

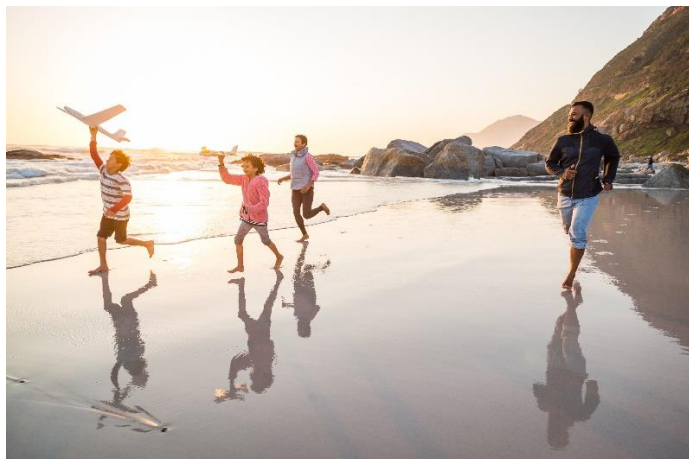


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# ANNUAL REPORT

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**2022/2023**



**By  
your  
side**

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# 1 – Key Headline Summary

## **Adoption Partnership South East Regional Adoption Agency**

- April 2022-March 2023 saw an increase in the number of children with an adoption plan agreed across the 3-partner local authorities.
- The average timeliness for matching children with their adoptive parents in 2022/23 is close to the DfE target and exceeds the national average across the region.
- Quality Life Story Books are provided for children and their adoptive parents in a timely manner.
- The early permanence scheme continues to develop, and a significant proportion of children live with early permanence foster carers, reducing unnecessary moves should the court grant a Placement Order.
- Most children are placed with APSE adopters enabling greater support post placement and beyond the granting of an adoption order.
- The number and proportions of disruptions remains extremely low.
- Enquiries from prospective adopters saw a significant increase during 2022/23, which is not necessarily mirrored in other areas of the country and completion of the Stage 2 process is very close to the national target and compares favourably with the national average.
- The adoption support teams offer a support and advice line appointment within 5 working days.
- Effective development of the mentoring service saw a 500% increase in the number of mentors since July 2022.
- The voice of the child and adoptive parents is actively sought, and compliments are high, with low numbers of formal complaints.
- Independent feedback from Ofsted on adoption via the local authority ILACs inspections were positive.
- The RAA secured significant grant funding from the DfE to develop 3 key areas to support early performance, enhanced family finding and multi-disciplinary adoption support.
- 2023/24 will see the departure of the existing Head of Service and the appointment of a permanent replacement. The current Head of Service will be leaving in June 2023, her replacement will take over on 1st July 2023, so there will be no gap in leadership and management.

- Staff within the service are positive with a 'can do' approach. They are committed to supporting children and their families, both birth families and families by adoption.

## 2 – Introduction

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

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

### Legislation & Regulations

- The work of the RAA is governed by:
- Education and Adoption Act 2016
- Children and Families Act 2014
- Adoption: Statutory Guidance 2013
- Care Planning, placement and Case Review and fostering services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
- Care Planning Regulations 2010
- Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011)
- Local Authority Regulations 2005
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Standards Act 2000



## **3 – Principles and Values**

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

### **Principles & Core Values**

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

### **Equal Opportunities**

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

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

## 4 – The Aims and Objectives of the Agency

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

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

### **Three Year Plan (2023-2026)**

Adoption Partnership South East has created a 3-year plan, which outlines its vision, mission, outcomes, priorities.

*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 – we 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.*

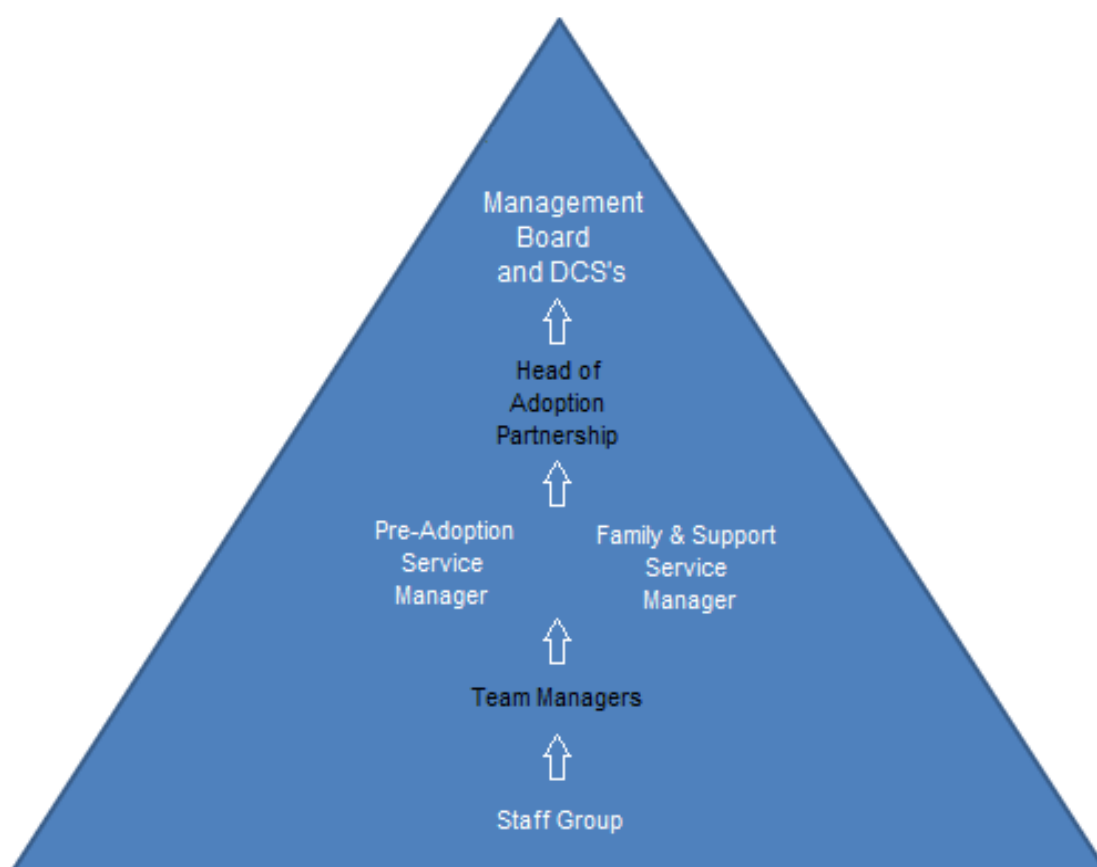
The plan and how it will be achieved is available on the APSE website:

<https://www.adoptionpartnershipsoutheast.org.uk/about-us/about-the-partnership>

APSE produce an annual business plan outlining the detail of the work to be undertaken and this is attached as Appendix 1.

## 5 – 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 roles 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**

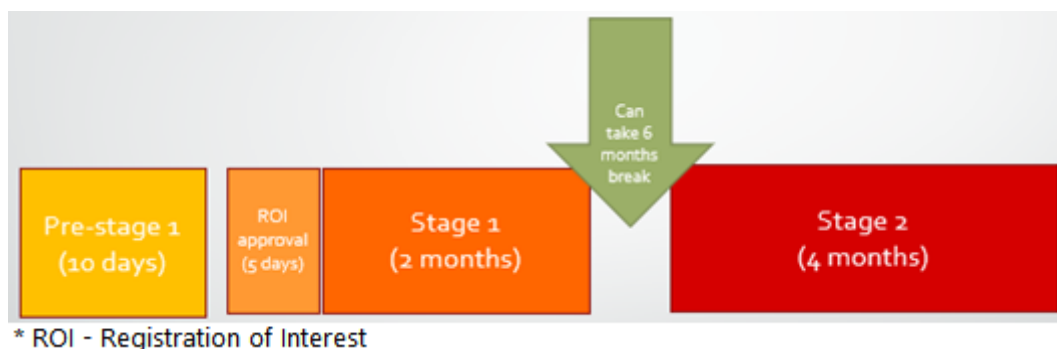
Adoption Partnership South East has an Early Permanence Team which provides early permanence foster placements to young children with a potential adoption plan and are either subject to care proceedings or are placed for adoption by consent (relinquished) by their parents. These placements may go onto 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., step parents and these are known as 'non-agency' adopters. A recruitment strategy is in place and is reviewed regularly (appendix 5).

## 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

The RAA commissions independent services from Barnardo's to support those with lived experience of adoption. The Service is a bespoke service to families eligible to receive support from Adoption Partnership South East. The Service is called Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Service known as CAFIS. Services are provided to four groups of people affected by adoption:

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



## 6 – 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 2022 to 31 December 2022.

In Q3 2022/23, the response rate from local authorities for the child level section was 100% and the adopter level sections was 100%. The response rate for the adopter level section from Voluntary Adoption Agencies was 100%.

Analysis indicates that, as at Q3 2022/23 (31 December 2022), nationally there were a total of:

- 800 Agency Decision Maker decisions
- 670 Placement Orders granted
- 720 Adoption Orders granted and 950 Special Guardianship Orders granted, a total of 1670 permanence orders
- 1980 children with a PO waiting to be matched, 990 who had been waiting 18+ months since entering care and 240 children with a PO waiting to be matched 18+ months since grant of PO
- 660 Adopter Registrations and 560 Adopter Approvals
- 2330 Prospective adoptive families not yet approved
- 2340 Approved adoptive families waiting to be matched

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

### Adoption Partnership South East Data

The table below shows the number of children within the Regional Adoption Agency with an adoption plan during the last three years and outlines their adoption journey.

Indicator	Authority	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Agency decision makers best interest decisions	Bexley	5	10	10	13
	Kent	92	80	58	80
	Medway	32	39	18	28
Placement Orders	Bexley	<5*	10	6	8
	Kent	65	54	49	58
	Medway	20	27	16	14
Matches approved	Bexley	<5*	6	7	7
	Kent	56	63	51	48
	Medway	23	23	26	14
Children placed	Bexley	<5*	6	5	8
	Kent	60	64	49	46
	Medway	23	21	27	13
Adoption Order granted	Bexley	5	7	7	<5*
	Kent	63	42	47	56
	Medway	19	14	22	21

\* <Data suppressed due to low number

### Agency Decision Maker Best Interest Decisions

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is usually a Director of Children's Services or an Assistant Director who agrees 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. Kent agreed the plan for adoption for 58 Kent children in 2021/2022, 27.5% less than in the same period in previous year (80). 2020/2021 also saw a decrease compared to the previous year (92 in 2019/2020). In 2022/2023 this increased to 80 again. 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.

### **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. 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 58. 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.

### **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. 51 Kent children were matched with an adoptive family during 2021/2022, a decrease of 19% from the previous year when there were 63 children matched. 2020/2021 was an increase in comparison to 2019/2020 when there were 56 matches. In 2022/2023, there were 48 matches. 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.

### **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. For Kent, in 2022/2023 there were 46 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.

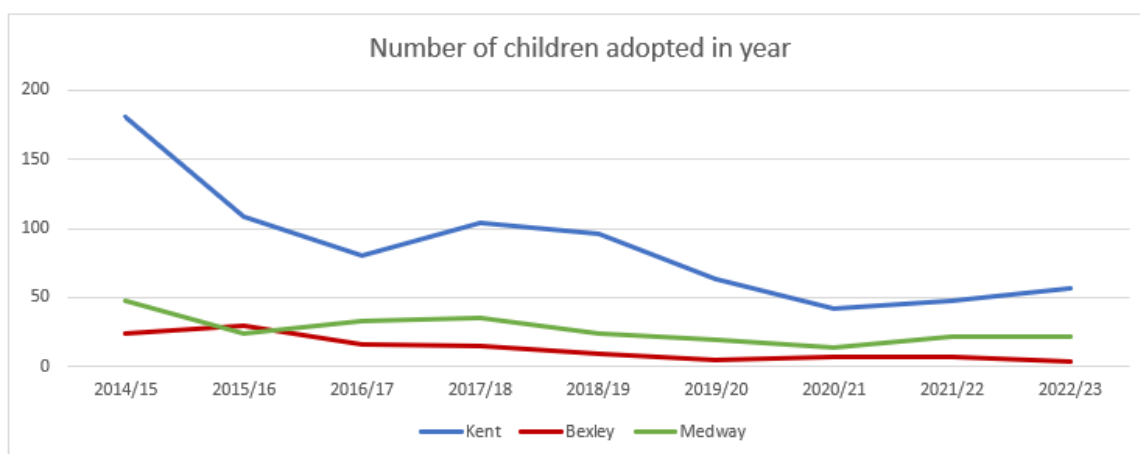
Sibling placements - Within the group of 67 children placed in 2022/2023, 17 were part of a sibling group placed together for adoption: Bexley: 4 siblings (2 pairs), Kent 13 siblings (5 pairs and 1 set of 3 siblings), Medway 0 siblings.



## Children Waiting

As of 31st March 2023, there were 47 children within the RAA with a Placement Order who were not placed with an adoptive family: 6 Bexley children, 30 Kent children and 11 Medway children. At the time of writing this report, 30th May 2023, of the 6 Bexley children 2 are subject to having their Placement Orders revoked and 4 children are linked or placed now with adopters. Of the 30 Kent children; all but 7 are now linked or placed with adopters, and the remaining 7 children have active family finding in place. Of the 11 Medway children, 5 are now linked or placed with adopters, 3 children have a change of plan from adoption and 3 children have active family finding in place.

## Adoption Orders Granted



Bexley saw a decrease to 3 Adoption Orders granted for children in 2022/2023 compared to previous year's figure published of 7. For 2020/2021, this was also at 7.

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.

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. This is still a reduction compared to the 63 in 2019/2020.

## Timeliness of Children's Plans

Timescale indicator	National Comparison (Dec 2022)	Authority	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	From target 2022/23 (days)
Placement order to matching decision, children matched in year	-	Bexley	52	61	138	146	+25
		Kent	74	144	117	110	-11
		Medway	203	252	160	94	-27
Placement order to matching decision, children adopted in year	199	Bexley	57	49	67	135	+14
		Kent	96	80	132	129	+8
		Medway	218	237	209	152	+31
Became in care to placed for adoption, children placed in year	-	Bexley	216	410	333	481	+55
		Kent	271	385	309	476	+50
		Medway	428	388	469	340	-86
Became in care to placed for adoption, children adopted in year	478	Bexley	222	394	354	427	+1
		Kent	278	274	392	352	-74
		Medway	474	394	375	427	+1

### 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 Q3 of 2022/2023.

For children who were adopted, the data shows that in 2022/2023, 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. Kent saw a slight decrease in the average number of days from 132 in 2021/2022 to 129 days in 2022/2023. In 2020/2021 the

average was 80 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.

When seeking to review more recent or current performance, the table above 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. This was due to the complex needs of the children concerned. 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. 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.

### Became in Care to Placement Order

Timescale indicator	South East Benchmarking Comparison (Dec 2022)	Authority	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	From target 2022/23 (days)
Became in care to Placement Order, children with order granted in year	-	Bexley	258	403	430	300	+50
		Kent	226	355	336	446	+196
		Medway	304	295	375	470	+220
Became in care to Placement Order, children adopted in year	307	Bexley	216	354	364	300	+50
		Kent	233	233	326	327	+77
		Medway	262	284	202	326	+76

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.

Kent's average days for 2022/2023 was 327 and in 2021/2022 was 326 days. Medway's duration increased from 202 in 2021/2022 to 326 in 2022/2023. It is not possible to ascertain a national comparison, so data provided through the South East Benchmarking was used, showing an average of 307 days, but this does not include Bexley as this comes within the London data set.

The data shows that, during 2022/23, 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, particularly for children in Kent and Medway, and all three local authorities exceeded the target of 250 days. Across the region, the pandemic has had 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.

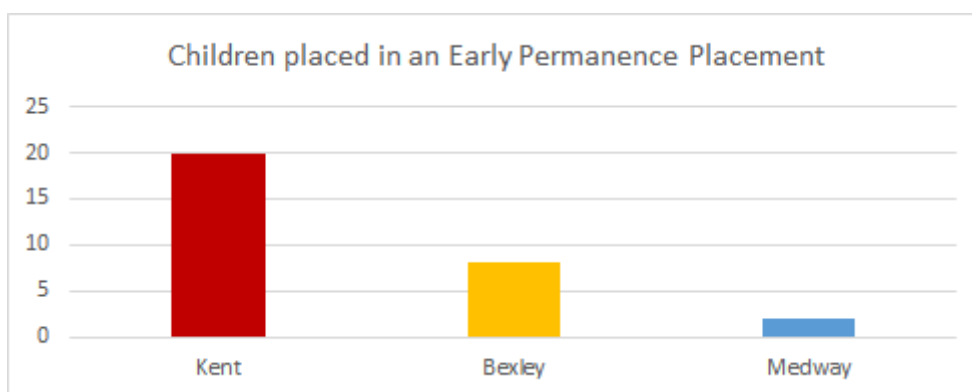
### **Became in Care to Placed for Adoption**

The current DfE threshold for children becoming in care to placement is 426 days, 14 months, for children adopted in 2022/2023. Regarding this measurement, the average days for Bexley's children increased in 2022/2023 to 481 days, compared to 333 the previous year. Kent's average days was 309 days in 2021/2022 and increased to 476 days in 2022/2023. Medway's duration decreased from 469 in 2021/2022 to 340 in 2022/2023.

### **Life Story Books**

Children's social workers are responsible for undertaking life story work with a child in care. Prior to the launch of the RAA, the adoption teams were assisting children's social workers to complete their life story books, although this varied in how it was undertaken. During April 2022 – March 2023, 54 life story books were completed.

### **Early Permanence**



Between 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023, 30 children were placed in an Early Permanence placement (8 Bexley children, 20 Kent children and 2 Medway children).

Adoption Partnership South East exceeded the target to place 20% of the children placed for adoption in an Early Permanence placement.

### **Disruptions**

Between 1 March 2022 – 30 April 2023, 2 children experienced an adoption disruption, both within Medway. 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' and the Agency Decision Maker who approved it. The reports were shared with the responsible children's service and the lessons learnt will also be shared with the adoption agency social workers and managers.

## 7 – The Adopter Journey – Adoption Data

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

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.

<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>England Avg</b>
Enquiry to Stage 1 Start (days)	N/A	87	-
Stage 1 Start to Stage 1 End (days)	60	120	128
Stage 2 Starts to Stage 2 End (days)	121	131	152

During 2022/2023, Adoption Partnership South East was outside of the Stage 1 target of 60 days but exceeded the national average by 8 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. It is clear that the pandemic has impacted on health service availability and capacity, and these delays are also evident nationally.

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.

During this period, 69 households were approved as adopters which ensured sufficiency of adopters for Bexley, Kent, and Medway children. In total, 67 children were placed with adopters during 2022/2023 and 60 of these children were placed with the Regional Adoption Agency assessed and approved adopters.

Of the 69 households approved during April 2022- March 2023, 63 were part of a couple and 6 were single applicants. 58 applicant households identified themselves as heterosexual, 11 identified as being from the LGBT community. 124 adopters identified as white British and white any other background and 8 identified as being from a black, or Asian or other ethnic group.

### **Adopter Gap – sufficiency**

It is important to have a range of adoptive placements available to allow children to be matched with adopters who are most able to meet them. The adopter gap i.e., the number of adopters 'approved and waiting' was between 15-25 at any point in time during 2022-2023.

## 8 – Adoption Support Data

The table below shows the number of families who contacted the Initial Enquiries Team for support and were offered a support and advice line appointment between April 2022 – March 2023.

LA	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	TOTAL
Bexley	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	2	1	6	15
Kent	12	20	9	12	7	14	16	20	7	16	14	12	159
Medway	2	5	1	4	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	0	22
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>196</b>

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

### Adoption support assessments (households) carried out between April 2021 – March 2023

Local Authority	Number of adoption support assessments April 2021 – March 2022	Number of adoption support assessments April 2022 – March 2023
Bexley	11	7
Kent	143	114
Medway	14	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>141</b>

### Adoption Support Fund Applications Between April 2022 – March 2023 (includes pre-order applications)

Type of application	Number of applications
Internal provision	117
External provision	263
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>380</b>



### **Supporting those affected by adoption - Barnardo's CAFIS Activity data**

Independent birth parent support	75
Adopted adults access to records/intermediary	217
Birth relatives' access to records/intermediary	77
Indirect contact	1872 children
Direct contact	52 children

### **Training**

A range of opportunities for parents to access training are provided by the adoption support service, 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)

### **Support Groups**

A range of opportunities are available to adoptive parents to meet and seek support. Some are from other adoptive parents, such as We Are Family; a 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 on-line adopter community and meet up groups for parents across our region.

The Adoption Support Team and Virtual Schools Kent 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 sub group for the south east is well established and continues to meet. This means professionals can share practice and ideas quickly.



## **9 – Voice of the Child – Participation & Engagement**

The RAA commissions the Participation & Engagement Team within KCC's Virtual School to provide a service to all adopted children and young people across the region.

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

- i. Young Person's Council - The Participation Team continue to work to support the work of the Adoption Partnership Southeast and help ensure adopted children and young people living in Bexley, Kent and Medway have opportunities to take part in a wide range of participatory activities. We aim to support the Adoption Partnership so the voice of adopted young people is embedded in all working practices. Children and young people from all three areas can now attend the 'Adoptables' group as well as face to face and virtual activities and events.
- ii. The Adoptables group held 6 face-to-face meetings throughout the last year with a membership of 20.
- iii. Participation Activity Days and Virtual Sessions - The Participation Team organised a range of virtual and face to face participation activities for adopted young people living in Bexley, Kent, and Medway. In the period of April 2022 to March 2023, the team organised 23 activities with 350 spaces being taken up. These included activities in the school holidays as well as 4 'Try Something New Saturday' sessions.
- iv. Participation Events - The adoption summer picnic is an annual event where adopted children and their families are invited to a relaxed, fun day where they can meet other families as well as staff from the Adoption Service and Participation Team. In the summer of 2022, a total of 43 family groups with 63 young people attended. Plans for the Summer picnic for 2023 are underway. A Christmas Party was held in December 2022 which 61 families with 89 children attended and this brought families together with staff for a fun filled afternoon.
- v. Our current apprentice who supports the Adoption workstreams, along with a former apprentice, are working with Social Workers to provide advice from a young person's perspective to prospective adopters during stage one preparation session of the adoption process.
- vi. The apprentices supported young person's interview panels for the positions of the new Head of the RAA and Service Manager positions.

## **Young Person Feedback**

*"With the Adoptables, we do meetings for people who are adopted, and we sometimes do activities after the meetings too, like roller skating and bowling. I think it's important to go to the Adoptables because we get to see new people and meet new friends and we're all adopted together."*

*"I go to Fun Days and we do things like horse riding, baking, aquapark, cooking, climbing, Mama Mia and Arts and Crafts. My favourite activities are horse riding, the aquapark and baking because I'm really good at swimming and baking. I would recommend people come over and try them out because they're really fun."*

## **Parental Feedback**

*"Thank you so much for yet another great morning of activities for (my daughter) and the other young folk. It has truly rounded off a great summer of fun for them and forged stronger friendships as a result."*

*"It is days like this which need to be captured and bottled as a way of showing how much you guys' matter in the lives of our adopted children. They know that they are with people who 'get them' and what they've been through."*

*"Keep doing what you are doing and as a parent, I can't thank you enough for what you've given them in the past two years. It's so lovely that the children who first encountered each other in little square boxes via TEAMS in lockdown are now building strong friendships with the common bond that they are adopted and in this environment that's totally normal."*

*"(My daughter) is really benefitting from this time with you all and I am so grateful to you for giving your time to do it. It's so nice to see her excited by a project again and it's lovely that she is doing it with someone other than me."*

*"Thank you very much to you and the Participation Team for the Betteshanger activity day on Wednesday. (My daughter) had a brilliant time, thank you so much for the support and encouragement you gave her."*

*"A massive thanks on behalf of all of us for what you laid on over the Easter holidays. (My son) loved the sublime science event and has talked nonstop about it, and equally (my daughter) loved the pizza making activity."*

*"We so appreciate these opportunities for our children to do these activities over their holidays, it really does make a difference to our holidays, breaking them up with engaging opportunities. Thank you."*

## 10 – Adopter Voice

The Adopter Advisory Board met quarterly during 2022/2023. The number of adoptive parents attending was variable, so there will be a review undertaken with adoptive parents to think about how best to hear their voice in the coming year.

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

- Adopters' views at the time they attend the adoption panel for approval and a match.
- The views of others who attend the adoption panel including social workers from Kent and other adoption agencies if placing the child via inter-agency route.
- Adopters' views after they adopted - an electronic form was recently designed to capture adoptive parents' feedback after the adoption order is granted.
- Panel members attending panel training.
- Adopters attending the preparation training.
- Adopters receiving adoption support services - an electronic form was recently designed and is sent to parents, seeking their feedback after they received a service.
- The service also gathers feedback from adopters through national surveys and research such as the Adoption UK, Adoption Barometer

### **Examples of feedback received by the Adoption service**

*"I want to thank you for all your support during an extremely challenging time – both emotionally and process...that was important to me."*

*"Thank you so much for the support you've given us over these last few months: you've been pivotal in helping us get back to a place of stability and hope. [Our son] is doing really well and we feel connected again where at times we had felt completely broken. Thank you for helping us to mend back together."*

*"Thank you for all you have done for our family over the last few years. You have provided wonderful support and guidance and managed to get us the essential services for us and the boys as we have needed."*

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

*"Feels like talking to a friend who just gets it."*

*"Thanks for your brill support."*

*"You were a marvel."*

### **Mentoring feedback**

*"It was really helpful to have an independent opinion of someone who has been through the process themselves."*

*"It was nice to have someone other than the Social Worker to talk to. Also, it was a very good sounding board for ideas and questions."*

*"Helped me to reflect on the process and put feelings into words."*

*"[My mentor] listened to me when the adoption became a bit overwhelming, and she was very sensitive."*

*"It was nice to have someone to speak about my feelings when our little one came to live with us."*

### **Complaints**

The Partnership agreed Kent County Council will be the lead partner on all complaints which relate either wholly or in part to the Adoption Partnership South East. Most of the concerns or issues raised in relation to the service provided by the Regional Adoption Agency are resolved through a problem-solving approach within the service as the service aims to respond quickly and with sensitivity. Between 1st April 2022- 31st March 2023, four Stage 1 complaints were received. One was received from a family living in Medway and three from adoptive parents living in Kent.

## 11 – Independent Feedback on the Service

### Ofsted

Kent County Council underwent an Inspection of its children's services (ILAC) in May 2022 and was awarded 'Outstanding' and the London Borough of Bexley was inspected in February 2023 and was graded 'Outstanding'.

The regional adoption agency participated in both inspections and managers, social workers and adoptive parents were interviewed by Inspectors. This experience highlighted the RAA's progress in relation to bringing staff together from three different local authority adoption teams and integrating new members of staff into the service. Those interviewed spoke positively and with confidence about the service and during their meetings, were able to articulate clearly how they work productively within the RAA and with the local authority partners, within a partnership model to meet the needs of children and families.

The report published in relation to Kent stated:

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

Feedback received from The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and the Director of children's Services in Bexley stated:

*"Inspectors fed back very positively on our Adoption work and the difference that this is making to children which we know is the result of having high aspirations for children and the associated skilled and hard work to achieve this."*

### Adoption Support Brief Service Review

In 2022, RAA's were offered the opportunity of having an independent review of their adoption support services undertaken by an Independent Consultant commissioned by the National RAA Leadership group. This took place in August 2022 and a range of strengths were identified including positive comments about management and a commitment to ensuring staff are enabled to develop their practice and skills. It noted staff across the RAA are committed to providing a good service and are aspirational about continuous improvement.

The report was shared and discussed at the RAA governance board in March 2023.



## 12 – The National Workstream

There are now 32 RAAs across the country with only 3 local authorities not yet in the programme. A national project team was created with DfE funding which supports the work of RAA's and aims to deliver the government's national adoption strategy: Achieving excellence everywhere. RAA leaders work collaboratively on developing and improving practice and delivering improved outcomes for children and families nationally and they developed a 3-year plan with 3 key priorities: Recruitment, Child's Journey and Adoption Support. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East is engaged in the national forum of RAA Leaders and involved in several work streams with a view to delivering on the priority areas identified.

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



## **13 – Developments using Grant Funding**

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

Adoption Partnership South East were successful in submitting three expressions of interest for DfE funding streams which run for between 2 – 3 years, up to March 2025. The funding secured is allowing 3 pilot developments:

- i. Early permanence 'wrap around support' - APSE developed an early permanence scheme now ready to be further developed. The grant funding enabled the development of a wraparound support service provided by therapeutically trained social workers who understand the complexities involved and are able to fully support our early permanence carers. This bid incorporates funding for staff development and training including the role out of Dyadic Developmental Practice, known as DDP training. DDP is a therapeutic parenting approach and model for practice using what is known about attachment and developmental trauma to help children and families with their relationships. This can be used to inform and strengthen adopter assessments, preparation, placement transitions and adoption support.
- ii. Enhanced family finding – the grant funding allowed for increased training and resources to support the care planning and family finding of siblings. This enabled resources within APSE to provide 'hands on' support to children's social workers to ensure there was a sibling assessment undertaken when considering adoption as the care plan. A good quality sibling assessment will determine what the local authority will propose to the court in relation to whether siblings should remain together, or if their individual needs are so great they would be best met by separating, with some level of contact put in place. The funding allowed for increased adoption social work resources to identify at an early-stage prospective adopters who can consider adopting siblings and ensuring they have the necessary training and enhanced support to feel equipped to support children in the early days of establishing their family.
- iii. Multi-disciplinary Centre of Excellence – this bid comprises of two components, firstly to scale up the existing therapy team within APSE, which consists of therapists funded by KCC, to support Kent families. This will allow for a consistent approach across the region and an evaluation of the impact for children and families, compared with always needing to outsource their

therapeutic intervention. The second part of our bid is to bring 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 recently published Adoption UK Barometer 2023 details the views and analysis of the lived experience of adoption, from the creation of new adoptive families through to the experiences of adult adoptees. Their summary of recommendations is for "Free, accessible, high-quality support for adoptees of all ages, whenever they need it.

The summary and full report are available on their website: [Adoption Barometer | Adoption UK Charity](#).

## **14 – Conclusion**

Children are at the heart of the RAA and staff and those supporting the service voluntarily work hard to hear and learn from those affected by adoption. Managers and staff within the service are committed to building on successes and ensuring quality, timely assessments are undertaken and active family finding to ensure children’s adoption plans progress. April 2022 – March 2023 was a time of consolidation and development for the service and the creation of a three-year plan reinforces the direction of travel for the service. The vision of being a supportive and active adoption community within our region is the basis for all our work and the service is in an excellent place to develop and deliver on this in the coming years, under the capable leadership of a new Head of Service.

*Sarah Skinner*

**Sarah Skinner**

Head of Adoption Partnership South East

**June 2023**

## 15 – Appendix

### Appendix 1



Adoption  
Partnership Business

### Appendix 2



APSEStructureChart  
ANON.docx

### Appendix 3



APSE SOP  
2023.docx

### Appendix 4



AP Panel Chairs  
Report October 2022



AP Panel Chairs  
Report March 2023

### Appendix 5



Recruitment  
Strategy 2023-24.docx