



Annual Report 2023/2024

**By
your
side**

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Message from the Head of Adoption Partnership South East; Amy Coombs



I am delighted to introduce our 2023/2024 Annual Report. I have been in the role of Head of Service since July 2023. Prior to this I was managing the Pre-Adoption Order part of the service. I am incredibly passionate about ensuring our Adoption Service works collaboratively with Bexley, Kent, and Medway Children's Services to provide an excellent Adoption service; meeting the needs of all those with lived

experience of adoption, with the child at the centre of all we do. Adoption Partnership South East (APSE) is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) comprising the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council, and Medway Council. 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.

This Annual Report highlights our achievements across 2023/2024 and identifies areas of service delivery which can be improved and how we will do this going forward into 2024/2025. This report evidences how well we know our service and our motivation to work dynamically to continue to improve the service Adoption Partnership South East provides to our region.

Three Year Plan (2023-2026)

In 2023 we developed a Three Year Plan; this outlines our vision, mission, outcomes, priorities across the next three years.

Our Vision is to be a supportive and active adoption community within our region, working with our partners to innovate and improve local and national adoption standards for children, adoptive families and those affected by adoption.

Our Mission is to put children at the heart of our decisions; our children come first, and we are dedicated to finding loving, secure, and permanent homes that are right for them, whilst also providing a range of tailored support to children and families who have come together via adoption, and adults affected by adoption.

The plan and how it will be achieved is available on the [APSE website](#).



Our service collaborates with Adoption England and is committed to implementing the Adoption England National Strategy to modernise adoption; ensuring children and families across the region continue to benefit from adoption and that adopted people and their families are better supported moving forward. Our 2024/2025 Service Plan outlines how APSE will do and is attached in the Appendix.

Highlights

This report highlights the significant amount of innovation which is taking place within Adoption Partnership South East in collaboration with Bexley, Kent, and Medway to strengthen the adoption work to ensure children are at the centre of all our work:

- Our Early Permanence work has been enhanced by creating a wraparound support program for all involved and collaborative working with children's Social Workers to ensure when it's the right plan children are placed in Early Permanence placements.
- High numbers of applications to become an adopter continue to be made to APSE resulting in a sufficient pool of approved adopters for children across the region.
- 27.5% of our adopters approved identified as being from a mixed, black, Asian, or other ethnic group.
- Our focus on recruiting adopters for sibling groups and developments on additional training for these applicants has enabled us to place siblings together; providing robust guidance to Care Planning Social Workers assessing sibling groups and high-quality support to adopters parenting sibling groups together.
- Our multi-disciplinary support for families provided by therapists based within our service as well as our Social Workers across the service being trained to work in a Dyadic Developmental approach.
- Our strong adoption community within the region, where participation events and activities are accessible across the region.
- The voice of our adoptive parents and young people is present within our service and directly feeds into the Partnership Board.

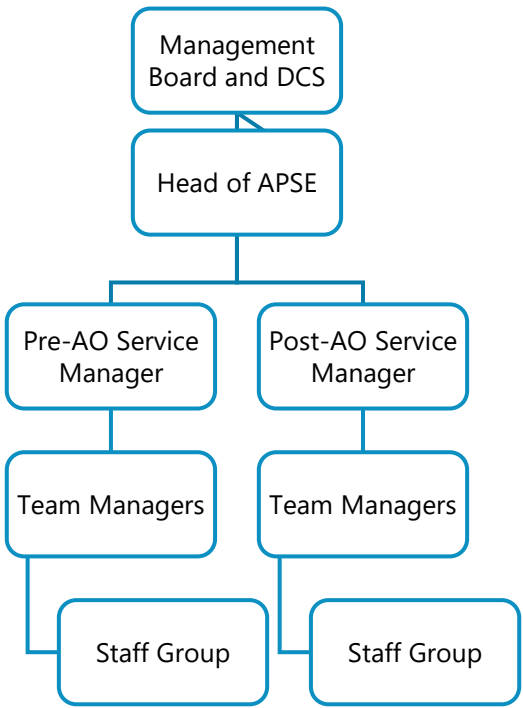
Amy Coombs

Head of Adoption Partnership South East



Our Service

Adoption Partnership South East is managed by the Head of Service and two Service Managers, one of whom is responsible for the pre-adoption order teams and one who is responsible for Adoption Support teams. Details of the nine teams within the service and the structure charts are included in the appendix.



The Head of Service reports quarterly to a Partnership Board, which is comprised of the 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 twelve-month period.

An Operational Managers group meets quarterly, which includes the Head of APSE, Service Managers (APSE), Service Managers and IRO leads for Children in Care teams from Bexley, Kent and Medway.



Equality and Diversity

Adoption Partnership South East believes that everyone we work with should be treated with dignity, respect, and without discrimination. We have worked to strengthen our service to represent the diverse community we work in. Equality and diversity are central to the work we do. Our recruitment of adopters across 2023/24 has ensured we have approved adopters from diverse backgrounds and communities to maximise the opportunities for children to be placed with families that reflect their history, heritage, needs and diverse communities.

The diversity of our Panel membership has been further enhanced during 2023/24 (see Panel Chairs' Reports in appendices) to reflect our adoption community. We have continued to work towards developing a more diverse staff group; valuing differences and what individuals bring to our service. Adoption Partnership South East promotes a culture and environment where our staff, families, and partner colleagues feel they belong, can participate, and are valued for their contribution. We have done this by ensuring we listen and work with our reference groups (as outlined in in our Adoption Community feedback section), we provide regular service meetings for our staff to give them time to be heard and to take part in developments within the service and working collaboratively with partners across the region in joint meetings and training.



Innovations

Adoption Partnership South East were successful after submitting three expressions of interest for DfE funding streams which run for between 2 – 3 years, up to March 2025. The funding secured has enabled us to develop our 3 innovative pilots projects:

Early Permanence 'wraparound support'

APSE had a well-established Early Permanence scheme, already placing over 20% of children with a plan for adoption in Early Permanence placements. An Early Permanence placement is a foster placement for children who have a likely plan of adoption. Approved adopters foster a child during the care proceedings, and then, should the court agree, the plan for adoption the carers go on to adopt the child. This scheme avoids additional placement moves for children and provides stable and loving environments for children whilst care planning decisions are being made.

The DfE funding has enabled us to further develop this scheme by introducing a 'wraparound' model, providing support for the parents, professionals, and carers with the child at the centre of this support. The funding enabled us to recruit an independent link worker to provide support to the parents of a child placed in the early permanence placement. The link worker helps parents understand the Early Permanence approach and feel empowered with a view to assisting reunification or supporting positive future in touch arrangements between parents and adopters, should the plan progress to adoption. The project has provided funding for all our adoption Social Workers to be therapeutically trained in level one Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) and to have access to a DDP consultant. This has supported our staff to provide a high level of support to our EP carers during what are often challenging circumstances. The funding has also been used to access additional therapeutic support for our carers when their situation needs it; for example, when the carers are working with a reunification plan of a child back to birth family or dealing with high levels of uncertainty. APSE provides Early Permanence training to children's Social Workers across the region. This project is being evaluated by the University of East Anglia and results of this research and evaluation will be available in 2025.

Enhanced family finding for Siblings

Adoption Partnership South East used the DfE grant funding to establish a project to support sibling adoptions. This project has taken a three-pronged approach; focusing on adoption care planning for a sibling group, recruitment and assessment of adopters for siblings and training, and support for sibling adopters. For the first element of this project, APSE used the funding to provide sibling assessment training to Social Workers across the region to enable decisions on care plans for sibling groups to be well informed by high quality assessments.

APSE also recruited a Senior Practitioner to complete sibling assessments when needed to avoid delay or co-work an assessment with a child's Social Worker and provide consultations to children's Social Workers. The second and third elements of the project has been to have a clear recruitment drive to increase the number of prospective adopters for sibling groups and then to provide additional training and support to these adopters. APSE used the funding to fund Adoption UK to establish an additional day preparation training for applicants to attend on sibling adoption. Adoption UK also established an eight-week peer support group for adopters in the early stages of having siblings placed with them. Our adopters are provided with a high level of support from our adoption Social Workers who are trained in level one Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) training and have access to a DDP consultant. This project is being evaluated by Oxford Brookes University and their findings will be available in 2025.



Developing Multi-Disciplinary Approaches

This project has comprised two components, firstly scaling up the existing therapy team within APSE, which consists of therapists funded by KCC, to support Kent families. This allows for a consistent approach across the region and an external evaluation of the impact for children and families, compared with previously needing to outsource all their therapeutic intervention is in place. The second part of the project is bringing together a multi-agency group of professionals to help us have a better shared understanding of this group of children. It appears to be a common theme that, at times, multiple agencies struggle to support these families. The children's needs are complex, the family's needs are complex, and the universal services may not fully understand the complexity in relation to adoption. The project aims to raise the awareness of the needs of our adopted children and their families across the universal services and work toward easier and more timely access of these services for our families.

Commissioning Support Programme

In support of the National Adoption Strategy (July 2021), the Department for Education (DfE) has made grant funding available over a two-year period to explore whether national or pan-regional commissioning arrangements would facilitate better access and value for money when commissioning adoption support services.

APSE is working with Adopt South and Adoption South East to achieve the following goals:

- To provide additional commissioning capacity across the region.
- To improve the collective understanding of the need of adoptive families, now and in the future.
- To increase pan-regional commissioning arrangements on the ground.
- To share best practice and increase consistency.

Assessing needs and understanding the gap between those needs and existing services informs local priorities and service development. The overall aim is to improve the speed of service and provide a better quality and consistency of adoption support across the region and for our three RAAs to understand how joint working can practically happen.



Adoption Community

Adoption Partnership South East are committed to developing support, working with, and hearing the voice of all those with lived experience of adoption. Our Adoption Community is a key priority to our service and 2023/2024 has seen key developments in this area; having a dynamic and fun calendar of participation events for our families, strengthening our approach to receiving 'service user feedback process', increasing our peer-to-peer support for adoptive parents, and developing an Adopter Parent Reference groups and Young Persons Reference group. Barnardo's CAFIS also continue to support our adopted adults and birth parents. APSE are working with this service to further develop the voice of our adult adoptees and birth parents into their own reference groups.

Participation Events for Families Across the Region

APSE commissions the Participation & Engagement Team within Kent County Council's Virtual School Kent, to provide a service to adopted children and young people across the region. The Team continues to work to 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. Aiming to support APSE so that the voice of adopted young people is embedded in all working practices. The team organises and facilitates a variety of events and activities for adopted children and young people, including:

Young Person's Council 'The Adoptables' - Children and young people from all three areas attend the 'Adoptables' Council. This is a group for 11 to 16+ and alongside agenda items and discussion topics, fun activities are regularly built into the meetings, for example playing games, going roller skating and bowling. We have found this encourages young people to attend but also most importantly, helps the group members to get to know each other and build relationships with one another. The Adoptables Council has held five face-to-face meetings throughout the last year and has a membership of 23 children & young people. During recent meetings, members have discussed a variety of topics including:

Attendance in school, qualities and expectations of the new Head of APSE and the voice of the Child at Adopters matching panels.

Participation Activity Days and Virtual Sessions

The Participation Team organises participation activities for adopted children and young people living in Bexley, Kent, and Medway. In the period from April 2023 to March 2024, the team ran 15 activity days with 271 spaces being taken up. The team provided a variety of activities throughout the year to cater to different interests, these have included an interactive science day, water sports, outdoor pursuits days, bowling, cooking, and a range of arts and crafts activities. These days provide a safe space for children and young people in similar situations to take part in activities they have never done before and to form friendships that we have seen grow as they attend multiple events. The activities have also provided parents a chance to meet and form connections with other adopted families. The team have received some really positive feedback showing how the events benefit children and young people:

"I am truly indebted to your team for all that you have given our children. My daughter has had so many opportunities that wouldn't have been possible without you all. To know that you have a great system of apprenticeships within VSK gives them examples of what is possible for them in the future and great role models. I cannot thank you enough, keep up the great work. "

"The staff are understanding and supportive, and it is great for her to take part in activities where there are other adopted children in a supportive atmosphere, where the experience of adoption is a shared one, and where these issues are understood. It is great that some of the activity leaders have also had experience of the care system, and so are role models."

"Just a THANK YOU for arranging these days, my daughter enjoys them a lot and it is nice she is around other adopted children."

Involvement with Preparation training

The former VSK apprentice who supported the Adoption workstreams has been working with Social Workers from APSE to provide advice from a young person's perspective to prospective adopters during stage one preparation session of the adoption process. Positive feedback was received showing how invaluable it was to have an apprentice with adoption experience as part of the process:

"xxx was great. It was really helpful having someone who was adopted with a sibling and older to share perspective. Attendees really appreciated it too." The Participation Team have recently employed a new apprentice who will be joining the team in June. The new apprentice is part of an adoptive family and therefore will enhance the current and future workstreams, to provide a comprehensive service to adopted children and young people across the region.

Bi-Annual APSE Family Events

The APSE 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 APSE and the Participation Team. In the summer of 2023, a total of 59 family groups with 74 young people attended. Plans for the Summer Picnic for 2024 are underway. A Christmas Party was held in December 2023, which 76 families with 93 children attended. This brought families together with staff for a great afternoon. There were lots of crafts to make and take home as a reminder of the day – reindeer food,

handprints, tree decorations, as well as many entertaining stall games for everyone to participate in. The children had the opportunity to see Santa in his grotto.



Peer to Peer Connections

Our Mentoring Scheme has recently changed its name to the Peer Connection Scheme, in line with other national adoption peer support work. Our scheme currently has 40 Peer volunteers (adoptive parents), since being relaunched almost two years ago we have supported over 150 families. A Peer Connector is linked with a family once they have been approved as adopters. The Peer Connector can then be alongside the family throughout the matching process and once a child is placed. Now that the scheme is well established, we are further developing continued support for families across the region by Peer Connectors remaining involved when families are finding this helpful. Our Peer Connectors also help facilitate WhatsApp groups for applicants during the assessment process to help support networking between families.

Adopter Led Community Groups

Across the region, adoptive parents facilitate group meetups for families. We Are Family have supported the facilitators for these groups and helped establish new groups.

Adoption Communities Voice and Feedback

Young Person's Reference Group

In 2024 a group was been established by VSK's Participation Team, for older adopted young people, aged 16-25 to have their say on relevant topics that may affect the wider adoption community. The Participation Team represented members by attending the APSE Partnership Board Meeting in March. Members views were shared with the board around easier access for young people to obtain their case records when they reach eighteen, as well as ensuring adopted young people know what support is available to them in schools.

Adoptive Parent Reference Group

In 2023/2024 an Adopter Parent Reference Group was established. This group is run and chaired by parents. There are currently eight parent members (4 women, 4 men), all with different experiences, ranging from 1 to 4 children in a family, from different stages in the adoption lifecycle, different backgrounds and children with unique needs. The group meet quarterly, aligned to the timing of the APSE Partnership Board meeting. The group aims to provide the adoptive parents perspective to APSE (to be the voice of the parents), with this they:

- Suggest improvement ideas
- Raise key issues and concerns
- Provide perspective on questions raised by the board
- They also represent at the DMDA Steering group

Key discussion points have included:

- How to accelerate / manage time delay - big focus on open and transparent communication to manage expectations
- Post adoption support materials and sign-posting
- Additional training for mental health in adoption
- How to get honest and open feedback through the assessment process

Sophie (current Chair) reports; *"The group feel they have significant influence and feedback due to the close alignment with the board meeting, for example; anonymous surveys were implemented following a suggestion from the group due to struggling response rates, several parents attended a recent board meeting so they could meet the team in person and one of the key topics identified to spend more time in, is the changing research around contact with birth parents"*





Service User Feedback

In 2023 APSE piloted a new approach increase the response rate of our service user feedback. The original surveys required frontline staff to send the survey link to service users after each interaction, but this approach received very few responses.

The methodology was revised in 2023 to an approach where survey invitations are now sent by email to all service users from a centralised client list.

An additional 'seeded' version of survey (containing the Adoption Order date) was introduced 26th February 2024 to run alongside the unseeded survey.

The Pre-Order Survey

This identified strengths in the support that our applicants received during the assessment process and when a child was matched and placed with them, and that most of our applicants would recommend APSE. The results and feedback highlighted the need to ensure the assessment process is completed in a timely way and APSE are now working to ensure the when applicants enter our assessment process, we have the capacity to work through their assessment in a timely way with the same Social Worker completing the assessment. (See results table and feedback below).

	Pre-April 2023	April 2023 to March 2024	Change	Total Surveys
Measure / Question	Sample sizes: n=12	n=42	NA	n=54
The process from application to <u>approval</u> took the right...time	67%	43%	-24ppt	48%
The process from approval to <u>placement</u> took the right...time	80%	60%	-20ppt	64%
The information + training received prepared me well for being an adoptive parent	75%	79%	+4ppt	79%
I felt well supported throughout the assessment process by the adoption service	91%	81%	-10ppt	83%
I felt well informed <u>during</u> the child/ren matching process by the adoption service	60%	80%	+20ppt	76%
I felt well supported... <u>during</u> the child/ren matching and introduction processes	64%	82%	+18ppt	78%
I felt well supported... <u>after</u> the child/ren were placed for adoption	64%	76%	+13ppt	74%
I know what to do should my family need support in the future	83%	69%	-14ppt	72%
How likely would you be to recommend this service to another adoptive parent, based on the support you have received? Answered 6-10 on a 0-10 scale	100%	83%	-17ppt	87%



Feedback comments from pre-order survey

“The Social Workers were amazing and really supportive. The training we received was great, really informative and we still reflect on it now.”

“Our Social Worker was very informative and provided all the information we needed at the right time.”

“Excellent support from my Social Worker during matching and the training sessions were really useful.”

“Our Social Worker, was amazing - the assessment was rigorous, but she was open and transparent and supportive throughout the process. The matching process was great, and I really liked meeting the foster carer as part of this process. Overall, we were really happy with the whole process.”

“The time from application or Stage 1 to final approval is painfully long, frustrating, and emotionally challenging. Although I understand it is largely driven by the teams being under resourced which is out of your control.”

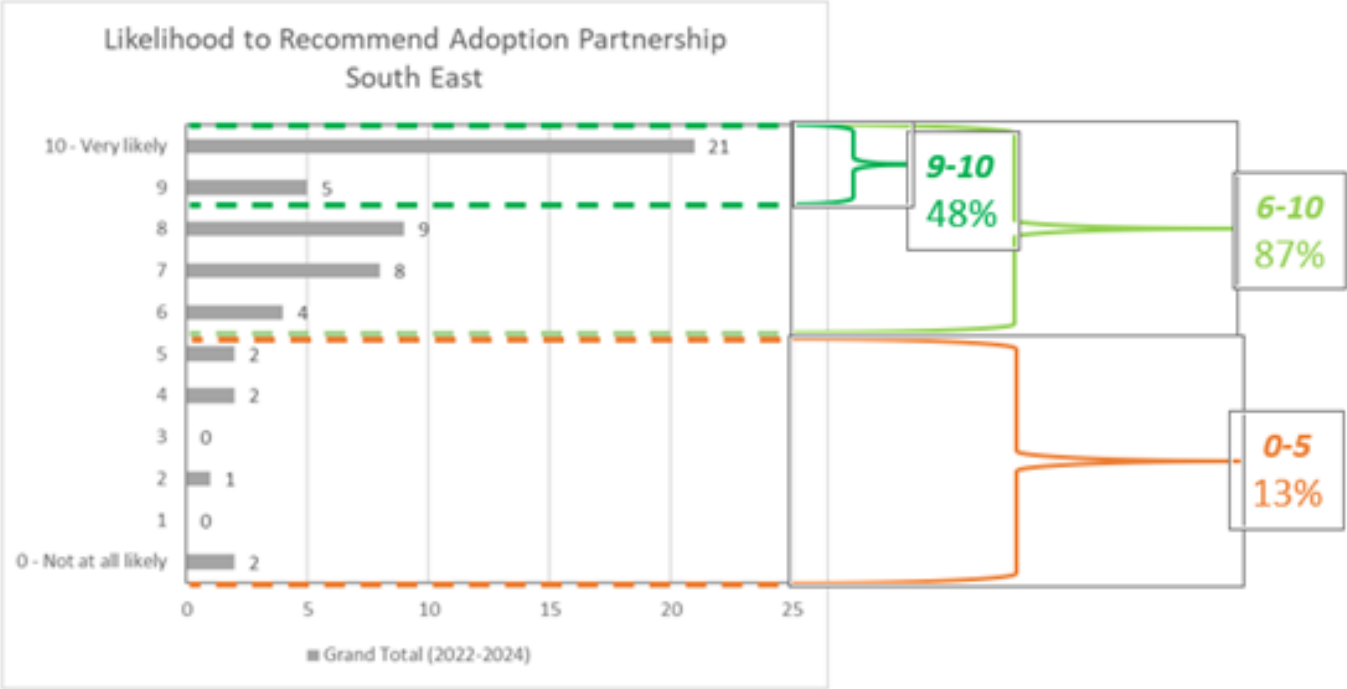
“Our Social Worker was brilliant, very informative. Sometimes we found it harder to get advice or information from CSW. Although CSW was responsive to our messages.”

“The training is good during stage one and two however no amount of training can prepare you for what it will be like. Maybe training or learning suggestions after the child is placed that support the individual circumstances of the family would be helpful. We had attachment therapy; I feel this should be a mandatory requirement for all Adopters after placement to support connection especially if the child/children are above 2 years old. We had a mentor which really helped us. Making sure all families have this available to them.”



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On a scale of 0 to 10 how likely would you be to recommend Adoption Partnership South-East?



What good experiences make you very likely (9 or 10 score) to recommend Adoption Partnership South East?

“We have met some very kind and caring individuals who supported us throughout our journey.”

“The knowledge, experience, hard work and compassion of all the Social Workers we worked with.”

“The team we worked with were all so friendly, open, honest and supportive. They helped and guided us through every stage.”

“We had a brilliant Social Worker, very supportive and informative. Couldn’t ask for better.”

“We felt well supported and if we needed questions answered, these were done quickly.”



The Post Order Survey

This identifies that families have found the support received by the Adoption Support teams supportive, identifying the teams are listening to and identifying appropriate interventions for families to access. The survey has raised an issue with timeliness of the service and new tracking systems have been put into place by senior management monitor this. In 2024 Adoption Support have also designated a dedicated Social Worker to complete the support and advice line calls, which will further streamline the process.

	Sept-Dec 2023	Jan 2024 to April 2024	Change	Total Surveys
Measure / Question	Sample sizes: n=42	n=32	NA	n=74
I received support in a timely manner, when I needed it	29%	50%	+31ppt	38%
The purpose of any support that was offered was made clear to me	48%	52%	+4ppt	49%
Pace of the support was right for me	27%	39%	+12ppt	32%
I feel my views have been listened to	48%	59%	+11ppt	53%
The service that I have received has made a positive difference to my family	39%	43%	+4ppt	41%
I am clear about what happens next in terms of support	37%	39%	+2ppt	38%
Overall, how useful have you found support provided by the adoption service post-order	55%	66%	+11ppt	60%
How likely would you be to recommend this service to another adoptive parent, based on the support you have received? Answered 6-10 on a 0-10 scale	51%	58%	+7ppt	54%



Feedback comments from post order survey

“Quick responses to request for help, the lag time is way, way too long.”

“It’s very helpful to understand the various conditions our daughter has, and the therapy funding was very useful.”

“Speedier decision to post adoption support funding.”

“Initial response was very quick which I was very impressed by having had support from another Local Authority/adoption service previously which was nowhere near as quick. We are waiting for an Adoption Support Fund application which I know takes some time, but other than that, everything has been relatively quick but more importantly there has been a real sense of understanding from everyone I have spoken to so far. It's refreshing not having to over-explain everything and knowing the support workers really "get it". I haven't once felt like I am fighting for support, which has not been my experience elsewhere. So overall, I am very impressed.”

“When I needed an urgent call, Post Adoption were available, and I felt listened to and reassured.”

“The presence of our Post Adoption Social Worker at school meetings and echoing our wishes for our child on their educational journey.”

“Support in gaining funding for our daughter’s assessment and funding for follow-up therapy.”

“Respite care was needed but not given. Behaviour issues were exhausting, and we needed practical support.”



Complaints

The Partnership agreed Kent County Council will be the lead partner on all complaints which relate either wholly or in part to 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 as the service aims to respond quickly and with sensitivity. Between 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, seven Stage 1 complaints were received. Two were from prospective adopters, four were in relation to post adoption support, and one from a foster carer involved in the transition of a child from fostering to adoption.

Independent Feedback on the Service - Ofsted

Medway underwent an inspection of its children's services (ILAC) in July 2023 and was awarded 'Good'.

Adoption Partnership South East participated in this inspection and managers, Social Workers, and adoptive parents were interviewed by Inspectors. This was a positive experience and gave an opportunity for the RAA to demonstrate the strong working relationships which have been developed between Medway Children's Services and the RAA and the positive impact this is having for children in Medway.

The report published in relation to Medway stated:

Since the local authority has joined the regional adoption agency (Adoption Partnership South East), there have been improvements in the timeliness of identifying suitable adopters for Medway children. There is a strong and robust approach to adoption in Medway. Prospective adopters are suitably assessed and prepared for the parenting roles they are about to embark on. The partnership is appropriately prioritising the recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of Medway children. Children do not wait long to be matched and once placed, they achieve permanence.

Learning from Feedback and Complaints

Adoption Partnership South East has reviewed the feedback and complaints and taken the following action as a direct result from the learning:

- Improved communication with applicants in the assessment process.
- Collaborative working group and training between adoption and fostering services.
- Tracking of Adoption Support cases and lead Social Worker completing support and advice line calls.
- Developments of life story work training and support for adopters.
- Adoption staff attending training on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.
- Team managers to make in person visits in response to a complaint or concern raised.

Journey Through Adoption

The Child’s Journey

Latest ASG (formerly ASGLB) Data

The ASG 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 1 April 2023 to 31 December 2023.

The table below shows the number of children within the Adoption Partnership South East’s region with an adoption plan during the last three years and outlines their adoption journey.

Indicator	Authority	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Agency decision makers best interest decisions	Bexley	5	10	10	13	6
	Kent	92	80	58	80	65
	Medway	32	39	18	28	20
Placement Orders	Bexley	<5*	10	6	8	8
	Kent	65	54	49	68	52
	Medway	20	27	16	14	12
Matches approved	Bexley	<5*	6	7	7	8
	Kent	56	63	51	49	72
	Medway	23	23	26	14	16
Children placed	Bexley	<5*	6	5	8	8
	Kent	60	64	49	47	72
	Medway	23	21	27	13	17
Adoption Order granted	Bexley	5	7	7	<5*	10
	Kent	63	42	47	56	68
	Medway	19	14	22	21	18

* <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 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. In 2022/2023, this increased to 13. For 2023/2024 this figure reduced to 6. Kent agreed the plan for adoption for 58 children in 2021/2022, 27.5% less than in the same period in previous year (80). 2020/2021 also saw a decrease compared to the previous year (92 in 2019/2020). In 2022/2023 this increased to 80 again. In 2023/2024 this figure was 65. Medway saw an increase from 32 children to 39 between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 followed by a decrease to 18 in 2021/2022. In 2022/2023, 28 children had an adoption plan agreed and in 2023/2024 this fell to 20.

Placement Orders

A Placement Order is the legal order granted when a court agrees 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 but increased to 8 in 2022/2023. In 2023/2024, this decreased to 6 again. 54 Placement Orders were granted for Kent children in 2020/2021 which was 11 fewer (17%) than in 2019/2020. This decreased again to 49 for 2021/2022. Numbers increased in 2022/2023 to 68 but fell to 52 in 2023/2024. Medway saw a 35% increase in Placement Orders granted, from 20 to 27 in 2020/2021, which slipped down to 16 during 2021/2022. This decreased again in 2022/2023 to 14 and again in 2023/2024 to 12.



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. In 2022/2023 this remained at 7. In 2023/2024, this increased to 8. For Kent in 2020/2021 there was an increase to 63 in the number of matches with an adoptive family in comparison to 2019/2020 when there were 56 matches. 51 Kent children were matched with an adoptive family during 2021/2022. In 2022/2023, there were 49 matches and in 2023/2024 this rose to 72. Medway had the same number of matches approved, 23, in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 but this increased to 26 in 2021/2022. This decreased to 14 in 2022/2023. In 2023/2024 this rose slightly to 16.

Interagency Placements

In total, 96 children were matched with adopters during 2023/2024 and 86 of these children were placed with Adoption Partnership adopters. Of the 10 children placed with external adopters; 2 were placed externally to place them with a sibling already placed. 4 children needed to be placed in a different geographical location and 4 had complex needs and to avoid delay were matched with adopters from another agency.

Children Placed for Adoption

During 2021/2022, 5 Bexley children were placed for adoption compared to 6 in 2020/2021. 6 was an increase on the previous year when <5* were placed. In 2022/2023, there were 8 children placed and this figure remained the same for 2023/2024. For Kent, in 2023/2024 there were 72 placements that began with adoptive families. In 2022/2023 there were 47 children placed. This was a decrease compared to the 49 Kent children who 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. In 2022/2023, 13 children were placed. In 2023/2024 this increased to 17.



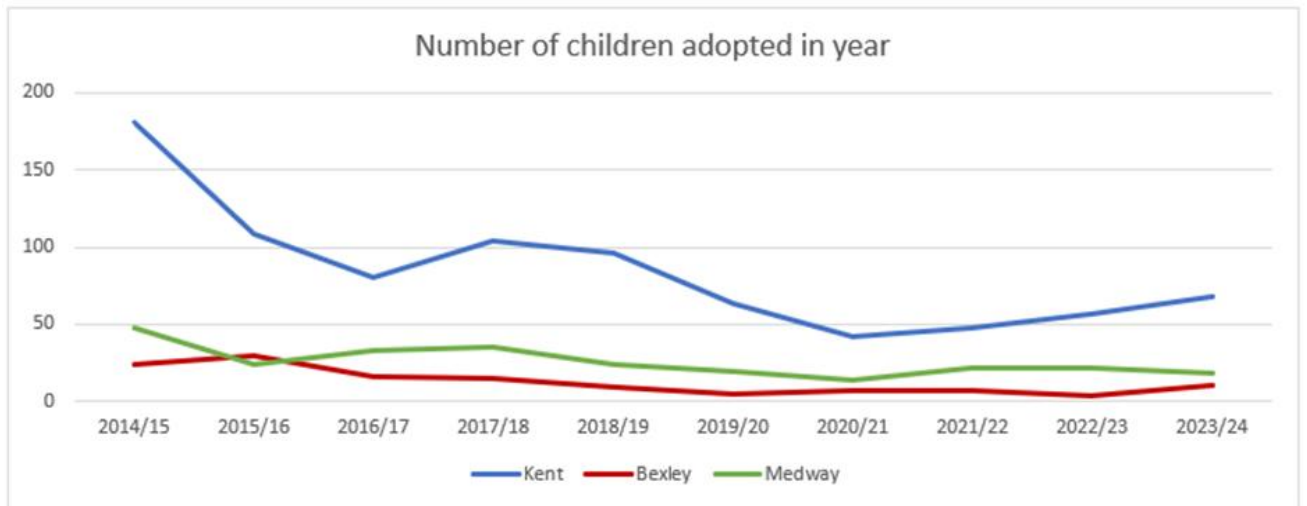
Sibling placements

Within the group of 97 children placed in 2023/2024, 22 were part of a sibling group placed together for adoption: Bexley: 2 siblings (1 pair), Kent 18 siblings (9 pairs), Medway 2 siblings (1 pair).

Children Waiting

As of 31st March 2023, children in the region had a Placement Order and a continued plan for adoption. Of those 23 children; 2 were Bexley, 17 Kent and 4 Medway. The 2 Bexley children were both linked with adopters. Of the 17 Kent children; 14 were all linked to adopters and 3 had ongoing family finding. Of the 4 Children only 1 was not linked with adopters.

Adoption Orders Granted



Bexley saw an increase to 10 Adoption Orders granted for children in 2023/2024 compared to previous year's figure of less than 5.

Medway 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. 21 were granted during 2022/2023. This decreased to 18 in 2023/2024.

42 Adoption Orders were granted for Kent children during 2020/2021 which increased to 47 in 2021/2022 and increased again in 2022/2023 to 56. In 2023/2024 this rose again to 68.

Timeliness of Children’s Plans

Timescale indicator	National Comparison (Mar 2024)	Authority	2019/ 2020	2020/ 2021	2021/ 2022	2022/ 2023	2023/ 2024	From target 2023/24 (days)
Placement order to matching decision, children matched in year	-	Bexley	52	61	138	146	220	+99
		Kent	74	144	117	110	144	-23
		Medway	203	252	160	94	171	+50
Placement order to matching decision, children adopted in year	England: 199	Bexley	57	49	67	135	140	+19
	London: 284	Kent	96	80	132	129	103	-18
	South East: 181	Medway	218	237	209	152	160	+39
Became in care to placed for adoption, children placed in year	-	Bexley	216	410	333	481	430	+4
		Kent	271	385	309	476	447	+21
		Medway	428	388	469	340	579	+153
Became in care to placed for adoption, children adopted in year	England: 512	Bexley	222	394	354	427	397	-29
	London: 543	Kent	278	274	392	352	346	-80
	South East: 478	Medway	474	394	375	427	473	+47



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. Latest ASG return data shows that nationally the average timescale was 199 days in Q4 of 2023/2024.

For children who were adopted, Bexley saw an increase in the average number of days it took to match children from 67 days in 2021/2022 to 135 days in 2022/2023. For 2023/2024 this increased again to 140 days. Kent saw a slight decrease in the average number of days from 132 in 2021/2022 to 129 days in 2022/2023. In 2023/2024 the average was 103 days. Medway saw a decrease from an average of 237 days in 2020/2021 to 209 days in 2021/2022 and a reduction again to 152 for children adopted in 2022/2023. In 2023/2024 this increased slightly to 160.

When seeking to review more recent or current performance, the data shows a slight increase in the timeliness between a Placement Order being granted and a match agreed with adopters in 2022/2023 in respect of Bexley children. It took on average 61 days for children to be matched in year 2020/2021. This increased to an average of 138 days for those whose Placement Order was granted in 2021/2022 and increased again to 146 days for Placement Orders granted in 2022/2023. For 2023/2024 this figure rose to 220 days. Kent children saw a decrease from an average of 144 days for those matched in year in 2020/2021 to an average of 117 days for those whose Placement Order was granted during 2021/2022. The average improved again in 2022/2023 and dropped to 110 days. In 2023-2024 the average was 144 days. Medway saw the biggest improvement with children whose Placement Order was granted in 2021/2022, being matched on average in 160 days, as opposed to an average of 252 days in 2020/2021. For children matched in 2022/2023, the average was 94 days. In 2023/2024 this increased to 171 days. Across the region there the timescales has increased, on review of the children who were matched during this 2023/24 the children whose matches took longer than the aimed 121 days were children with complex needs and or were staying with their foster carer who have needed to be fully assessed as adopters.



Became in Care to Placement Order

Timescale indicator	South East Benchmarking Comparison (Dec 2023)	Authority	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024	From target 2023/2024 (days)
Became in care to Placement Order, children with order granted in year	-	Bexley	258	403	430	300	478	+228
		Kent	226	355	336	446	481	+231
		Medway	304	295	375	470	432	+182
Became in care to Placement Order, children adopted in year	355	Bexley	216	354	364	300	359	+109
		Kent	233	233	326	327	416	+166
		Medway	262	284	202	326	429	+179

The current DfE threshold for children entering care to placement order is 250 days for children adopted in year. Regarding this measurement, the average days for Bexley’s children decreased from 364 days in 2021/2022 to 300 days in 2022/2023. For 2023/2024, it increased to 478 days. Kent’s average days for 2023/2024 was 416 days. This is an increase from 2022/2023 which was 327 and in 2021/2022 it was 326 days. Medway’s duration increased from 202 in 2021/2022 to 326 in 2022/2023. This increased again in 2023/2024 to 429 days. It is not possible to ascertain a national comparison, so data provided through the South East Benchmarking was used, showing an average of 355 days, but this does not include Bexley as this comes within the London data set.

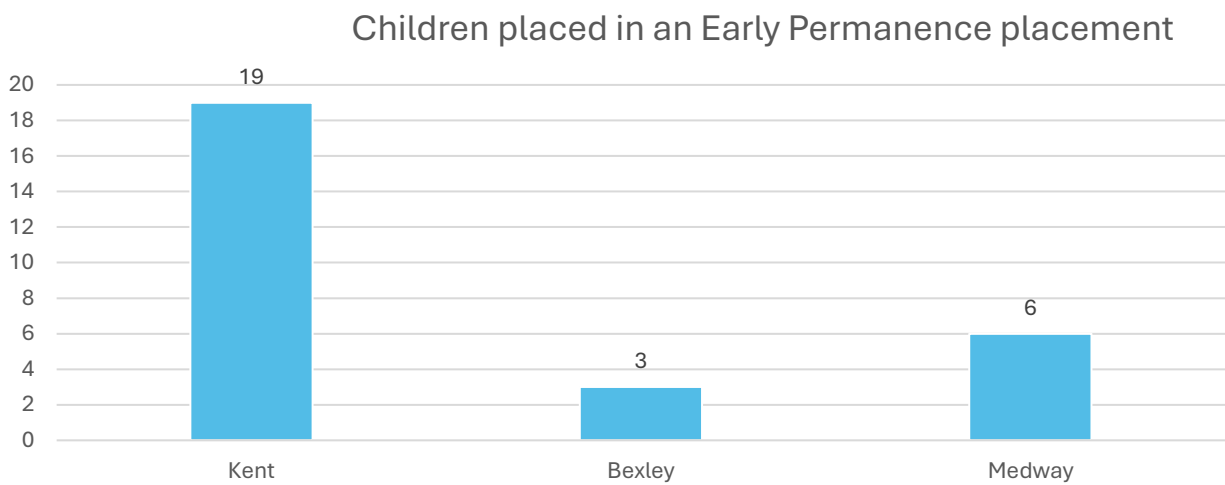
The data shows that, during 2023/24, the length of time between entering care and the court authority to place for adoption who have not yet been adopted increased considerably compared to pre-pandemic timescales, with all three local authorities exceeding the target of 250 days. Across the region, the pandemic continues to have an impact on the timeliness of court proceedings concluding. However, there are other factors such as court decisions regarding further birth relative assessments and practical issues such as court availability.



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 2023/2024. Regarding this measurement, the average days for Bexley’s children increased in 2022/2023 to 481 days, compared to 333 the previous year. In 2023/2024 this decreased to 430 days. Kent’s average days was 309 days in 2021/2022 and increased to 476 days in 2022/2023. The figure decreased to 447 in 2023/2024. Medway’s duration decreased from 469 in 2021/2022 to 340 in 2022/2023. In 2023/2024 this increased to 579 days.

Early Permanence



Between 1st April 2023 – 31st March 2024, 28 children were placed in an Early Permanence placement (3 Bexley children, 19 Kent children and 6 Medway children).

Adoption Disruptions

Between 1 March 2023 – 30 April 2024, 2 children experienced an adoption disruption, both within Kent. This refers to children who were placed with prospective adopters but returned to foster care and were not adopted by those adopters.

A disruption meeting was held in respect of each child, chaired by an independent consultant, for Coram BAAF. Comprehensive reports were produced, and the lessons and recommendations were shared with the adoption panel that agreed the ‘match’. The reports were shared with the responsible children’s service and the lessons learnt have also been shared with the adoption agency social workers and managers. APSE now delivers quarterly workshops sharing learning with adoption and children’s Social Workers.

Non- Agency Adoption –stepparent/relative adoption

Adoption Partnership South East completes assessments for the court when a relative or step parent applies to adopt a child within their family. These applications are completed through the non-agency route of adoption. We receive notification of intent from the applicants who live within the region and support families to apply to the court and complete the court assessment. **In 2023/2024; 43 adoption orders were granted** to families through this route. Our experienced Social Workers based within our Recruitment and Assessment teams work with these families and on the **31st March 92 families** were open to for non-agency adoption assessments.



The Adopter's Journey

Adopter activity (as households)	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Information Packs Sent / Virtual	477	585	427
Consultation Events Attended	134	163	195
Enquiries in year	69	116	97
Stage 1 starts in year	59	113	104
Stage 2 starts in year	70	72	92
Stage 2 ends in year	74	69	80
Adoptive families matched in year	54	58	80
Adoptive families with placements in year	52	56	79

Adoption Partnership South East developed their process for those wanting to find out more information about adoption. A digital information pack was 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 were designed to be accessible to all; giving a range of methods to receive the information.

Timescale	Target	2022/23	2023/24	England Avg
Enquiry to Stage 1 Start (days)	N/A	87		-
Stage 1 Start to Stage 1 End (days)	60	120	114	134
Stage 2 Starts to Stage 2 End (days)	121	131	110	154

During both 2022/2023 and 2023/2024, Adoption Partnership South East was outside of the Stage 1 target of 60 days but in 2023/2024, performance was 114 days which is below the national average at 134 days.

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, which included applicants having difficulties getting appointments with their general practitioner for the adult health assessment to be completed and DBS checks. Nationally the stage one part of the assessment process is significantly exceeding the target of 61 days.

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 131 days to complete stage 2 assessments in 2022/2023, 10 days over the target timescale, but 21 days below the national average of 152 days. In 2023/2024 performance was within target at 110 days.

During this period, 80 households were approved as adopters which ensured sufficiency of adopters for Bexley, Kent, and Medway children. In total, 97 children were placed with adopters during 2023/2024 and 88 of these children were placed with the Regional Adoption Agency assessed and approved adopters. Between April 2023 and March 2024, 6 adopter households had children from outside of the RAA placed for adoption with them.

Of the 80 households approved during April 2023- March 2024, 72 were part of a couple and 8 were single applicants. 72 applicant households identified themselves as heterosexual, 8 identified as being from the LGBT community. 125 adopters identified as white British and white any other background and 27 identified as being from a mixed, black, 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' available for a child was between 15-20 at any point in time during 2023-2024.



Adoption Support Activity

The table below shows the number of families who contacted the Advisory Team for support and were offered a Support & Advice line appointment between April 2023 – March 2024.

LA	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	TOTAL
Bexley	7	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	12
Kent	6	16	10	14	9	13	14	18	5	23	16	21	165
Medway	1	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	11
TOTAL	14	19	13	14	11	14	14	18	5	26	19	21	188

Adoption support assessments (households) carried out between April 2022 – March 2024

Local Authority	Number of adoption support assessments April 2022 – March 2023	Number of adoption support assessments April 2023 – March 2024
Bexley	7	5
Kent	114	102
Medway	20	3
TOTAL	141	110

Learning, Development and Support

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

- Incredible Years training, (12-week course)
- Non-violent resistance course (10-week course)
- Sensory integration (6-week course)
- Therapeutic parenting - understanding developmental trauma (12-week course)
- Life story workshops (2-day course)
- Monthly social work lead support group meetings

Adoption Support Fund Applications

Between April 2023 – March 2024 (includes pre-order applications):

Type of application	Number of applications
Internal provision	130
External provision	252
TOTAL	382

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 charity support community for adopters, commissioned by APSE to provide free access to support, programmes and resources created exclusively for the adoptive parent community. This includes an online adopter community and meet up groups for parents across our region.

The Adoption Support Team and Virtual Schools Bexley/Kent/Medway host a joint 'drop-in' session every month. It is a time for parents to meet informally, chat to other parents or ask an adoption/education related question. The sessions last for one hour. These sessions are advertised through our mailing list and is available to adopters from Bexley, Kent, and Medway.

Partnership working with Virtual Schools in the Region

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 continue to support the service development with training, advice and resources alongside contributions to newsletters.

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. Coffee sessions for adopters are supported by all three virtual schools and this includes sessions in the evening to enable more parents to attend. These were well received by parents.

The wider regional working subgroup for the south east is well established and continues to meet. This means professionals can share practice and ideas quickly.



Supporting those affected by adoption and Staying In Touch - Barnardo’s CAFIS Activity data

The RAA commissions independent services from Barnardo’s to support those with lived experience of adoption. This 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:

1. Service for birth parents
2. Support for birth relatives
3. Access to information and intermediary services
4. Keeping in touch contact service

Barnardo’s CAFIS Activity					
Service	Kent	Bexley	Medway	No of Out of Area Agency request	Total
Independent birth parent support	60	6	8	N/A	74
Adopted Adults access to records / intermediary	171	8	15	46	240
Birth relatives access to records / intermediary	76	3	7	11	97
Indirect staying in touch letter exchange	1321	178	366	N/A	1865 children
Direct staying in touch meetings	63	5	15	N/A	83 children

Adoption Partnership South East and Barnardo’s CAFIS are working closely with the National Campaign for a Culture of Change around staying in touch arrangements for children with their birth families post adoption order. All our work and support with families right from the preparation of prospective adopters through the support adoptive families with teenager works toward creating an open culture for adoptive and birth families to interact in ways which best meet the needs of the children involved. This is evidenced in an increase of in person staying in touch arrangements taking place.



The National Workstream

There are now 33 RAAs across England which are supported by Adoption England. Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies working together, supported by a small central team working nationally. RAA leaders work collaboratively on developing and improving practice and delivering improved outcomes for children and families nationally and they 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 they and the Service Managers are involved in several of the practice working groups in place to deliver on the national priorities.

Adoption England

Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies working together with a small central team working nationally, aiming to improve adoption practice and develop support and services to better meet the needs of children and families. Adoption England receives funding from the Department for Education and works in partnership with all agencies involved with adoption in England, including voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities, as well as specialised adoption charities and third sector services.

<https://adoptionengland.co.uk/>



Appendices

Page 34: Governance and Service Structure

Page 42: Service Plan 2024/25

Page 47: Statement of Purpose

Page 70: Recruitment Strategy

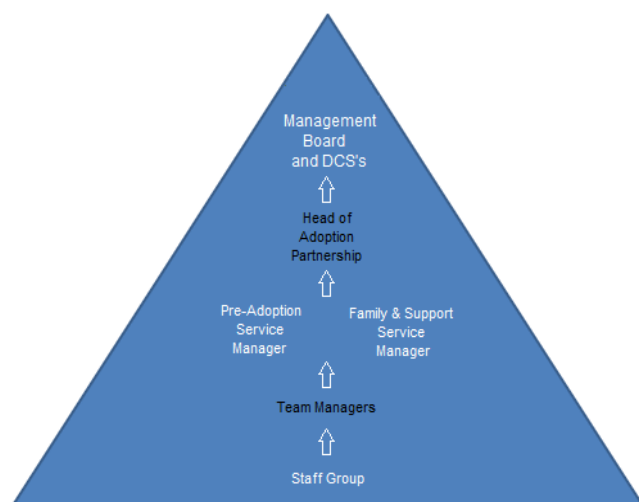
Page 80: Panel Chairs Report (Apr 23 - Sep 23)

Page 92: Panel Chairs Report (Oct 23 - Mar 24)



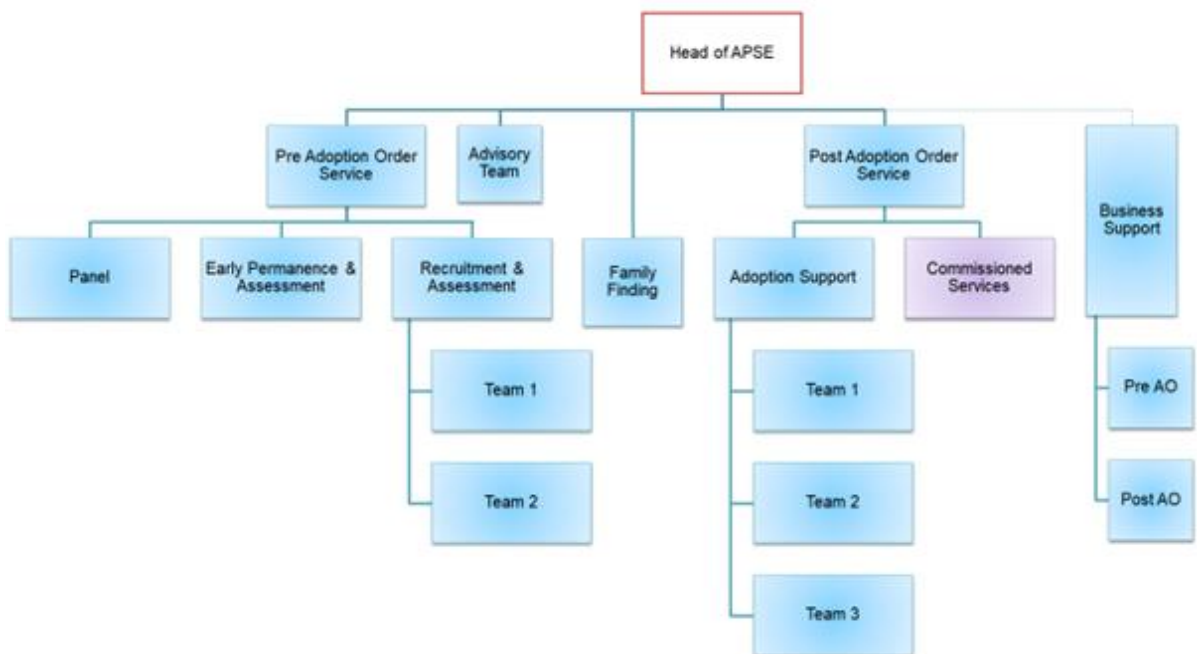
Governance and Service Structure

- 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 2)
 - 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.



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 is managed by the Adoption Advisory Officer, whose role stretches across the service. It includes Initial Enquiries Advisors, and the Mentoring Support Advisor.
- The Initial Enquiries Advisors act as the front door for the service and receive enquiries from people interested in finding out more about adoption and from adoptive parents seeking support.
- The Mentoring Adviser actively recruits and supports adopter volunteers, willing to support others going through the assessment process and adopters who are matched and placed with a child, but not yet adopted. APSE currently has 45 mentors. During 2022/23, the service actively recruited mentors to support early permanence carers and foster carers who adopted children and adopters with birth children.

Adoption Panel Team

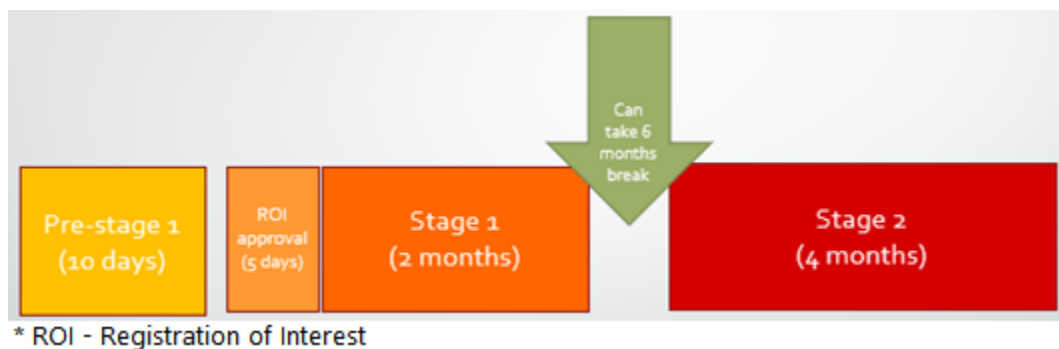
- A Panel Team supports the Agency's approval process for adopters and the Local Authority Partners when pursuing adoption as the care plan for children. The team has a quality assurance role and supports the four adoption panels covering the region.
- Weekly adoption panels are held virtually and each 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 with lived experience of 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 reflective of the community within Bexley, Kent, and Medway, including minority ethnic members and members from the LGBTQI+ community. We continue to have more females than male panel members and continue to seek to recruit more single adopters to join the panels.
- The Panel Chairs provide a six-monthly report to the Agency; reports relating to 2022/2023 are attached (appendix 4).

Early Permanence Team

- Adoption Partnership South East has an Early Permanence Team which provides early permanence foster placements to young children with a potential adoption plan and are either subject to care proceedings or are placed for adoption by consent (relinquished) by their parents. 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 regional adoption agency consists of permanency planning lead social workers, who support local authority children social work teams with their care planning and aims to identify children for whom adoption might need to be the care plan. This includes children who would benefit for an early permanence placement. The team also has recruitment and assessment social workers within it, 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.



- A range of training is provided for prospective adopters including 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. 94 households attended Stage 1 prep groups and 62 households attended Stage 2 prep groups.
- These teams also undertake assessments of extended members of a family wishing to adopt, i.e., stepparents and these are known as 'non-agency' adopters. A recruitment strategy is in place and is reviewed regularly.

Family Finding

- The Regional Adoption Agency has a dedicated Family Finding Team consisting of one Team Manager, senior social workers and social workers. 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.

Adoption Support Teams

- Adoption Partnership South East has a comprehensive adoption support service for those affected by adoption.
- The RAA will ensure 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 a newsletter, training, social events and other resources.
- 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.

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 and young people

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

Service for those with lived experience of adoption

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Adoption Partnership South East vision: To achieve an outstanding adoption service that ensures legal permanence for children either within their birth/extended family or with non-related adults via Adoption.

In November 2020 Bexley, Kent and Medway Adoption Services became part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) by joining in partnership. These agencies are building on the success of their pre-existing services to improve performance in meeting the needs of children who require permanence through adoption, by bringing together the best practice from each authority within the RAA.

Adoption Partnership South East is committed to ensuring that children can remain in the care of their parents and birth families wherever possible. However, where it is not possible to achieve stability for the child within the birth family, we work to achieve alternative permanent arrangements for the child within a family setting and these include adoption. This Service Plan sets out how Adoption Partnership intends to deliver its services to ensure timely progression for children whose care plan is adoption and the support that we aim to provide to them, their birth, and adoptive families. It outlines Management and Leadership of the service to ensure the workforce is appropriately equipped to meet the requirements.

Adoption Partnership South East's Service Plan outlines how the RAA will implement the Adoption England Strategy 2024-27. Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies (of which APSE is one) working together, supported by a small central team working nationally. Adoption Partnership South East's goals are part of the wider national aim to ensure there is a national, regional, and local approach to the strategic development and delivery of adoption service that are appropriate for the 21st century.



Service Plan 2024/25

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Adoption Partnership South East will work alongside the national strategy to prioritise supporting the delivery of the following outcomes:

- Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared, and supported to meet children's needs.
- Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.
- Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.
- Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met, and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.
- Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.

Adoption England Outcomes	How will APSE achieve the outcomes? (Lead responsibility)	Impact/Measurement How will we monitor our progress and success?
What will we achieve?		
Children and young people, adopted adults, adoptive and birth families are listened to and have an influence on the practice and the services provided nationally and regionally.	<p>APSE is developing a young person's reference group for young people to meet and influence development of adoption services. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE continue to deliver opportunities through Barnardo's CAFIS for adopted adults and birth families to have increased voice and influence within APSE. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE work with adopters to ensure they have an influence in the development of support and services. (Amy Coombs)</p> <p>Seek feedback from those accessing a service from APSE and commissioned services. (Amy Coombs)</p>	<p>Reference groups for young people and adoptive parents meet quarterly.</p> <p>Feedback from young people, adopted adults, and birth families is delivered at Partnership Board meetings and APSE management meetings. Practice across APSE is influenced by this.</p> <p>Barnardo's CAFIS provide quarterly data related to the services they provide to adopted adults and birth families.</p> <p>Staff within APSE facilitate and promote the voice of children and families throughout their practice. This is reflected in their reports and case recordings.</p>

Adoption England Outcomes	How will APSE achieve the outcomes? (Lead responsibility)	Impact/Measurement
What will we achieve?		How will we monitor our progress and success?
<p>Adopted people maintain relationships with people important to them and have a good understanding of the reasons why they were adopted.</p>	<p>APSE work with Bexley, Kent, and Medway partners to use tools and materials available to promote and support the relationships between children and the important people in their lives. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE to improve the quality and consistency of approach regarding life story books. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE work with Barnardo’s CAFIS to ensure all adopted adults across the region have access to the support they need. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE work with Barnardo’s CAFIS to ensure birth families across the region can easily find out what support is available to them. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE continues to champion the Culture of Change in adoption around openness and maintaining relationships. (Maria Olsson)</p>	<p>All adopted children are provided with a life story book (printed and electronic). APSE provide support to the adopters in how to use the Life Story Book with their child. Performance and completion of life story books is tracked monthly, to avoid any delay for children.</p> <p>All adopted children have a realistic Staying in Touch plan helping them to maintain relationships with important people in their lives. APSE Team Managers sign off referrals and ensure the children placed for adoption have a referral to CAFIS.</p> <p>Adopted adults have access to services they need, and it is easy to find out how to access those services. Barnardo’s CAFIS provide quarterly reports to monitor this.</p> <p>Staying in Touch arrangements for adopted children are regularly reviewed to ensure they meet their needs. Barnardo’s CAFIS provide quarterly reports to monitor this.</p>
Adoption England Outcomes	How will APSE achieve the outcomes? (Lead responsibility)	Impact/Measurement
What will we achieve?		How will we monitor our progress and success?
<p>Adopters from diverse communities are recruited, prepared and supported to meet children’s needs.</p>	<p>APSE ensure those interested in adoption have easy access to information and consultation. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE implement the ‘Adopter Journey - National Practice Standards and preparation of adopters’ framework. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>Continued implementation of DfE grant funded projects (Siblings and Early Permanence (EP)).</p> <p>APSE address bias and discrimination in their processes and decision making to encourage recruitment of adopters that reflect the diversity of the children needing adoption in the region. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE will continue to develop the diversity of adoption panels and the staff group. APSE is committed to the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles being demonstrated through behaviours, decisions, and actions. (Amy Coombs)</p>	<p>APSE receive sufficient enquiries and applications from prospective adopters, and these are progressed in a timely manner.</p> <p>Recruitment material reflects images of diverse families and children, including single adults, same gender couples and images that depict different identities, ages, genders, cultures, religious beliefs, and ethnicity.</p> <p>Adoptive parents are well prepared and supported to understand the lifelong needs of adopted children. This will be evidenced through adopter feedback and placement stability.</p> <p>Adoption data to look at sufficiency and diversity of adopters to meet children’s needs.</p> <p>Increased diversity of adoption panel members and staff from diverse communities.</p> <p>Increased number of available sibling and EP adopters for the children in the region. These adopters receive additional training and support, to prepare them for additional challenges.</p>

Adoption England Outcomes	How will APSE achieve the outcomes? (Lead responsibility)	Impact/Measurement
What will we achieve?		How will we monitor our progress and success?
<p>Children are matched and move in with their permanent family in a timely way. Their needs are understood and met,</p> <p>and their feelings are held in mind and responded to sensitively.</p>	<p>APSE works with Bexley, Kent, and Medway children’s services teams to support the workforce to strengthen the quality of permanence planning. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>RAAs will identify and understand delay for children and adopters through an EDI lens and strengthen matching practice, process and decision making. (Amy Coombs)</p> <p>APSE work with Bexley, Kent, and Medway children’s services to implement and embed the recommendations outlined in the Early Permanence National Standards. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE work to implement and embed the recommendations in the Matching National Standards. (Amy Coombs)</p> <p>APSE to provide a training programme to professionals to increase knowledge and awareness of permanency planning and adoption related issues. (Amy Coombs)</p> <p>Continued implementation of DfE grant funded projects (siblings and EP). (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE collaborate with the network to ensure every child has a bespoke transition plan based on their needs and feelings. Training on transitions will be co-delivered with fostering across the region to foster carers, professionals, and adopters. (Maria Olsson)</p>	<p>APSE Permanency Planning Leads attend all PPMs across the region when adoption is considered as a potential plan for a child. This is tracked by PPL Team Manager.</p> <p>All children, whose plan is for adoption, are matched in a timely way with their adoptive parents. Tracking of these children is undertaken within APSE and jointly with children’s teams, on a regular basis.</p> <p>Feedback from Adoption Panels and Agency Decision Makers on quality of Child Permanence Reports and matching information provided.</p> <p>Improved quality and timeliness of matches. Fewer matches disrupt before adoption order. This is evidenced in adoption scorecard and audits.</p> <p>Early Permanence is considered for all children when adoption is a potential plan (this is evidenced on the child’s file). Early Permanence placements are used across the region when it has been identified as a suitable interim placement choice (20% of children placed for adoption will been in an EP placement). Feedback from practitioners and families.</p> <p>APSE support the region to complete Together or Apart assessments to inform matching needs. Sibling groups are placed together with APSE adopters when assessed as being the right plan. This involvement with be tracked by the permanency planning lead Team Manager.</p> <p>APSE provide training and support for the professional network around the child, in relation to transitions. Feedback forms evidence increased knowledge from those attending.</p>
RAA Sustainable Budget	How will APSE achieve the outcomes? (Lead responsibility)	Impact/Measurement
What will we achieve?		How will we monitor our progress and success?
<p>APSE provides an adoption service to Bexley, Kent and Medway within the pooled budget.</p>	<p>Innovative project work within the service will continue to be developed using DFE funding.</p> <p>Adopters will be available for other Local Authorities to use, the income generated from these placements will offset the cost of external adopters when these are needed. This will be tracked and monitored by the Head of Service.</p>	<p>The service develops sustainable workstreams which benefit children across the regions; Siblings adoption, Early permanence placements and multidisciplinary adoption support.</p> <p>APSE has a balanced budget in respect of interagency placements.</p>

Adoption England Outcomes	How will APSE achieve the outcomes? (Lead responsibility)	Impact/Measurement
What will we achieve?		How will we monitor our progress and success?
<p>Adopted people and their families get tailored help and support when they need it.</p>	<p>APSE will implement the new Adoption Support Plan, following the national pilot. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>APSE will pilot the new early support framework and Purple Book. (Maria Olsson)</p> <p>ASPE will work to develop their Adoption Support case management system so that the required data can be submitted for the first collection in Q1 2025/26. (Amy Coombs)</p> <p>Continued implementation of DfE grant funded project Developing Multi-Disciplinary Approaches. (DMDA) (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>Continued implementation of the DfE grant funded national commissioning project to work across regions (ASPE, Adoption South East, Adopt South) and innovative procurement. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will offer monthly webinars to adopters at point of adoption order to ensure they are connected to the adoption support services in APSE. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will offer parents and professionals access to support and advice in a timely way. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will offer parents access to adoption support assessment within the identified timescales. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will review adoption support assessments within the identified timescales. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will continue to ensure parents have access to learning and development workshops. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will continue to ensure that parents have access to therapeutic support from both experienced social workers and therapist. Regular feedback from parents will be sought from each stage of the support process to review this service as well as clear communication with parents. (Rachel Dobson)</p> <p>APSE will develop an adoption community to provide peer connections to families across the region. (Amy Coombs)</p>	<p>Every child/family has an Adoption Support Plan. This will be measured by Panel and ADM Quality Assurance.</p> <p>Early support framework and Purple Book feedback from adopters and practitioners.</p> <p>Provide adoption support data which will measure timeliness of service delivery, caseloads and types of support accessed.</p> <p>The grant funded multidisciplinary models continue providing services with a sustainable funding arrangement. DMDA Project to increase connectivity and adoption awareness with partner agencies across the region. This will be reviewed in quarterly meetings. Data on professional consultations reported quarterly.</p> <p>If pan-regional innovation bid is accepted, APSE will lead on the exploration of a ‘Checking in and Staying Connected Service’ for the three RAAs.</p> <p>Adopted parents feel well supported and able to access relevant support. APSE will have a menu of support for adopters that is delivered in a timely way, which meets their needs. These will be informed by feedback forms form adopters.</p> <p>Following approval, adopters will be provided a Peer Connection. Adoptive families will be connected into peer community groups across the region and invited to participation events. Pre and post order feedback will measure the impact as will the engagement in activities.</p>

Statement of Purpose 2024/25

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 on these standards by Ofsted.

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.

Principles and Values

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 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:

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

Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services

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.

Principles and Values

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.

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.

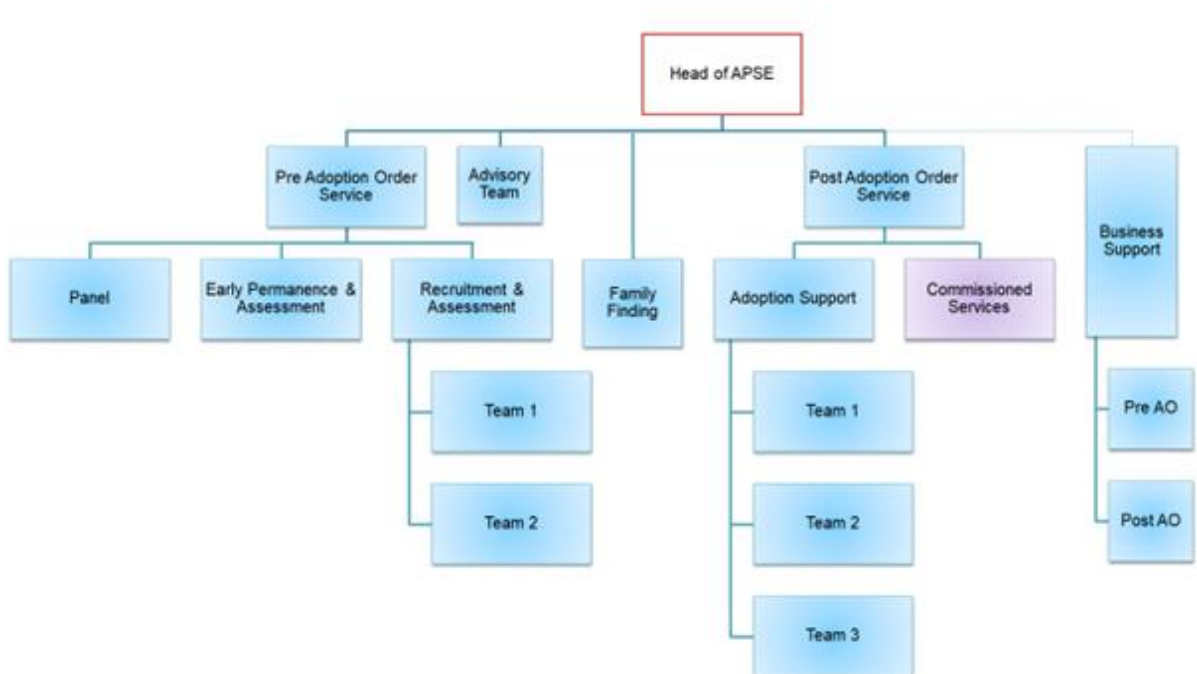


Adoption Partnership South East is managed by a Head of Service, two Service Managers, one of whom is responsible for the pre-adoption order work streams and one who is responsible for overseeing family finding and adoption support. There are nine teams, and the agency has a total of 90 members of staff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

Organisational Structure

- 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:



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 Work of the Adoption Service

- 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, Stable Block, Oakwood House, Maidstone, ME16 8AE
- Medway Council, Gun Wharf, Dock Road, Chatham, Kent, ME4 4TR

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 bimonthly 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).

The Service to Prospective Adopters

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

The Service to Prospective Adopters

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 Service to Prospective Adopters

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 adopters(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.

The Service to Prospective Adopters

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.

The Service to Prospective Adopters

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.

Beyond Approval

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.

Beyond Approval

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.

Beyond Approval

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.

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

Adoption Support Services

- 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

Adoption Support Services

- Support with Staying 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

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 Service 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.

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.



Compliments and Complaints

Details of the Registration Authority

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

Qualifications and Experience

Amy Coombs, Head of Service, has overall responsibility for Adoption Partnership South East. Amy qualified as a Social Worker in 2004 after completing the Diploma in Social Work at Canterbury Christ University; and in 2010 was then awarded the Specialist Award in Children's Social work post graduate degree. Amy has also completed management training through Kent County Council (Kent Manager). Amy started her social work profession in 2004 working as a children's Social Worker in a children's social work team within Kent County Council. Amy has worked with in all aspects of children's social work including child protection, children in care and care proceeding cases. Amy spent ten years working within Kent County Council Children's Services as a Social Worker and then a Team Manager of a Child in Care Team in Folkestone. In 2015, Amy joined Kent Adoption; firstly, as the Family Finding Team Manager and then Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager. In 2019 Amy was appointed as the Interim Service Manager for Kent Adoption and then the Service Manager of the pre-order Service when the RAA; Adoption Partnership South East was launched in 2020, before her appointment as Head of Service in July 2023.

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.

By
your
side

Recruitment Strategy 2024/25



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, 2016).

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 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

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)



Principles and Core Values

Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond and where possible this should be within their own family

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

Equal Opportunities

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

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

The Adoption Marketplace

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

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

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

The Adoption Recruitment process

Enquiries and first contact

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

Consultation Sessions

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

Registration of Interest

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

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

Stage 1 - Pre-assessment process

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

The stage one process will include the following:

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

Preparation sessions

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

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



Stage 2 – The assessment process

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

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

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

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

Based on the information in the assessment the adoption social worker will write a Prospective Adopters' Report (PAR). This is a very detailed report providing information about the prospective adopter(s) and their background. The report will reach a conclusion about the prospective adopters(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.



**Adoption
Partnership**
South East

Repeat adopters

Families who have already been assessed as adopters can apply to adopt again if there is a year's gap following their child's adoption order being made and a 2-year age gap between their child and a potential new child.

In this case, they would express an interest in adopting again and be offered a home visit to discuss their circumstances. If it is appropriate to proceed, they would then complete the registration of interest form and start the process. Depending on the circumstances of the family stage one and two of the process may run sequentially or concurrently. They would be offered training.

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

Marketing Strategy

Most applicants state that they have been thinking about adoption for some time before deciding that the time is right to contact an adoption agency. An advert may provide the 'tipping point' for contacting the Adoption Service. Adoption Partnership South East therefore aims to use a variety of methods to attract potential adopters and to maintain a high-quality adoption service, reminding the public of the children requiring adoptive families and the support they can expect should they take on the role of an adoptive parent.

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

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

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



Adoption Recruitment Campaign

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

Adoption Partnership South East's website provides information to the public about adoption and how to enquire. It also provides a platform for the recruitment team to promote the Adoption service, advertise upcoming events and announce national Adoption events such 'you can adopt' national recruitment campaign, LGBT Pride and National Adoption Week. Adoption Partnership South East is also advertised on the You Can Adopt website and works collaboratively with Adoption England's national campaigns.

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 regular 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.

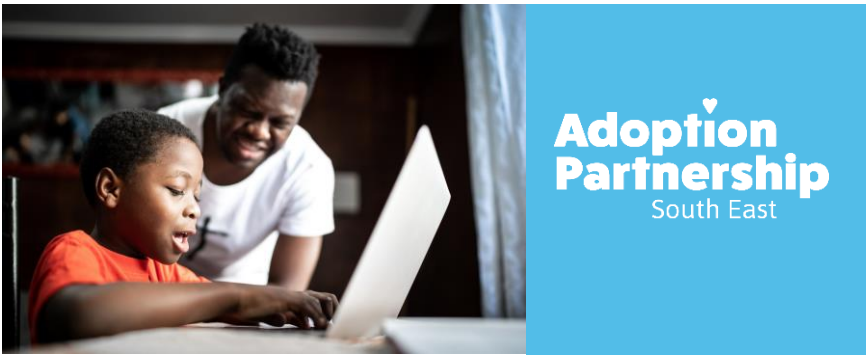
Adoption Partnership South East Panel Chairs Report

1st April – 30th September 2023

Document Owner	Katy Bennett, Panel team manager, Adoption Partnership.
Document Author	Cathy Yates, Independent Panel Chair Eva Lindsay, Independent Panel Chair Frances Moffat, Independent Panel Chair Sandra Neilan, Independent Panel Chair Katy Bennett, Team Manager, Adoption Service Maria Olsson, Service Manager, Adoption Service
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Approved	Amy Coombs

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In July 2023, Amy Coombs, who was previously the Service Manager for the Pre-Order part of the service, was appointed as the Head of Service following Sarah Skinner leaving in June 2023. Maria is now the Service Manager, having worked as a Team Manager within the service for many years prior to this.

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 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 child being placed for adoption by parental consent and deregistration of approved adopters. All panel adopter approval recommendations are considered and ratified by the Head of Adoption Partnership. Children’s matches and plans for children being placed for adoption by parental consent 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 the Local Authorities sitting on them. At present, there are no Bexley social workers sitting on the panels but there are social workers from Medway and Kent. 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 Maria Olsson.

In July 2023, Amy Coombs, who was previously the Service Manager for the Pre-Order part of the service, was appointed as the Head of Service following Sarah Skinner leaving in June 2023. Maria is now the Service Manager, having worked as a Team Manager within the service for many years prior to this.

2. Update on Previous Recommendations

The previous Panel Chairs’ report highlighted the following recommendations:

- Continued focus on diversity of membership of Panels which reflects our adoption community.

- Continued focus on diversity of membership of Panels which reflects our adoption community.
- CPR training to be delivered to the children's social workers across the region on a quarterly basis.
- Feedback to be given to relevant Service managers when documents are received which contain a high level of spelling/grammatical errors.
- Continued learning from disruptions and Panel deferrals to be presented either at Panel training or during Panels.

We have had two new independent Panel Members start with us during this period; one is an experienced foster carer, and from a Muslim background, and the other an Asian adopter who has experience of the Early Permanence scheme. Both are enjoying their new roles. We have also had a new Medical Adviser join our team as one of our previous Medical Advisers was only supporting on a temporary basis. We are currently inviting expressions of interest for a new independent Panel Chair as sadly, one of our chairs, Sandra Neilan, has made the decision to step down from chairing. We are also seeking social work members, particularly from Bexley and Medway, as several of our Local Authority representatives are standing down due to changes in their working commitments.

We have continued to seek feedback about the experience of those attending our panels in respect of the virtual experience, and this has been largely positive. Primary learning points relate to technology, or cases running late, and changes have been made where possible.

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.

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, Local Authority councillors, adopters and adopted adults. In May 2023, our Medway councillor retired from her role as a councillor; Medway Council have nominated a newly-elected councillor however she has not yet begun sitting on adoption Panels.



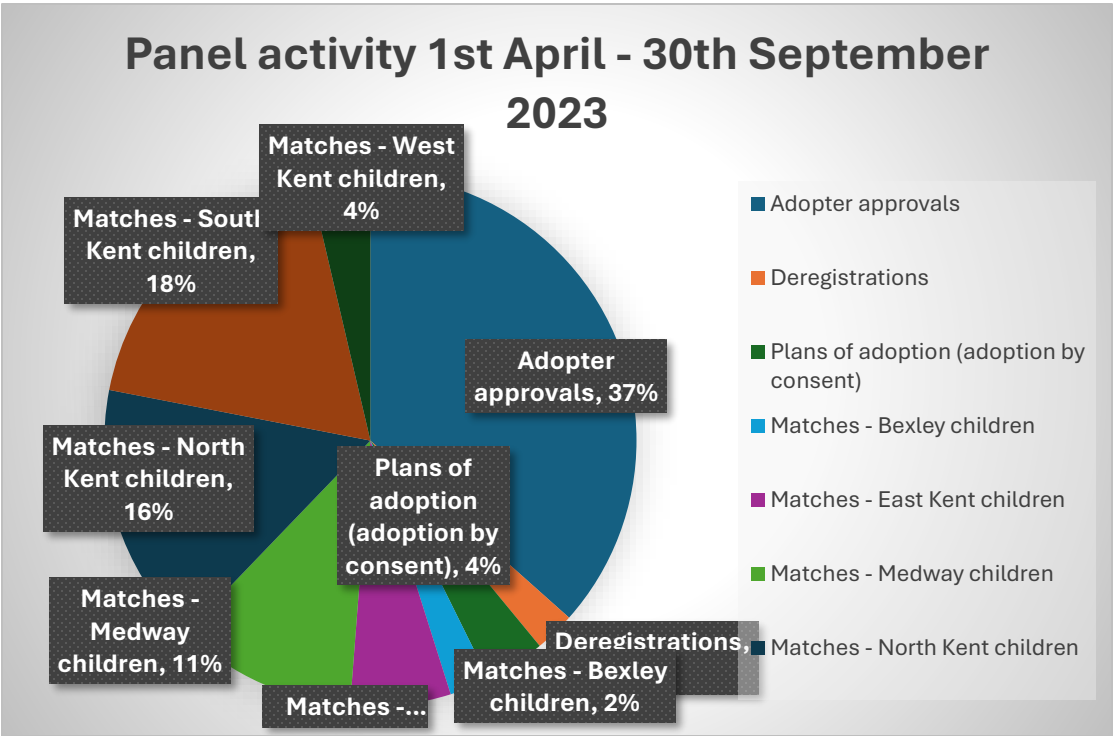
All panels offer a high commitment from members and quality discussions, informed by a knowledge base drawn from members of wide-ranging experience. This includes social workers in children’s services, adoption and fostering, Local Authority councillors, adopters and adopted adults. In May 2023, our Medway councillor retired from her role as a councillor; Medway Council have nominated a newly-elected councillor however she has not yet begun sitting on adoption Panels.

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

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

4. Breakdown of types of cases heard by Panel

In total 83 cases were heard at panel between 1st April and 30th September 2023.



Type	Number
Adopter approvals	30 households (1 case was deferred at Panel, requiring further information)
De-registrations	2 households
Total matches	47 children
Approvals of plans of adoption (adoption by consent)	3 children

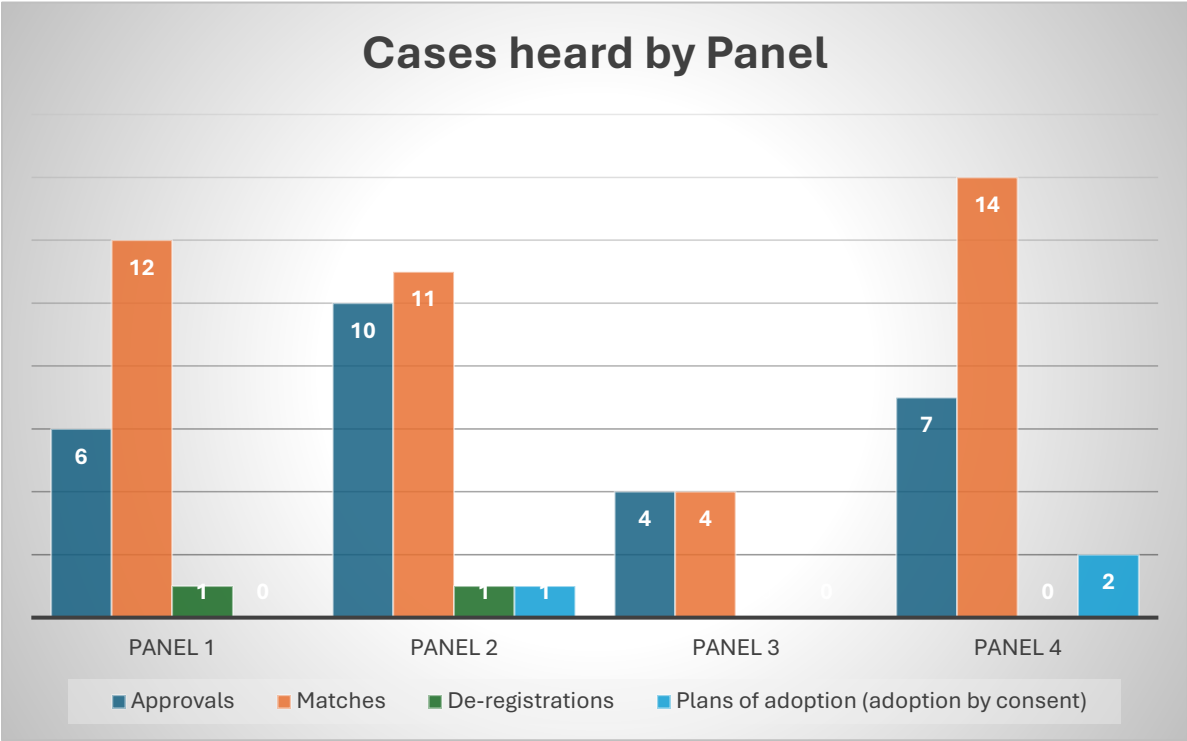
It is noted that the two de-registrations were families who had decided not to proceed with adopting due to their own circumstances, and both were in agreement with the change in their status. Panel did not therefore have a decision-making function in these cases, but the cases were presented to panel as a formality.

It is also noted that panel members deferred their recommendation for a couple to be approved as adopters in June 2023, however when this case was brought back to panel in August 2023, the majority recommended their approval. Therefore, this case appears twice in the figures of cases heard at panel, so 30, rather than 31, households have been approved in the past six months.

The Agency Decision Maker agreed with the recommendations made by panels (all of which were positive). In the case of one child whose match was presented at Panel, the Agency Decision Maker requested further information from the Medical Adviser in respect of one of the prospective adopters, and on receiving this, she ratified the match.

Children matched with another RAA/VAA in the period between April and September 2023: 8 (6 Kent and 2 Medway).

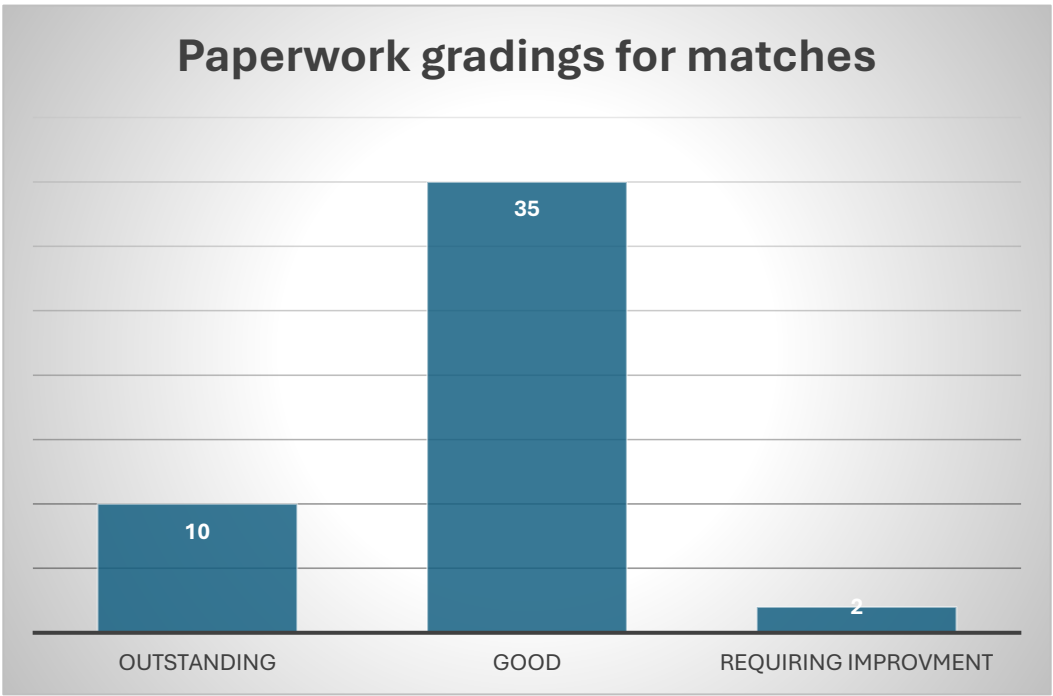
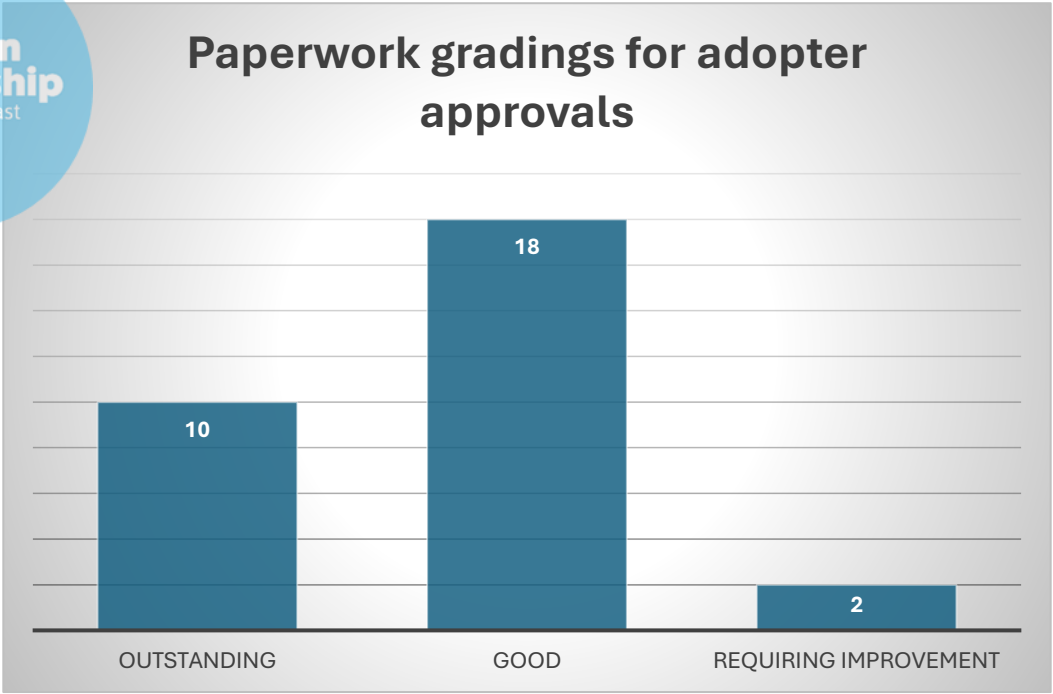
It is noted that four of these children were part of sibling groups where a match could not be identified from within the RAA. Two other single children were placed for adoption with a sibling who had been adopted outside of the RAA previously. The last two children were older children (6 and 7 years old respectively) for whom there were no matches within the Partnership.



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 April 2023 and 30th September 2023.



The Head of Service has also graded the paperwork for approvals of new adopters, and has concurred with the grading of panel members 80% of the time. When different, the Agency Decision Maker graded the paperwork one grade higher or lower, 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 since April 2023:

“Well run, well explained, questions were fair and objective, felt that we were really listened to and guided through the panel ultimately to a successful result.”

"We found the panel very friendly and reassuring. All the questions asked felt relevant to us and it was good to discuss our progress and what the future will hopefully look like."

"Bright friendly and articulate panel members who made us feel welcome and interested in what we had to say."

"We were very nervous but we both felt at ease when we started speaking to everybody and felt welcomed by all."

"All the training, guidance from our social worker, mentoring and self-directed study made us feel completely confident and prepared for panel. We also received timely and in-depth information on the match to ensure we best understood the needs of the children."

"This worked well for us, I was concerned as our very first training day in stage 1 was via virtual meeting and the atmosphere of the training was lacking the warmth we had over the next 2 days in person but we didn't need to worry as the panel were all very warm and welcoming."

"Really good, it helped us feel at ease being in our home and not having the added stress of having to travel and sit and wait."

"It was good, and nice to do it in our own home. Wouldn't have felt so good if our social worker hadn't been with us in person."

"Great, the format has been well rehearsed and chaired clearly. Everyone had the opportunity to speak and be listened to."

The majority of feedback provided since April 2023 has been positive, although there was constructive comments offered from the adopters and social work team in respect of one child's match regarding the nature of some of the questions. This has been fully explored with the Panel members to consider how unconscious bias may affect consideration of situations, and alternative wording for questioning. This also forms part of the agenda of our next training day in October 2023. There have also been a few comments about the internet connection being unstable, momentarily affecting the quality of the conversation, or cases having been heard slightly later in the day than planned due to previous case discussions taking longer than anticipated. In these situations, the team have always ensured adopters and social workers have been kept informed of delays to start times.

7. Panel Training

Training is provided for the adoption panel members and is well attended. Our last training day took place on 9th June 2023, and covered learning from disruptions, adoption by consent (as Panels have heard several of these in the past year), and an overview of the services being provided by Adoption Partnership South East such as wraparound support for Early Permanence carers and additional training and support for adopters of sibling groups

Feedback from Panel members was positive, with people particularly finding it helpful to consider the situations when children have been unable to remain with their prospective adopters and have returned to care following placement.

Panel members' annual reviews are in process, and their feedback on training needs is being noted for future sessions. Our next training day is going to explore the use and impact of language, as well as feedback on some of the successful matches Panel has considered.

8. Panel Chairs Meeting

We held our annual Panel chairs meeting on 7th November 2022; the four chairs were joined by panel advisers, service manager Amy Coombs, and Head of Service, Sarah Skinner. The meeting was positive, and chairs were updated about developments across the service. We also discussed feedback from those attending panels, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of holding virtual panels. We agreed to hold a further meeting between chairs and panel advisers to discuss particular challenges that have arisen with virtual panels, to share and develop best practice in how to manage these. The next meeting is scheduled to take place on 17th November 2023.

9. Disruptions

There have been two disruptions between 1st April and 30th September 2023. The first disruption took place in April 2023 and involved a seven-year-old little girl from Kent with a number of health and developmental conditions who had been placed with external adopters. A disruptions meeting has taken place and key learning from this is being progressed.

The second disruption took place in August 2023 was a Kent child; a 7-year-old boy placed with Adoption Partnership adopters. A disruptions meeting is due to take place.

At the training day in June 2023, there was a learning activity relating to previous disruptions, which Panel members found helpful.

10. Panel Chairs' comments

Panel 1 – Cathy Yates

Panel 1 was sorry to hear that Sarah Skinner, the previous Head of Service, left the Adoption Partnership back in July 2023 and would like to take this opportunity to thank Sarah for her leadership and guidance that enabled the RAA to develop to where it is today. The Panel was thrilled too when Amy Coombs was confirmed into the role and look forward to working with Amy in the future.

There have been some changes to the Panel membership over the last 6 months as 1 independent member resigned. We were fortunate to be able to appoint a new independent person quite quickly who has education experience and is also an adopter. We have also, now, been successful in appointing a new vice-chair. Eva Lindsay has therefore, now stepped down from this role and I would like to personally thank Eva for the support she has given me as Chair. Panel is delighted that Emma Smith has been appointed as the new vice-chair; Emma has a wealth of both personal and professional experience that she can bring to this role on Panel.

The quality of work being presented to panel during the last 6 months has remained, in general, at a high standard. Paperwork is generally good and normally graded as Good or Outstanding. Social Workers who present at Panel are usually very competent and demonstrate a good understanding of both the needs of the children and strengths and vulnerabilities of prospective adopters.

The relationship between the RAA and Panel remains positive and Panel continues to welcome the regular updates from our Lead Panel Advisor on regional and national issues as well as feedback on some individual cases. Panel members remain committed to learning from this process as well as feedback from applicants and social workers who attend Panel. Annual appraisals pick up on any of these issues and are also an opportunity for Panel members to give feedback as to how they feel the Panel functions. Panel members have also once again, valued the training provided by the RAA.

Panel 1 has also been fortunate in the last 6 months to have some social work representation from workers in the Child in Care teams, which had not previously been happening, and this has been greatly valued as it provides a good balance to having adoption social workers in this role for some of the time.

Overall, it has been a positive 6 months for panel 1.

Panel 2 – Fran Moffat

There has been one change in Panel membership in the last six months, an independent member who has two young adopted children, Emma Smith, is no longer on Panel 2. This was a loss for us but Emma has now been appointed as Vice Chair to Panel 1 where she will be an asset. We continue to have a balanced membership of male and female, and all members prepare well for Panel and come with sensitive and appropriate questions. We have some diversity in Panel membership, and Panel members are able to challenge appropriately where complex issues are raised.

Paperwork is usually graded as good or outstanding although at a recent Panel it was felt that a PAR needed improving as there was insufficient analysis of some issues where the applicants were planning to move abroad. During Panel our concerns were addressed and we went on to approve the adopters and the match of a child already in their care. We do feel that some of the CPRs can be repetitive in terms of very detailed assessment reports of the birth parents, but we appreciate that the CPRs are now written as if to the child.

Our Panel adviser updates us each Panel on matters of general interest, and this also provides an opportunity for us to raise other issues, for instance about future training. Panel members have really appreciated the ability to be together for Panel training rather than just meet online, and we all benefitted from the training especially about adoption by consent as we were due to have such a case presented at the next Panel. We have had one approval presented at Panel where one applicant has had an exceptionally high BMI as well as some excellent qualities and this always provokes some challenging discussions.

We continue to work well with the RAA and the minutes are always of a high standard. There have been occasional problems with the IT, but mostly working online seems to work well. It seems that prospective adopters mostly like working online especially when their social worker is present with them. We are looking forward to the next Panel training.

Panel 3 – Sandra Neilan

There has been one change to the membership of Panel 3. We lost a well-regarded independent member who left us to pursue further academic training, relating to his career. He is much missed, but we were very lucky to have a new member join us who has a background in fostering. She has settled in well and I am sure will make a positive contribution to our Panel.

The paperwork presented to Panel has been graded as “good” or “outstanding”. Some paperwork during this period of time has been received late, which is not helpful to Panel members and we are hoping that this is temporary blip and does not become a trend.

Some IT problems continue to plague us – for Panel members, social workers and applicants.

At the start of each case social workers continue to give brief summaries as to why they are supporting the approval/match, and this provides good additional information to Panel and confidence to applicants.

The Panel Adviser joins us at the beginning of the monthly meeting and gives relevant and informative updates. This is most useful.

Members’ annual reviews have been completed giving a good opportunity for expression of views, on both sides. It’s a good time for both positive and any negatives issues to be discussed.

Training provided an excellent opportunity to meet, given that our Panel meetings are “virtual” and gave plenty of time to discuss issues raised during the training.

Panel 4 – Eva Lindsay

Panel 4 has continued to work well as a team. Membership has been stable although one Panel member indicated at her appraisal that she would prefer to attend fewer Panels due to health and work issues. Panel 4 does continue to be an all-female Panel!

Panel 4 has continued to work well as a team. Membership has been stable although one Panel member indicated at her appraisal that she would prefer to attend fewer Panels due to health and work issues. Panel 4 does continue to be an all-female Panel!

We have continued to be well supported by the Panel advisors and business support team. Minutes are always of a very high quality and completed in a timely manner. Panel 4's lead Panel Advisor and lead business support offer me and the Panel excellent support and are available to help whenever needed.

Cases presented to Panel have generally been of a high standard and paperwork is usually rated good or outstanding. Presentations at Panel are also generally very good. The adoption social worker being with the adopters is clearly helpful to the applicants. The adoption by consent cases have been exceptional, showing excellent practice and beautifully written CPRs. The work that has been undertaken is often moving, showing great sensitivity on the part of the social workers.

Panel training has been welcomed by all Panel members and also the opportunity to hear more about the prep training (online) was valued by those of us who could attend.

Summary by Maria Olsson, Service Manager

It looks like the past 6 months were again very busy for the four panels with slightly fewer adopter approvals whereas matches and children's plans remained almost the same. I am pleased to read the largely positive feedback from those attending panel suggesting that panel members work hard to make applicants and others feel at ease. The less positive feedback is also helpful for learning and development; this informs one of the sessions at the next panel training day.

Panel chairs and members feel well supported by the agency and that there is good communication via the panel advisors. They also comment on how accurately the panel discussion is reflected in the minutes written by panel administrators. Furthermore, that the reports presented to panel are seen to be of good quality with professionals having a good understanding of children's needs as well as adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities. The practice (in some areas) of writing CPRs to the child seems a positive development; there is also room for improvement in some CPRs so hopefully the training and guidance provided will help with this. I take on board the comment about some paperwork arriving late.

There have been changes within the panel membership with movement between panels, some leaving and others joining. It is positive that the panels are increasingly diverse so reflecting the Adoption community although there is room for furthering this. I am very sorry to learn that Sandra Neilan is leaving her role as panel chair after many years; I wish her well and would like to thank her for her commitment and contribution over the years.



Recommendations

- Ensure consistency across the panels in respect of grading paperwork
- Find ways of incorporating the voice of young people into Panels
- Continue to promote a diverse Panel membership that reflects our adoption community.

Panel Chairs Report Appendix A

Anne Kohler (social work member)
Barbara Redsell (social work member)
Barry Lumsden (independent member)
Cathy Yates (independent chair)
Claire Jones (social work member)
Dawn Bigwood (independent member)
Dr Abeyweera (medical advisor)
Dr Bhargava (medical advisor)
Dr Das (medical advisor)
Dr Eltom (medical advisor)
Dr Himid (medical advisor)
Dr Hussain (medical advisor)
Dr Lebbe (medical advisor)
Dr Nicholls (medical advisor)
Eloise Creed (social work member)
Emma Smith (independent vice chair)
Eva Lindsay (independent chair)
Fran Moffat (independent chair)
Iona Stephens (independent vice chair)
Jackie Kohler (social work member)
Jackie Lumsden (independent member)
James Buckland (independent member)
John Mcdonald-Baker (independent vice chair)
Jon Witham (independent member)
Julia Fagg (social work member)
Katie Boyce (social work member)
Kerry Larkin (social work member)
Kris Bahadur (independent member)
Louise Hawley (independent vice chair)
Luke Rains (independent member)
Melissa Cubbon (social work member – currently on maternity leave)
Nedra Millar (independent member)
Penny Cadman (social work member)
Rhiannon Webb (social work member – currently on maternity leave)
Sandra Neilan (independent chair)
Saira Minhas (independent member)
Smitha Campbell (Medway councillor)
Theresa Gardiner (social work member)
Wendy Purdy (independent member)

Adoption Partnership South East Panel Chairs Report2

1st October 2023 – 31st March 2024

Document Owner	Katy Bennett, Panel team manager, Adoption Partnership.
Document Author	Cathy Yates, Independent Panel Chair Eva Lindsay, Independent Panel Chair Frances Moffat, Independent Panel Chair Louise Hawley, Independent Panel Chair Katy Bennett, Team Manager, Adoption Service Maria Olsson, Service Manager, Adoption Service
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Date	12 th June 2024
Approved	Maria Olsson

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1. Introduction

This report covers the work of Adoption Partnership's four adoption panels for the period from the beginning of October 2023 until the end of March 2024.

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 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 child being placed for adoption by parental consent and deregistration of approved adopters. All panel adopter approval recommendations are considered and ratified by the Head of Adoption Partnership. Children's matches and plans for children being placed for adoption by parental consent 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 the Local Authorities sitting on them. At present, there are no Bexley social workers sitting on the panels but there are social workers from Medway and Kent. 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 Maria Olsson.

2. Update on Previous Recommendations

The previous Panel Chairs' report highlighted the following recommendations:

Ensure consistency across the panels in respect of grading paperwork

Find ways of incorporating the voice of young people into Panels

Continue to promote a diverse Panel membership that reflects our adoption community

We have had one new independent Panel Members start with us during this period; an adopter of a sibling group of four. He is enjoying his new role. We have also appointed a new Panel Chair as our long-time Chair Sandra Neilan stepped down. We were fortunate to successfully appoint Louise Hawley, who has been one of our independent members and Vice Chairs for some time. Louise is also adoptive parent, social worker and counsellor. Louise has taken on her new role with confidence, and we have also appointed one of our independent members, Lukas Rains, to replace her as Vice Chair. Lukas is an adoptive father, and also provides mentoring support to our new adopters. He is very passionate about adoption and supporting our families. We are currently recruiting some new social work members to sit on our Panels.

We have continued to seek feedback about the experience of those attending our panels in respect of the virtual experience, and this has been largely positive. Primary learning points relate to technology, or cases running late, and changes have been made where possible.

Panels continue to be proactive and robust when discussing and agreeing upon grades for the paperwork of cases brought to Panel; whilst they find this challenging at times, they take it seriously and ensure they provide constructive feedback and strengths alongside the grades to support social workers in their future reports.

We have asked one of our Young People's Council groups (the Adoptables) to come up with some questions we can ask at Panels to ensure the views and interests of care-experienced young people are heard within our Panel discussions. Following introducing these questions at our recent Panel member training in April 2024, we plan to start using these questions in May 2024.

3. Membership of panel and membership changes

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.

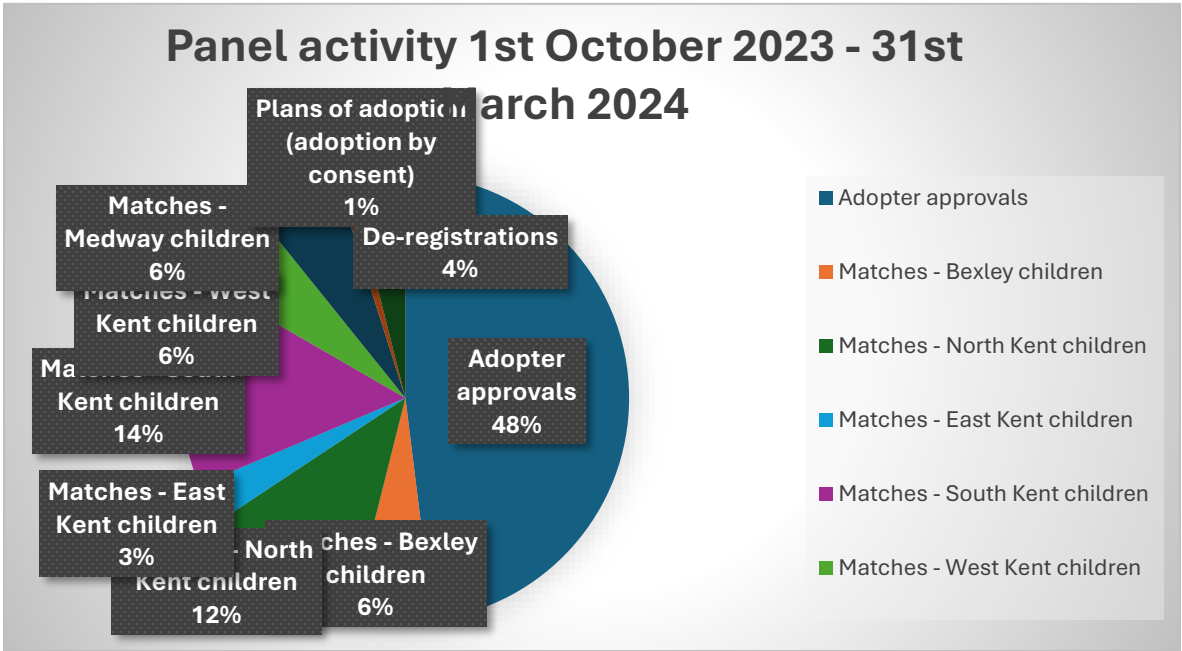
Appraisal of Panel Members is carried out on an annual basis, with meetings chaired by the Panel Chair and supported by either the Panel Team Manager or one of the Panel Advisors. This incorporates feedback on their performance, strengths, and areas for development by both the panel member, and the agency.

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, Local Authority councillors, adopters and adopted adults. Medway Council have nominated a councillor who was elected in May 2023 and she now sits on a quarterly basis.

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

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

Breakdown of types of cases heard by Panel



Type	Number
Adopter approvals	47
Matches - Bexley children	6
Matches - North Kent children	12
Matches - East Kent children	3
Matches - South Kent children	15
Matches - West Kent children	6
Matches – Medway Children	6
Plans of adoption (adoption by consent)	1
De-registrations	4

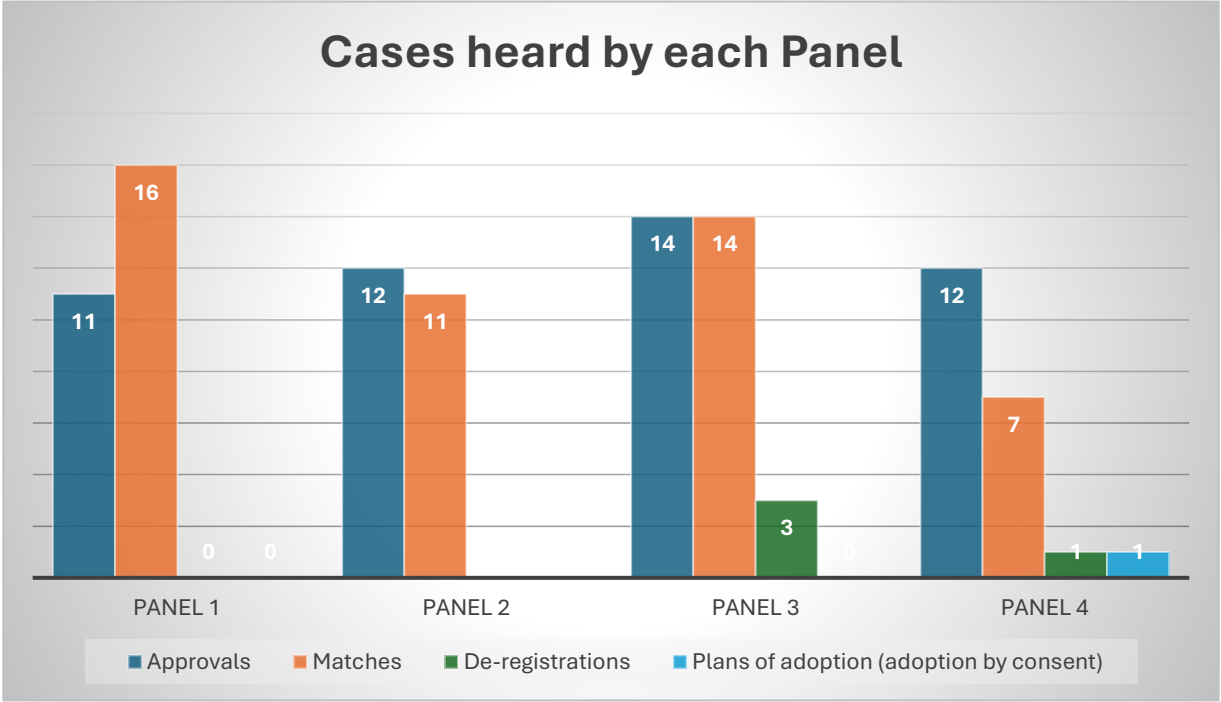
It is also noted that there was one further approval heard at Panel which the Panel members recommended, but that the Agency Decision Maker did not then go on to approve to become adopters.

The Agency Decision Maker agreed with all of the other recommendations made by panels (all of which were positive). One of the matches for a North Kent child was heard at the final Panel of the financial year, and so the Agency Decision Maker did not make his decision until April 2024 but agreed with the recommendation of the Panel.

It is noted that the four de-registrations were families who had decided not to proceed with adopting due to their own circumstances, and were in agreement with the change in their status. Panel did not therefore have a decision-making function in these cases, but the cases were presented to panel as a formality. Two of the households highlighted within their responses to the reports presented to Panel that they had some concerns about the process and support provided to them, and Service Manager Maria Olsson was able to give some reassurance to Panel members about the learning and reflection for the service as a result.

Children matched with another RAA/VAA in the period between October 2023 and March 2024: 3 (2 Kent and 1 Medway).

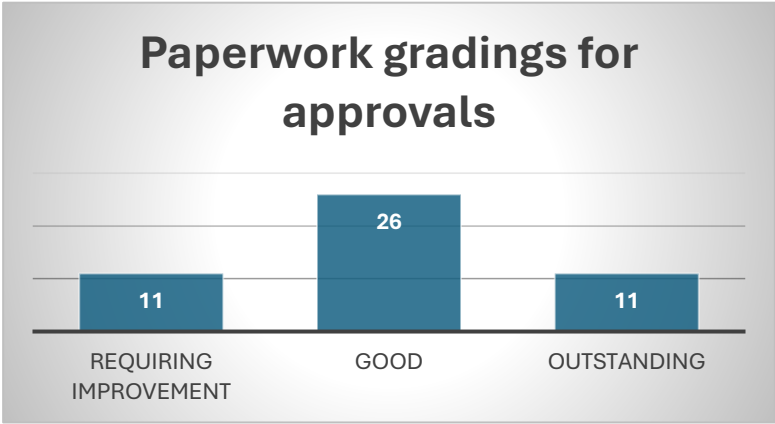
It is noted that two of these children were a sibling group where a match could not be identified from within the RAA. The other child was an older child (5 and a half years).

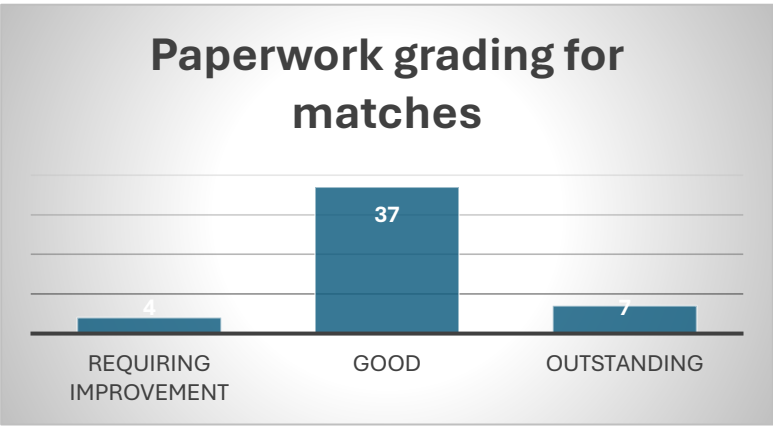


5. Quality assurance of reports presented to panel

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 October 2023 and 31st March 2024.





The Head of Service has also graded the paperwork for approvals of new adopters and has concurred with the grading of panel members the majority of the time. When different, the Agency Decision Maker graded the paperwork one grade higher or lower, rather than having a significantly different view of the quality. We have seen an increase in PARs being graded as ‘requiring improvement’ and this is the result of the shift to only giving a grade of good or outstanding if the PAR was brought to Panel within timescales (within four months of beginning Stage 2 of the assessment).

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 since October 2023:

“The panel made us feel at ease, very warm and welcoming even in a virtual environment.”

“I found everyone really nice and friendly. I found it very easy to talk and the questions were straightforward. I felt that I had been very well prepared by my social worker.”

“Thought it was great having previous adopted parents on panel. Was a really positive experience,”

“It was good, I think in person might be a bit more nerve wracking and everyone came across well on the virtual panel, they all seemed experienced with the process.”

“Whereas my partner preferred this experience and found it a calmer, less stressful way, I have always found I am more at ease when face to face. That being said, it was a comfort being in our own environment.”

“We were kept waiting for approximately 30 minutes which I appreciate is often unavoidable but then it felt at times that we were being rushed along. One of the adopters was asked at one point if she could make her answers shorter which I felt was inappropriate, especially given the child's complex needs and the adopters thoughtful and insightful answers.”

The majority of feedback provided since October 2023 has been positive, with any learning points usually relating to slots not beginning on time due to previous cases taking longer than expected. However, it is noted that when this was raised within feedback, this was alongside an acknowledgement that the families had been kept informed when this happened. However, the final comment outlined above will be raised with the Vice Chair in their annual review, and this will also be included in our upcoming training day for Panel members so that alternative ways of managing these scenarios can be considered.

7. Panel Training

Training is provided for the adoption panel members and is well attended. Our last training day took place on 31st October 2023, and covered the use of language, grading of paperwork, and an update of previous cases Panels had heard.

Panel members' annual reviews are in process, and their feedback on training needs is being noted for future sessions. Our next training day is going to cover adoption support, and there will be a group discussion about previous cases and situations that Panel members can learn from.

8. Panel chairs meeting

We held our annual Panel chairs meeting on 17th November 2023; the four chairs were joined by team manager Katy Bennett, service manager Maria Olsson, and Head of Service, Amy Coombs. The meeting was positive, and chairs were updated about developments across the service. We also discussed the grading of Panel paperwork and feedback from the recent training day.

9. Disruptions

There have been no disruptions between 1st October 2023 and 31st March 2024.

10 Panel Chairs' comments

Panel 1 – Cathy Yates

The last 6 months has been a stable time for Panel 1. The new vice-chair and independent member have gone from strength to strength and their experiences and backgrounds have added to the strength of the panel. Both are adopters themselves and the knowledge and experiences this brings to the panel is invaluable. Whilst panel members work well together and have diverse backgrounds, we are aware that Panel 1 has mainly female membership and it would be positive to have more male members. The panel continues to work well, and the overall quality of the paperwork remains good. Panel advisors support the panel by giving sound advice and resolving issues pre-panel where possible. The administration of the panel also continues to work well although there are still occasions when some paperwork is late. Panel is sometimes challenged by medical issues that arise in relation to applicants and the need to understand the impact of these on any child that may be placed. Medical advisors are always helpful in these discussions and panel members appreciate their input.

As with the other panels, we have changed our process in making recommendations and feel that this has been a positive change for applicants and enables them to hear panels reasoning more effectively.

Panel members continue to be well prepared for panel and to ask insightful questions and are always prepared to offer to help with other panels when the need arises.

Panel 2 – Fran Moffat

In the last six months one panel (in April 2024) was cancelled, but in other panel meetings we were quite busy with several panels with five cases (and one with six cases but the last case was pulled from panel). On two panels a case overran which impacted on the next cases. Sometimes this is due to the very full answers given by the applicants, and in others there has been a technical hitch where there was a delay in the applicants or social worker being able to log in.

Our membership has been stable with one new social worker member. We have also welcomed members from other Panels to cover on occasion, including a new independent member with fostering experience who has been a great addition to the Panels. We have a good gender balance and also members with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. All panel members are able to raise issues of diversity appropriately at panel.

All panel members who were able to attend the panel training in the autumn found this helpful, and it is always good to see people face to face and share common issues. We have been more careful of our language since then, and as recommended during this training we have changed our process so that before the applicants are invited in to the meeting we have already shared together whether at this stage we feel able to recommend the approval or match. This has led on most occasions to more focused and less repetitive reasons given for our recommendation at the end of panel.

All panel members come to panel well prepared and ask questions in a sensitive manner. When we have more than two cases the vice chair will chair one case (or two cases when there are six cases.) We have had several matches where a child is already in placement on an early permanence, and it is heartening to see how the child has made progress in the care of the adopters.

Most paperwork has been graded as good, but there have been several occasions when there has been a lack of analysis or gaps in the reports and we have felt the paperwork required improvement. We sometimes find repetition in the APRs between the matching grid and the adoption support grid but we understand that CoramBaaf are updating the APR and it is currently being piloted.

Panel 3 – Louise Hawley

Panel three has undergone a number of changes in recent months, The long-standing chair retired in December 2023. I took the chair's role in January 2024 .

To date, I have chaired three panels with the April panel being cancelled due to no cases being booked. As we were without a vice chair for several months, another panel chair kindly stepped in to undertake the vice chair role. As a newly appointed chair, this support was very much appreciated and is reflective of the supportive nature of colleagues across the different panels.

An existing panel member has now been appointed as vice chair. A period of introduction to the role is about to commence. The new vice chair is already demonstrating his commitment and enthusiasm for the role. It is anticipated that the new chair and vice chair will work well together.

Panel members continue to be committed and always attend panel well prepared with thoughtful and, in the main, relevant questions. We work hard to provide a welcoming and supportive environment to applicants and social workers, despite a variety of technical issues that arise with working online.

Panel members keen to attend panel training and are active participants in any training provided.

Panel continues to be well supported by the nominated panel adviser and medical advisers.

It has been raised that medical advisers are receiving some paperwork too late or very close to the panel. I am aware this has been raised with the RAA by the medical advisors.

With regards to grading of paperwork, there is a sense that PAR standards have risen over the past year with the majority being graded “good”.

Panel 4 – Eva Lindsay

Panel 4 has seen a couple of changes recently. A long-standing panel member stepped down in order to give extra time to her family and we have welcomed a new panel member who brings the experience of being the adoptive father of four siblings.

The panel members work well together. They prepare for panel thoroughly, are very welcoming of applicants and social workers and ask questions sensitively and respectfully. The vice chair chairs cases as needed and she and I always discuss the agenda when it becomes available.

Panel members have all attended panel training and have found that it has informed their approach to panel. Also meeting face-to-face is greatly enjoyed.

We have had some cases which have prompted more discussion than usual. Two included second opinion visits. In one case after significant discussion and concerns being raised, the panel made a positive and unanimous recommendation. The ADM subsequently did not approve the couple. Panel have had the opportunity to discuss and reflect on this which has been very helpful and will, I think, influence some future panel discussions.

Panel 4 continues to be very well supported by the Panel Advisors, especially our lead Advisor and by the Panel Administrators. Minutes are impressively accurate and timely. Our lead Administrator moved to another post within the Adoption Partnership. We all wished her well in her new job whilst acknowledging that panel will miss her

11. Summary by Maria Olsson, Service Manager

The past six months have been busy for the 4 panels hearing up to 6 cases each time they meet. There is overall stability within the panels, however panel three has had a new chair and vice chair; it is positive that they were already APSE panel members so familiar with the agency. The panel training in October was well attended and is reported to be helpful in terms of learning but also as an opportunity to meet in person as a panel group. Panel members are well prepared, committed, able to ask relevant questions and engage in difficult conversations.

Panels have worked hard on further developing their grading of paperwork to ensure consistency. It is positive that majority of reports presented to panel are graded as good or above. Some reports require improvement due to quality and/or timeliness issues; we continue to work on improving this. I also note the importance of distributing the reports to panel members in a timely manner.

I am pleased that feedback from those attending panel is largely positive in terms of them feeling welcome and supported. It seems that technology at times is a challenge and/or if cases run over so that people are left waiting.

Panel chairs speak positively about their relationship with the agency and that they feel well supported by their lead panel advisor. They also comment favourably on the accuracy and timeliness of panel minutes produced by business support officers.

12. Recommendations

- Find ways of incorporating the voice of people with lived experience of adoption into Panels. This has now begun in respect of questions asked by young people, and we will seek to work with Barnardo's CAFIS to do similar in terms of the voice of birth parents.
- Continue to promote a diverse Panel membership that reflects our adoption community.
- Work with social work teams in respect of paperwork being submitted in good time for Panel members to read in line with Regulations.



Panel Chairs Report Appendix A

Panel Membership

Anne Kohler (social work member)
Barry Lumsden (independent member)
Cathy Yates (independent chair)
Claire Jones (social work member)
Dr Abeyweera (medical advisor)
Dr Bhargava (medical advisor)
Dr Das (medical advisor)
Dr Eltom (medical advisor)
Dr Himid (medical advisor)
Dr Hussain (medical advisor)
Dr Lebbe (medical advisor)
Dr Nicholls (medical advisor)
Emily Beard (social work member)
Emma Smith (independent vice chair)
Eva Lindsay (independent chair)
Fran Moffat (independent chair)
Iona Stephens (independent vice chair)
Jackie Lumsden (independent member)
James Buckland (independent member)
John Mcdonald-Baker (independent vice chair)
Jon Witham (independent member)
Julia Fagg (social work member)
Katie Boyce (social work member)
Kerry Larkin (social work member)
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