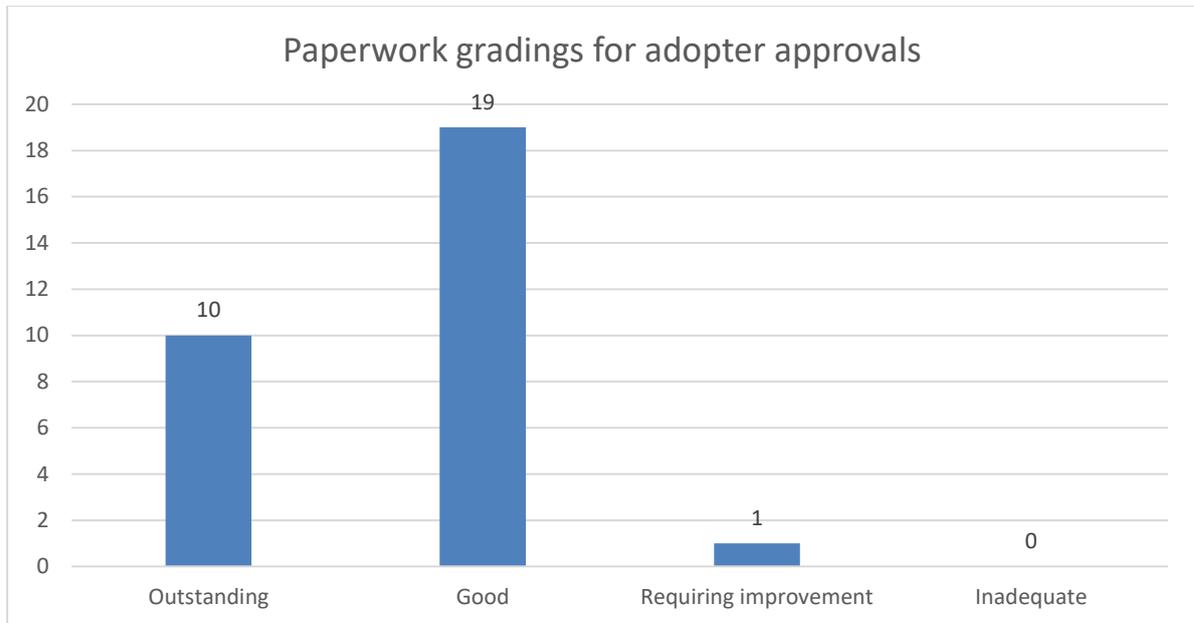


5. Quality assurance of reports presented to panel

Part of panel's remit is to monitor the quality of the paperwork in relation to prospective adopters' reports and this found to be generally good. All the adoption panels grade the quality of the paperwork presented for both approval and matches.



Below shows the gradings given to panel paperwork between 1st November 2021 and 31st March 2022.





Panel members have confirmed that the guidance provided to them in October 2021 has assisted them in consistently and robustly grading paperwork. Head of Service Sarah Skinner also graded the paperwork for approvals of new adopters, and has concurred with the grading of panel members 83% of the time. When different, the agency decision maker graded the paperwork good rather than outstanding, or vice versa, rather than having a significantly different view of the quality.

6. Feedback

We have created an online feedback form for both applicants and social workers to complete following panel and are working hard to increase uptake of this, with some success. The form requests the views of those attending virtual panels, and from both social workers and applicants, this feedback is largely positive in terms of the practical arrangements and the quality of the experience. The following comments are a range taken from recent feedback forms:

Everyone made us feel incredibly comfortable and welcome, more like we were having a discussion than being interviewed. We found the feedback from the members of the panel really encouraging.

We found the panel to be welcoming which set the tone for an open and friendly discussion. Both of us felt we were listened to and were able to give full responses. We never felt pressured for time. It was much more approachable than we had imagined.

Overall experience, didn't feel like being judged, more like we were joining a team

The panel asked the necessary, challenging questions in a kind and thoughtful way.



After some IT issues our end the meeting went smoothly. The chair was very good at putting us at ease and the panel members were kind and helpful.

No difficulties - We didn't understand that we wouldn't get the link to the meeting until they were ready for us to enter the room. As such there were some emails back and forth between myself and the panel coordinator. You may want to make this more clear in the panel email.

It was great. It saved us time and travelling. Being a short meeting, I didn't really miss the 'human' contact as I did, for example, with the stage 1 and 2 training.

It was a great experience, and not having to worry about the commute to and from panel. Being at our own home made us feel less anxious.

We liked it [the virtual panel]. In fact, we feel that this was preferable to face-to-face - less nerve-wracking than meeting in an imposing and unfamiliar council building.

7. Panel Training

Training is provided for the adoption panel members and is well attended.

A full day's face-to-face training took place on 25th March 2022. This training included presentations on the following subjects:

- An overview of local and national progress across Regional Adoption Agencies
- Transitions to adoption
- Birth family contact
- Unconscious bias



Panel members' annual reviews have been completed, and their feedback on developmental needs incorporated into the recent training day. Training feedback has been positive, with panel members very positive about the opportunity to meet face-to-face, and undertake learning exercises with their peers. The following are taken from the feedback forms:

The whole day was well planned and valuable. Given we have been doing virtual panels since the AP started, it was also really good to meet panel members in person.

I found the CAFIS presentation interesting and challenging and the unconscious bias sessions thought provoking.

Thinking about the importance of contact issues is always really helpful. Also, I think the exercises on unconscious basis was thought provoking for all panel members

Panel members have identified further training that they feel would be helpful. The following are some of the comments from the recent training day:

It would be good to have someone do a talk who has been on the panel to adopt and how they feel when going through the process.

Looking at deferred cases

How to assess multi generational families / multi occupancy households

8. Disruptions

There have been no disruptions in the period between 1st November 2021 and 31st March 2022.



9. Panel Chairs' comments

Panel 1 – Cathy Yates

Panel 1 has welcomed a new independent member during this time period, who works with young people and who has been adopted herself. She has been a very welcome addition to the panel.

Panel members have gained in confidence in grading the standard of paperwork and giving their reasons why, the recent guidance on this has been very helpful. Overall, the quality of paperwork presented to the panel is of a good quality with several cases being rated as Outstanding. The contribution from applicants to the paperwork is always helpful and gives the panel a good insight.

The process of virtual panels, whilst it has both pros and cons, generally works well and it was good to see recently that an assessing social worker was present with the applicants to support them in the panel process. I hope that this is something that will become the norm now covid restrictions have been lifted. With the continuation of virtual panels it is also important in my view that key standards are adhered to that applied to physical panels e.g. the agreement that children in placement should not be present at panels now there are no restrictions preventing other people caring/babysitting for the duration of the panel.

Panel 1 members very much welcomed the recent training day. The content of the day was well presented and relevant to the work of panels. It was also agreed by all that it was beneficial for panel members to meet in person and get to know one another a little better.

Relationships between the panel and the Adoption Partnership remain positive with Panel Advisors and administrators providing excellent support and are always willing to try and resolve any issues.

Panel 2 – Fran Moffat



The membership of Panel 2 has become more stable over the last six months, with two social work members attending alternate panels, and this has led for more consistency. We have a new male BAME panel member who is an adopter, and this has increased the diversity of panel membership which was an issue raised in the last report that needed to be addressed. Sadly we are losing the Bexley councillor member (last panel April 2022), and it is unlikely that Bexley will suggest another councillor to attend panel. We had an excellent training day on March 25th which enabled us to meet face to face. Sadly the new panel member was not able to attend because of a covid infection. The quality of paper work is generally good, with a few PARs rated excellent. One member has raised the issue of the amount of paperwork presented for each match, particularly when there are siblings to be matched. We had one complex assessment presented where the social worker was not recommending approval, and where after a long discussion panel also did not recommend approval. There will be future training on multi-generational families, and maybe the issues raised in this case could also be included in that discussion.

Panel 3 - Sandra Neilan

This has been a positive time for Panel 3 in that having lost one experienced Member, due to retirement we have welcomed two new Panellists – one a County Councillor, with an extensive knowledge of education and the other is a younger member, with more recent personal knowledge of adoption. We have three Social Workers who rotate their attendance at Panel.

Minutes do record the reasons for the grading of the reports – we have been assisted by the guidance, regarding the issues to be considered and this provides more consistency across the Panels. Feedback from either Sarah Skinner or the relevant ADM is welcomed and also increased feedback from applicants is helpful, when considering and evolving Panel's performance.

It is noted that Virtual Panels will continue, so it was helpful to have the recent training day, when we met, in person. There was an interesting agenda, especially the time spent considering unconscious bias.



In general, the assessments have been well written and appropriate for Panel's consideration.

Panel 3 has begun the process of the Annual Appraisals.

Panel 4 – Lloyd Glover

Panel 4 has welcomed a new member who is an adopter & seems to fit into the dynamics of our members very well. We have had a mix of cases & most paperwork has been of a good or outstanding quality. We recently had paperwork which had the ecomap in the 'network & support' area of the PAR rather than at the beginning & Panel felt that this was a much more convenient place for it & it helped formulate a picture of their support network. Panel did recently experience one set of CPR documentation which was particularly weak & had to be rated as unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, no panel 4 members were able to make the training day due to work commitments & Covid infections but we all hope to be at the next one. Panel have discussed the possibility of learning how the PA & ADM discuss the cases to aid the ADM to make the final decisions & that feedback from the ADM on panel performance & quality of questions etc may be helpful in the future. Virtual panels are planned to continue & these seem to be improving, bar the occasional software or connection issue.

10. Summary by Amy Coombs, Service Manager

The last six months have been a busy time for the panels, having heard 63 cases. It is positive that the paperwork for these cases has in the main been graded good or outstanding, with only 8 cases being graded requiring improvement and one inadequate. The panels have continued to function via Microsoft Teams and it is positive to have received positive feedback on this way of functioning from both attendees and the panel chairs. The accessibility and positive environment the online panels currently provide is positive, however a formal review of this will be helpful going forward to inform future planning of how our panels function.



The most recent panel training, described by one of our chairs as excellent, went well. This training facilitated discussions, learning and a space for reflections for panel members. The face to face element of this training was positively received and therefore future training will continue to take place face to face.

Panel members continue to work well together within their panels and it has been positive that the recruitment of new panel members in the last six months has increased the panel membership diversity in regards to ethnicity, age and related adoption backgrounds. Our panel chairs continue to do an excellent job at chairing the panel and ensuring cases are appropriately scrutinised and suitable recommendations are made to the agency decision makers.

The panel team continue to ensure the panel are well supported and run as seamlessly as possible, by providing experienced panel advisors, taking good minutes and coordinating the panels and cases.

11. Recommendations

- Continue to increase representation in panel membership of those from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.
- Increased representation of single adopters.
- Undertake consultation to inform a review of virtual panels in 2022.
- Continue to seek service user feedback for all those attending panel.



Appendix A

Panel membership

Barbara Redsell
Barry Lumsden
Cathy Yates
Dawn Bigwood
Dr Bhargava
Dr Das
Dr Eltom
Dr Himid
Dr Hussain
Dr Lebbe
Dr Nicholls
Dr Tukmachi
Ellie Hunter
Eloise Creed
Eva Lindsay
Fran Moffat
Iona Stephens
Jackie Kohler
Jackie Lumsden
James Buckland
John McDonald-Baker
Joy Bamford
Julia Fagg
Katie Boyce
Kris Bahadur
Lloyd Glover
Louise Hawley
Luke Rains
Penny Cadman
Rhiannon Webb
Richard Diment
Sandra Neilan
Simon Webb
Theresa Gardiner
Wendy Purdy
Zoe Thomas





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.

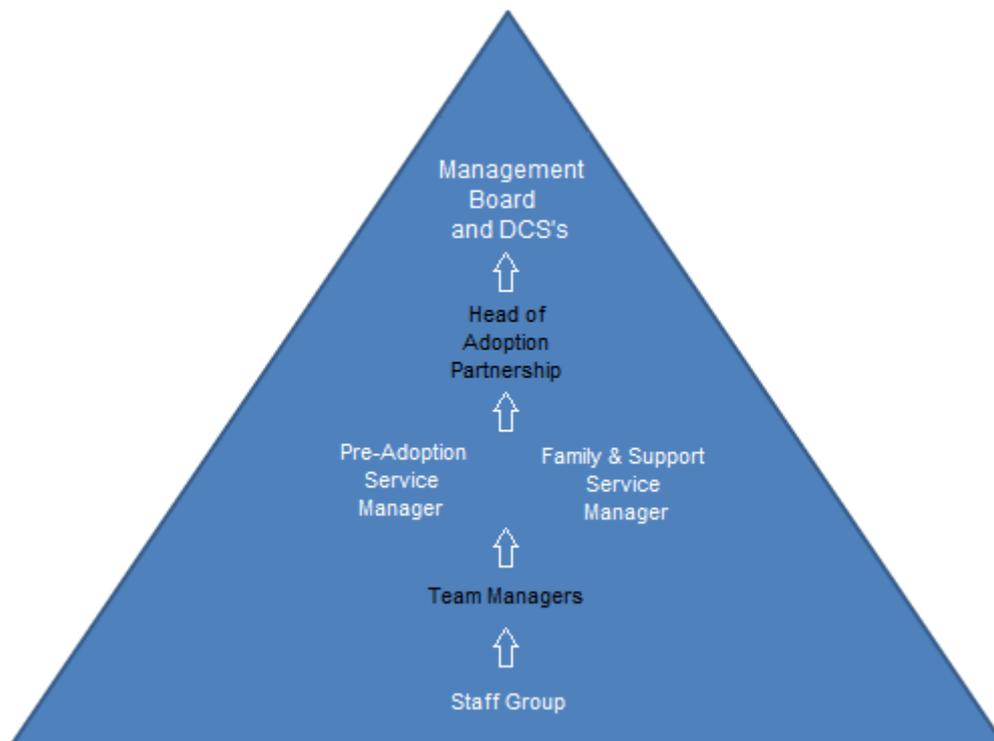
Objectives of the agency

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.



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.

- One Advisory 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.

The service is staffed as follows:

	Head of Service	Service Manager	Project Officer	Team Manager	Senior Practitioner	Panel Adviser	PPM Lead	Social Worker	Adoption Advisory Officer	Social Work Assistant	Senior Therapist	Mentoring Support Advisor	Initial Enquiries Advisor	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		1						8
Adoption Support 2				1	3			4		1						9
Adoption Support Clinical Team				1							4					5
Advisory Team												1	3			4
Business Support														3	12	15
																92

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 to provide support to those affected by adoption

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 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.

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 region.

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
- 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 therapists and a range of therapeutic interventions
- 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.



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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.



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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.

