

Surrey County Council

Adoption Agency

Report

2014

## Introduction:

The Adoption & Children Act 2002 (implemented 2005) requires that Local Authority Adoption Agencies present regular reports of agency activity to Elected Members. Since April 2011, reports are provided twice yearly. This report and the statistics contained within it capture the period April 1 2013 to March 31 2014. A mid year report will be provided in a further 6 months, capturing activity in the first half of 2014-2015.

## Context:

The Adoption Agency operates as part of the Countywide Services (Children's Social Care). As such, we are sited within the Directorate of Children's Schools and Families, Children's Services and Safeguarding under the leadership of Strategic Director Nick Wilson and Deputy Director, Caroline Budden.

In common with all agencies concerned with promoting the wellbeing of children under the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, we reference activity against the 5 ECM outcomes: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well being. As an Adoption Agency we are additionally required to comply with the following legislation, standards and associated regulations:

- Children Act 1989
- Children Act 2004
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Standards Act 2002
- National Minimum Adoption Standards, Adoption Agency Regulations and Department of Education Adoption Guidance-all updated in 2011 with statutory guidance updated again in 2013
- Restrictions on writing adoption report regulations 2005
- Inter-Country Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003
- Adoption Support Services Regulations and Standards 2003

As a regulated service we are subject to inspection by OFSTED, the last inspection having taken place in June 2011, with the outcome that we were rated as 'good with outstanding features'. 3 recommendations were made which have since been addressed, namely to write and implement an education policy for adopted children, to ensure that the views of young people inform service delivery and to ensure that birth parents are informed verbally within 2 working days of Agency decisions in relation to adoption. All recommendations have duly been acted upon.

The Adoption Agency operates within the framework of Equal Opportunities legislation and Surrey County Council's Equal Opportunities Policy – the Agency does not discriminate in any way on the basis of race, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, marital status or age in relation to staff and service users and we have recently completed an Equalities impact assessment to ensure that our practice is consistent with this.

## Service Overview:

Surrey provides a busy and thriving adoption service covering the following areas of business:

- **Recruiting adopters** who can offer placements to Surrey's looked after children, or children placed from other local authorities.
- **Family Finding** for children in need of adoptive placements
- **Adoption support services** Support services range from financial allowances to therapeutic services and support groups for their carers.
- **Non-agency adoption.** Assessment and preparation of welfare reports for the Court in respect of proposed adoption arrangements, which were not made by an adoption agency.

- **Services for birth parents whose children have been placed for adoption.** This is required by the Adoption & Children Act 2002, which places on the Local Authority a duty to provide a service to all parties affected by adoption.
- **Facilitating direct contact** between birth families and children placed for adoption where it is deemed appropriate.
- **Operation of a 'post box' service** whereby birth families and their adopted children can exchange letters, photographs etc. with the adoption service acting as an intermediary in order that confidentiality can be maintained.
- **Inter country adoption** - non agency adoption welfare reports (as discussed previously) and post placement reports to the child's country of origin
- **Services to adopted adults:** the adoption service undertakes a significant amount of work with adopted adults. The law allows any adopted adult over the age of 18 who wishes to trace their adoption records and/or family of origin to contact their local adoption service
- **Support to relatives of adopted adults** In addition to adopted adults being able to access information and request assistance to make mediated contact with their family of origin, birth relatives of children adopted in the past, who may now be adults, can now approach us for a similar service which is provided by the adoption service.

### **National context: the Adoption Action Plan and Family Justice Review**

March 2012 saw the publication of the Adoption Action Plan by the Department of Education. This was preceded by the Family Justice Review- published late in 2011. Jointly, they inform the current policy context with regard to reform of the family courts and the adoption process.

Adoption regulations and statutory guidance were most recently revised in 2013 with further amendments expected. This has resulted in the first instance in the removal of the role of adoption panels in scrutinising children's adoption plans, driven by a wish to avoid duplication of decision making (between panels and courts.) From September 2012 therefore the role of the panel became restricted to recommending adopter approvals and matches between children and adopters.

Current clauses within the children and families bill before parliament will introduce a requirement to consider placing children with dual approved (for fostering and adoption) families during care proceedings, a requirement to inform adoptive families for their right to an adoption support needs assessment and provide that the adoption recruitment function of local authorities could be removed by agreement of both houses of parliament, if there is a failure to provide a sufficiency of placements for children. (Given an estimated shortage of 6,000 adopters across the country there was concern that many children with adoption plans were waiting too long to be placed in their new family or were not placed at all and therefore remained looked after). As such, both local authority and voluntary adoption agencies have been incentivised to recruit more families rather than focussing on local need.

In line with the coalition government's 'Adoption Action Plan', the adult adoption pathway was reformed from July 2013 to create a new 2 stage pathway, the stages to take 2 and 4 months respectively to complete with a fast track process for former foster carers and second time adopters.

A one-off ring fenced adoption reform grant was provided in 2013-14 to support the extra work needed and a national adoption gateway was also created with Department of Education funding, to provide initial information for would be adoption applicants and help direct them to recruiting agencies. Extra support for adoptive families was also introduced through the extension of priority school admission status for former looked after children and the extension of pupil premium plus to the same children.

Adoption performance of local authorities is now monitored by the Department of Education through league tables (which look at the percentage of looked after children and young people who exit care through adoption) and an annual scorecard (which aggregates data for the past three years to give average timescales for the child's adoption journey.) –see performance section of this report.

Surrey meets the current thresholds as set by the Department of Education, one of only 36 local authorities to do so. Surrey has also elected to submit quarterly data on a variety of performance measures collected in a Voluntary Adoption Survey, conducted by Ofsted. This contributes to a national picture of adoption, as well as enabling us to track our own performance throughout the year pending the annual publication of the adoption scorecard in November. The result has been a fast moving landscape, with many challenges to deliver on alongside maintaining 'business as normal'.

### **Local Activity:Children**

With over 800 looked after children by the end of the reporting year, we saw correspondingly high numbers of adoption care plans for 0-7 year olds, with an average of 5% of the total looked after population placed for adoption over the reporting period. Adoptive placements were identified and ratified for 57 children by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, with many more provisional matches already identified and booked into adoption panel for matching by that date. By the end of the period 59 children had received final adoption orders after a settling in period with their new families.

All but 2 children were placed following legal action on the part of the local authority, which is a reflection of modern day adoption with very few birth parents requesting adoption for their children. The range of ages at which children were placed for adoption was broad with the youngest placed at 5 months of age and the oldest 6 years. 3 children were adopted by their foster carers

31 children moved into new families by themselves and 21 children moved as part of a sibling group. Whilst generally it is considered best to seek placements of siblings together, in some instances the children's care plans are for separate placements. The reasons for this can be wide ranging from having older siblings living elsewhere - in adoptive or long term foster families, or placed with relatives where it may not be possible for the child to join their sibling. In other instances the needs of the children may be significantly different or in conflict with each other prompting a decision to seek separate placements.

It is also generally recognised that families who reflect their ethnicity and cultural, spiritual and linguistic backgrounds of a child are likely to be in a position to enable the child to develop an appropriate sense of identity, however taking account of the difficulties encountered in achieving exact matching, particularly where the child has a rich and complex heritage, we consider any family that we consider able to promote their identity and cultural needs alongside all other needs. In doing so, we hold in mind the primary need for a family and resist the thought that the child should wait for an indeterminate length of time for a perfect match- which might in all reality not exist. Taking this approach has meant that all our children have an equal chance of placement within the national minimum standard timescales.

3 children with an adoption took over a year to place, the reason were as follows: 2 children were placed for adoption following a previous failed adoptive placement and the remaining child was claimed for adoption by his foster carers following an initial period of seeking adopters. As they had cared for him from birth, this was considered a good outcome as the child did not then experience a move.

Sadly the placement of 2 children placed for adoption disrupted prior to the adoption order being made, and these children have been placed with foster carers pending a further attempt to secure legal permanency.

### **Special guardianship**

Mindful that single measures do not tell the whole story, and that adoption is not the only means by which children exit care, we can report that special guardianship is increasingly used to promote permanency. Indeed following recent rulings in the court of appeal, there has been a very significant shift in favour of special guardianship as an alternative legal outcome. This has resulted in a slowing down of adoption activity towards the latter part of the reporting period, and whilst adoption figures for the year were at their highest ever, they were nonetheless eclipsed by special guardianship (66 orders), with the expectation that in 2014-15 there will be significantly fewer adoptions than for this period.

Special guardianship work transferred from the adoption service to a newly created friends and family team in 2014, in recognition of the growth in this area of work.

### **Placement challenges:**

As in previous years, children over 4, those with health and developmental uncertainty, complex emotional and behavioural needs, children from BME backgrounds and large sibling groups risk waiting longer for a family. We therefore designate these as 'priority children'.

Experience and research shows that children whose health needs are particularly high are often 'claimed' by foster carers who have already formed a close relationship and approximately 20% of adoptions from 2013-14 related to foster carers who adopted known children. These often are very successful placements, not least because there is no element of fantasy about the child, which can sometimes be the case if the child is previously unknown to the adopters. We aim therefore always to explore whether the current carer is minded to request consideration, and think creatively around removing obstacles (such as lack of resources or support) which might otherwise deter the carer from offering permanency.

However, not all our priority children are able to be adopted by their foster carers and so we have engaged a management consultancy 'Impower' to help us identify how we can work better with prospective adopters, with the aim of encouraging them to adopt an open minded approach to matching, thus enabling more children to benefit from adoption, and faster. (The current situation is that like most agencies we remain over-subscribed with applicants for pre-school aged children without additional needs, yet have a number of waiting children at any given time.) This work involves building a better understanding of the motivational attitudes of potential adopters and the key messages that need to be used when recruiting, assessing and matching adopters.

For children for whom there is no immediate match, regular family finding meetings are held. These are chaired by an assistant team manager from the adoption service and attended by the child's current carer and social worker and an assigned family finder. The meetings review measures to identify a family and a record of the meeting is made and shared with the independent reviewing officer for the child (whose role is to ensure that a proactive approach is taken to achieving an adoption care plan).

Family finding activity aims to bring the child to the attention of as many potential families as possible. We will consider families both within and beyond Surrey borders, who are approved or under assessment in order to maximise the child's chances of finding a family with minimal delay.

We have been very pleased that a booklet distributed to adopters on a regular basis of 'waiting children' has been very effective. This appears to help encourage adopters to think beyond their original acceptance range, and has resulted in several matches. It also meant that in 2013-14 only 3 children needed to be placed with adopters from other agencies. We have also developed a secure website, access to which is restricted to staff, approved adopters and applicants under assessment. This has enabled us to feature information which adopters and applicants can access independently, identifying children whom they wish to receive further information about. Meanwhile, the child's profile is circulated to other adoption agencies, including our consortium partners (Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Parents and Children Together- a voluntary adoption agency based in Reading and London.)

From November 2014 we expect to have enlarged the current consortium to include additional local authority and voluntary adoption agency members which will give our children access to a wider still range of adopters.

In March 2014, we ran our first Adoption Activity Day with our consortium partners and BAAF (the British Agencies for Fostering and Adoption.) Activity days were pioneered in the USA and seek to bring together prospective adopters and children for a day of supported activities in the hope that potential links will emerge to be considered further. Given a 19% success rate for children who participated in pilot schemes we regard this as a worthwhile initiative.

Alongside our sending out profiles, children are also referred to the National Adoption Register, which is administered by BAAF and seeks to identify possible matches between waiting children and approved adopters.

When a match involving a Surrey child and adopters from another agency is made a £27,000 fee is paid to the agency supplying the placement (the level being set annually by BAAF.)

Given high levels of adopter approvals in 2013-14, a number of Surrey adopters adopted children from other authorities, as a result of adopter lead matching. When Surrey adopters chose to adopt children from other authorities we are able to recoup the £27,000 inter agency fee to recoup costs with respect of the time and investment needed to prepare, assess and support the family from the placing authority. The placing authority then remains responsible for the child's post- adoption needs for the first 3 years following adoption, but thereafter if the family continues to live within Surrey this responsibility shifts to Surrey.

### **Foster2adopt**

A further development has been the increase in foster2adopt placements. This involves approved adopters assuming care of a child under fostering regulations, pending court authorisation to place a child for adoption. This approach has been deployed in a number of situations where an existing foster placement (or placement with relatives) cannot continue, and the court has not yet agreed to adoption as the care plan. Prospective adopters agree to carry the risks (that the court may order that the child is returned to the care of their birth family), and also to support any ongoing contact arrangements, pending the final hearing in court. In the event that the court approves an adoption plan, the family then applies to formally adopt the child (at court with agreement of the agency)

Foster2adopt is considered a 'big ask' for those who wish to adopt given that adopters mainly identify themselves as 'parents in waiting' rather than carers, and the outcome of the court process is far from guaranteed. Nonetheless, a number of such arrangements have been successful, with the benefit that the child is placed earlier than otherwise, and experiences fewer moves.

### **Post placement:**

We also support families as they manage the realities of parenting their adopted children; many of whom still exhibit complex needs. Support is considered prior to the making of the order, and appropriate services put in place under a support plan, but there is additionally a statutory entitlement for a re-assessment of adoption needs at any time during the child's growing years.

Recent research by Professor Julie Selwyn has provided the first national study of adoption breakdown. Whilst this research demonstrates that adoption is a very positive and stable placement option for most adopted children and young people, it also highlighted that for a relatively small number the outcomes are less favourable, with the risk either that the placement breaks down (usually in adolescence) or that quality of life for the adoptive family is severely compromised.

A number of risk factors linked to adoption breakdown were identified by Professor Selwyn which reflected our practice experience, notably age at the time of being placed for adoption-early placement being a protective factor, the quality of pre-adoptive care and whether or not there was been exposure to domestic abuse in the birth family. Professor Selwyn kindly visited us to share the findings of her research, to thank the service for its role in providing access to families and professionals during her study. This research has provided a stimulus for us to review how local adoptive families access support, mindful that when a placement breaks down the child or young person may return to being 'looked after' and require a high level of support from a variety of services.

At the current time, services which families may access through the adoption service include:

- post approval training for adopters
- Membership of Adoption UK with access to group support-(for adopters)
- Access to a Buddy Scheme/parent consultation service (provided by Adoption UK)
- Parent and toddler group for adopters -fortnightly
- A monthly drop in with surgery slots (social work/educational psychologist)
- An in-house social work service

- Access to adopter surgeries provided by PAC (post adoption centre) under terms of a service level agreement-monthly
- TAP (the attachment project) a specialist multi-agency consultation panel, designed to facilitate and promote attachment between adopters and adopted children
- An education psychology service to assess adopted children experiencing difficulty in school.
- We supported contact: typically setting up and supporting face to face meetings between children and birth family members and 700+ post box cases involving over 2,000 exchanges annually.

## **Adopters**

Week by week the number of families ready and waiting for a child varies. However from a low resource base 3 years ago, we have successfully increased numbers of families available for placement with children. Across the year we approved 60 adoptive families, an increase of one third on the year before.

This has been possible given higher than normal levels of enquiries and an increase in our number of 'intakes' over the year from 5 to 6. In so doing, we hope to continue to ensure placement choice for most children referred to us, as well as respond to the call from central government for local authorities to recruit beyond their own local needs in the interests of enabling more children nationally to benefit from adoption.

Most enquiries we receive are in relation to one or two children of up to 5 years of age. The majority of applicants were childless, with a smaller number with one or more children of their own. Some families sought approval for a second child (having adopted through us previously), in such instances the assessment process is generally shorter given that much information about the family is already known.

Of the successful applicants the majority were heterosexual couples, however we have been pleased to welcome a rising number of same sex couples as well as single adopters.

Several applicants were born overseas (or have relatives living in other countries) and given the increasingly complex backgrounds of children referred for adoption and the need to value their heritages, this is welcomed.

Some families, including a number of foster families, sought approval for specific children. As with 'second time' adopters the assessment of foster carers is generally shorter.

1 family converted from inter-country to domestic approval, (because of the long wait for a match to be forthcoming from China.) In recent years we have seen a number of such conversions.

The average age of an adopter in Surrey is 45; this is in line with the national average, and the reality that there is no upper age limit for adoption so much as a need to focus on the health and wellbeing of applicants.

### **Revised Adult adoption pathway:**

From 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013 we have offered weekly information sessions for anyone interested in adopting with us, and have seen up to 30 potential applicants a month since the revised process commenced. We call these sessions 'learn2adopt'.

The sessions are a response to a requirement for adoption agencies to provide detailed information within 10 working days to anyone seeking this. Our objective in the sessions is to enable enquirers to decide if adoption is for them, whether this is the right time to register interest and finally whether Surrey is the right agency with which to work, (mindful that they are not restricted to working with us as their local authority service).

Checks and references are taken up and a medical performed following a 'registration of interest' which starts off the 2 stage process. Stage 1 lasts 2 months, and applicants attend an information

event and an informal meeting with experienced adopters before the agency makes a formal decision about whether or not to progress them to a second more intense stage (lasting 4 months) This is led by an allocated social worker, and results in preparation of a report by the social worker with recommendations and any comments that the applicants wish to add for the panel's consideration. Applicants are given the option to attend panel, which most chose to do.

The role of panel is to make a recommendation as to whether the applicants are suitable to adopt and they may also provide advice e.g. as to the range of issues that applicants are best suited to manage, however the final decision is taken by a senior manager in the agency (agency decision maker) in line with adoption regulations. The agency must then inform the applicants of the outcome verbally within 2 working days, and in writing within 5 working days.

## Appeals

If adopters are not approved, the applicants are entitled to appeal via Surrey's own internal appeals system or via the Independent Review Mechanism (known as the IRM) an appeals system set up by central government in 2003 and currently operated by the British Agency for Fostering and Adoption. In the period covered by this report there were no Surrey cases heard by the IRM. Adoption matters that are not within the remit of the Adoption Panel or the Independent Review Mechanism are handled via Surrey's complaints system.

## Adult Adoptees

We continue to receive a very high volume of enquiries and service requests in respect of historical adoptions-mainly from adoptees wishing to learn more about their past or perhaps to initiate contact with relatives from the family of origin. (In 2013-14 we dealt with a total of 373 enquiries).

This is sensitive work which provides us with a reminder that adoption is a lifelong issue for many adoptees, even when their adoption experience has been a positive one. The work in this area is managed mainly by a full time specialist worker and a part time colleague, with assistance from family support workers and the referral and information officer. Activity is always high throughout the year, peaking at times when adoption reunions are featured in the media as was recently the case with a series of programmes about people seeking relatives. Adult adoptees can access the following services:

- Birth records counselling
- Support and advice in relation to adoption records held in the Surrey archive, or by other adoption agencies
- Intermediary services for adoptees who have received support and counselling from our service
- Access to independent counselling
- Access to a monthly support group.

## Birth Relatives

We have a duty to provide a service to relatives who are or have previously lost children to adoption, with many referrals coming during the course of care proceedings in relation to parents who are in need of support, but would not chose to seek this via their child's worker. In addition, we support relatives who come forward seeking support, often many years following adoption of their children. This might be through direct provision or signposting to counsellors, or offering more practical assistance - such as helping them to write a letter to the family who adopted the child and enabling contact through this means. This work is mainly undertaken by a further specialist social worker, with support from family support worker colleagues.

In 2013-14 we provided a service to over 60 birth relatives.

## Finance

Under adoption regulations (Adoption and Children Act 2002,) adoption allowances can be paid if children meet the threshold criteria for an allowance (e.g. children who have exceptional needs such as a disability, significant emotional needs, large birth groups, or to enable a person known to the child



to offer them permanency) The adopters undergo a means test, in order to determine whether they qualify for payments on the basis of need. All allowances are reviewed annually.

Currently Surrey is paying adoption allowances in respect of over 200 children. These encompass children who might have been placed for adoption at any time over the past 18 years. Some allowances are paid for a time limited period, perhaps to enable a parent to remain 'at home' during the child's early years, in other instances the allowance might continue up to the child leaving full time education.

### **Service user involvement:**

We continue to have an effective and vocal service users group, who meet with us quarterly and take an increasingly active part in service delivery-participating in the production of a newsletter, information, training and social events. We were very pleased to support an adopter lead initiative this year to introduce 'meet the adopter' sessions during stage one of the application process, enabling first hand experiences of adoption to be shared with new applicants.

### **Staffing:**

At the close of 2013-4 the team was fully staffed albeit that we had some staff absences owing to maternity leave, the staff group being comprised of:

1 Team Manager (the responsible individual)

1 Agency adviser

3.5 full time equivalent Assistant Team Managers

15 full time equivalent Social Workers, all whom are qualified for their posts and registered social workers with the Health and Care Professionals Council.

1 post adoption support worker (who is trained in counseling but not a qualified social worker)

3 FTE Assistant Social Workers

1 Referral and Information Officer

In addition the following staff are commissioned by the Adoption Service:

Independent Chair of Adoption Panel,

Psychotherapist for consultation with carers.

A high percentage of our staff hold post qualifying awards and higher degrees. Specialist courses/training undertaken include Child Protection, Management, Practice Teaching, Child Care Award, Diploma in Adoption and Attachment, Counselling, Play Therapy, and Theraplay.

### **Service development:**

In 2013-14 we developed a number of practice 'hubs' within the service whereby staff can take forwards a special interest in an area of service delivery and development, under the leadership of our assistant team managers. Staff specialisms are as follows:

- Stage 1: initial recruitment and the first stage of the adoption application process.
- Training: provides preparation for becoming an adoptive parent, and post approval training.
- Family finding: identifying families for children at risk of waiting for an adoptive placement
- Adults affected by adoption (adult adoptees and birth relatives)
- Post order: works with families returning in search of support.

### **Adoption Panel:**

Panel currently operates most Tuesdays, over half day sessions, with additional sessions added where volume of business requires this to avoid unnecessary delay. Since April 2011 we have maintained a

'central list' of panel members in line with Adoption National Minimum Standards to ensure that we can offer sufficient panels. Under adoption regulations the panel must be chaired by an independent: chair Judy Wright, who is supported by 2 vice chairs, who are also independent members. As our current chair plans to step down in July 2014 after 10 years, we are currently in the process of recruiting a replacement.

The non-voting agency adviser role is filled by Jill Nancolas, one of the managers within the adoption service. A medical adviser also sits as a full member. Legal advice is provided to the panel by the corporate legal team, but advisers do not routinely attend panel.

We have been fortunate to have committed participation throughout the reporting year from our elected member representative and we believe their participation creates a helpful link between the service and elected members.

Social workers from each of the 4 areas also sit as panel members as it is a requirement for there to be social worker representation at each panel, as well as independent members.

Independent members all have a personal interest in adoption, and include adoptees and adopters. In selecting independent members we seek to achieve a diverse representation of people with different backgrounds and life experience. All our panel members display considerable commitment to Panels, not least given that each panel meeting they attend requires several hours of reading before the meeting. The role of the Adoption Panels is as follows:

- To make recommendations with respect of children with adoption care plans where a parent (rather than the court) has authorised the agency to place for adoption.
- Recommendations with respect of approval of prospective adopters
- Scrutinising proposed matches between individual children and prospective adopters
- Consideration of disruption reports identifying learning (in the event of placement breakdown.)
- Consideration of Agency activity through a quarterly review.

Any general themes or trends in relation to quality assurance of work presented to panel are discussed with the Agency through the Quality Adoption Forum (see communication section) of which the independent chair is a standing member. This ensures that there is satisfactory communication between panel and agency. It is panel policy to ensure praise is given when appropriate and to give any criticism as constructively as possible. From 2014 we are introducing a more formal process of feedback on the reports and presentations of social workers, which will be shared as a learning process and to inform appraisals and supervision.

All applicants and social workers that attend panel have an opportunity to complete a questionnaire to feed back on their experience of the panel process which is shared with panel and informs the annual appraisals of panel members.

### **Communication:**

There is an expectation that there is a regular dialogue between the panel and agency with regards to both day-to-day business, quality assurance and development. Regular business meetings between the panel chair, panel adviser and the adoption team manager ensure that the panel process operates effectively. In addition, a Quality Adoption Forum instigated in 2011, is attended by senior managers in Children's Services, agency decision makers and panel's chair to look at issues from a more strategic perspective.

### **Feedback:**

The service endeavours to be a listening and learning service. We therefore seek feedback at key points in the service users journey with us, notably at information events, following adopter preparation and attendance at panel, and we are introducing a further feedback loop following the making of adoption orders to gather feedback from both the adults and where possible the child too.

As discussed previously, we have an active service users group which meets quarterly and this provides helpful insights into the user experience as well as suggestions and help with service

development. We aim to ensure that different perspectives are represented within the group by inviting participation from those who have been adopted as well as those who are or have, adopted.

In the event of any placement disrupting before an adoption order has been made, whereby the child returns to being looked after by foster carers the service commissions an independent chair to conduct a disruption meeting to try to identify learning for the agency, and invites the participation of the adoptive family in whatever form works for them. The report that results from the meeting is shared with all the participants and relevant parts of the service.

## **Complaints**

The adoption service received 15 complaints in 2013-14, all concluded within stage 1 of the complaints process. In many instances the primary aspect of the complaint related to another part of Children's Services, typically the case holding team for a child with an adoption plan (it is not uncommon for members of an adopted child's family to complain that their child has been adopted against their wishes having exhausted the legal process) or involved complaints in relation to special guardianship applications that the service was unable to support.

It is not uncommon that in cases involving removal from parental care and where adoption is being considered that birth parents or relatives complain in the hope that this will lead to a change of decision. In such situations it may be necessary to provide a sensitive response, whilst making it clear that the outcome they seek is not within the remit of the complaints process.

One complaint involved a special guardian complaining about the level of financial support provided, and although the complaint was not upheld (given that the service had complied with the plan as set out previously at court), a way forward was agreed through a review of the support plan.

As noted elsewhere, we have a birth relatives worker attached to the service and they are available to relatives at any stage of the adoption or special guardianship process for support purposes, but have no actual casework involvement with the child or its adopters.

Two complaints were made by adult adoptees, which resulted in explanation (of what the service was able to provide) and in one instance an apology was issued acknowledging that information sent out by letter could have been clearer, with the corrective action that the template for this letter was amended.

Complaints from adopters involved a variety of issues and outcomes, including revision of the review process for adopters (i.e. those not matched within a year of approval) the service having acknowledged that the process of review in this instance had not been satisfactory.

A further complaint from an adopter focussed on the risks of children failing to receive continuity of services when they move between authorities through adoption. This provided helpful learning and discussion with health colleagues given that in this instance health provision failed to be provided promptly following the child arriving in Surrey from another local authority.

## **Compliments:**

We also are pleased to receive compliments with respect of individuals who have delivered exceptional service, as well as comments on the service generally.

Compliment from step parent adoption applicant:

'I wish to place on record my heartfelt appreciation for the immense efforts made on our behalf by V. V has been a tower of strength during the past months leading up to the successful adoption of my son T (those words are thrilling); her professional advice coupled with her experience and wisdom was invaluable'

Comments from adopters

'we have appreciated the support given in the last year from Surrey Children's Services. He (child K) has flourished with the support of school, Surrey and us'.

'The way you (social worker) treated us was impeccable. You were professional in helping steer us through what was a complex and time consuming process'

**Media:**

We were also pleased to support the work of the Wall to Wall production team which has filmed and screened a 4 part TV series on modern day adoption, in the interests of raising public awareness of the complexities of adoption and the needs of children who risk waiting for a family. The series screened in May 2014, featuring the story how a family was sought for a child (Joshua), happily now placed with adoptive parents.

**Conclusions:**

The adoption service continues to manage a very high workload, despite the loss of special guardianship work from January 2014. In practice an increase in the volume of adoption enquiries has more than filled the capacity vacated by special guardianship.

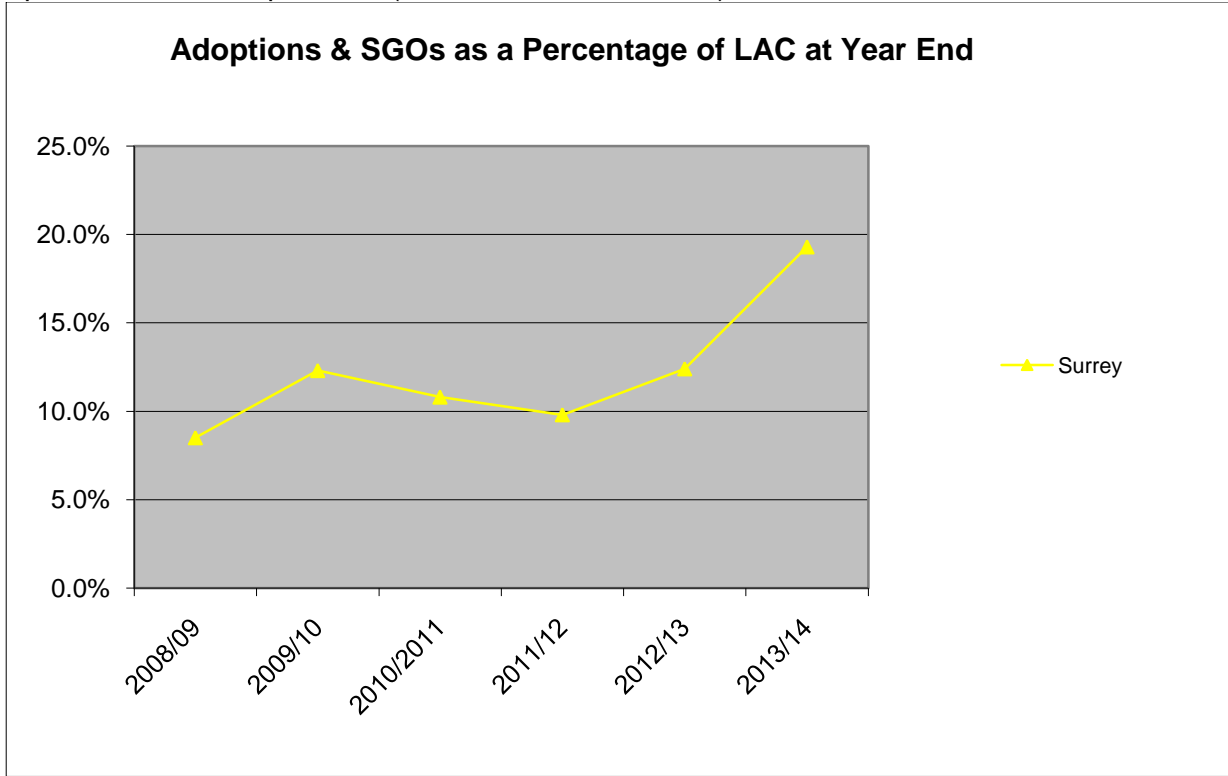
Changes introduced in July 2013 (with respect of the adult adoption pathway) are currently being embedded, with early indications being that the coming year will continue to see a high volume of enquiries and applications compared with previous years.

The challenge for the service will be to translate this activity into stable and enduring placements for a wide range of children.

## Adoptions & Special Guardianship Orders – Notes on Performance to March 14

### 1. Orders Granted

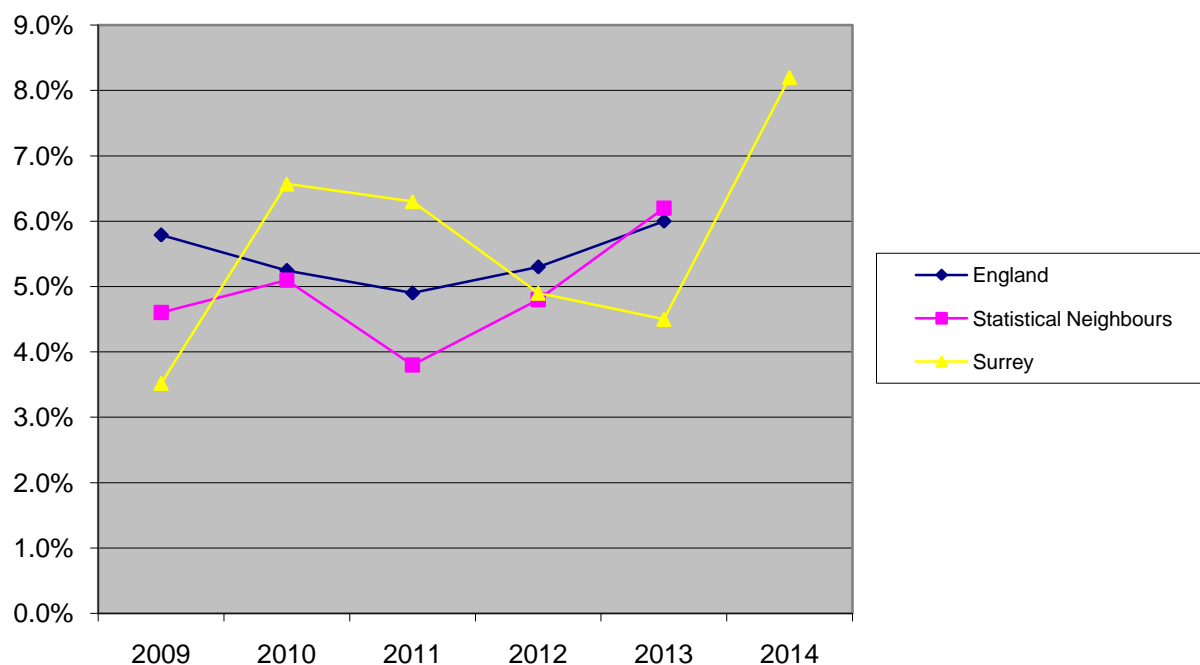
The former C23 Performance Indicator shows the number of Adoption/Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) granted, compared to the cohort of looked after children at the period end (children in care for at least 6 months, excluding unaccompanied asylum seekers – “UASC”). In Surrey, over the last 6 years, performance has been in the DfE “Very Good” band. Surrey’s performance was again a record for 2013/14, 19.4%, compared to 12.4% for 2012-13. There were 59 Adoptions (24 more than in 2012/13) and 66 Special Guardianship Orders (21 more than in 2012/13), 125 in total.



NB COMPARATOR INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE DfE CEASED FROM 2008/09 -PAF C23 NO LONGER MONITORED NATIONALLY.

For Adoptions only, we can compare the number of adoptions to the total LAC population (excluding UASC). In 2012/13, adoptions as a percentage of LAC (excluding UASC) fell for the third year to 4.5% (LAC numbers rose by 98 over the 3 years). In 2013-14, there were 59 adoptions (a 68% increase), to 8.2% of LAC (with a fall of 41 in LAC numbers in the year).

### Adoptions in year as % of LAC excluding UASC



The table below gives the actual numbers of orders granted in the last 6 years.

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Adopted	26	47	43	37	35	59
SGO	25	24	18	23	45	66
Total Orders in Year	51	71	61	60	80	125
% of LAC cohort at year end	8.5%	12.3%	10.8%	9.8%	12.4%	19.4%

In 2012-13, SGOs exceeded adoptions to make up 56% of total orders, indicating their increasing significance in achieving permanence for children. This significance continued in 2013/14, when SGOs once again exceeded adoptions, to make up 53% of orders granted.

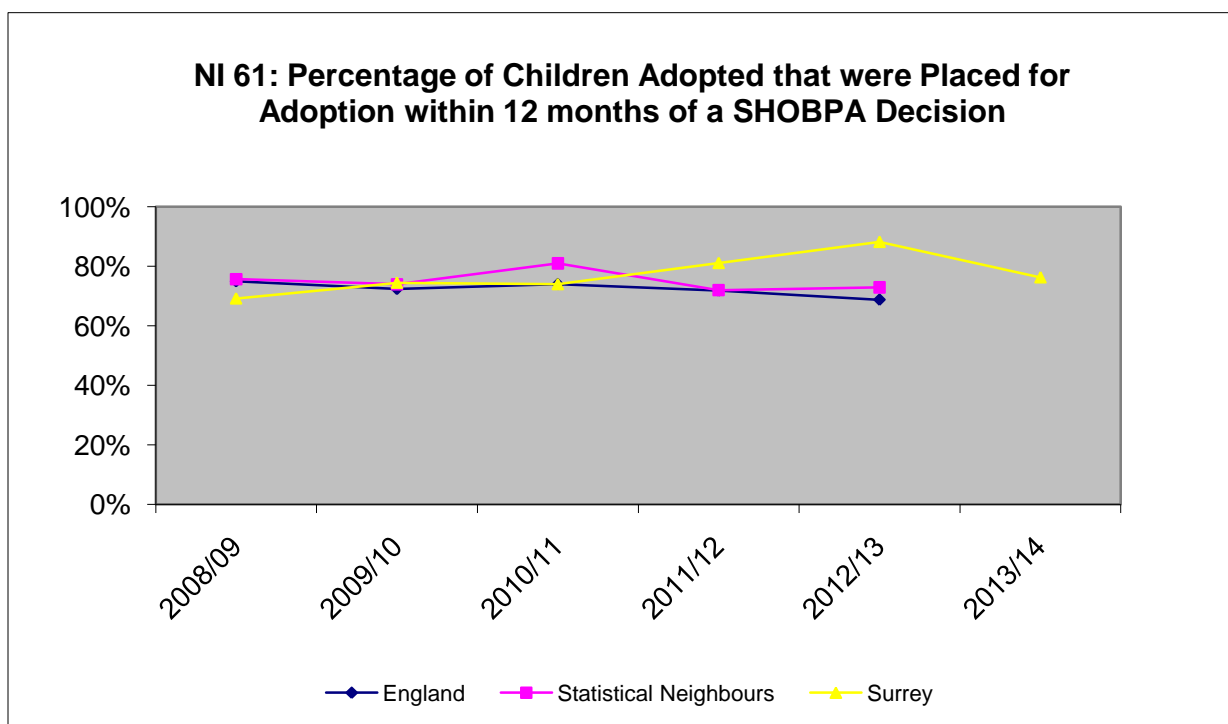
## 2. Time from Should be Placed for Adoption Decision to being Placed For Adoption – NI 61

Performance for this aspect of adoption is measured by former National Indicator NI 61: Timeliness of placements of looked after children for adoption following an agency decision that the child should be placed for adoption.

This indicator looks at the percentage of children adopted in the year that had been placed for adoption (with their eventual adopters) within 12 months of the local authority's decision that the child should be placed for adoption (SHOBPA).

Timescales for placing children for adoption will be affected by how easy or difficult it is to place them. Older children with more complex needs, sibling groups, disabled children and children from black and ethnic minority groups could be more of a challenge to place. Delays could also occur due to availability of in-house adopters, availability of funding for external placements and court delays.

Surrey's experience had broadly mirrored the performance by its Statistical Neighbours for a number of years, and in 2011/12 and 2012/13 exceeded them by 9 and 13 percentage points respectively. However, in 2013/14 Surrey's performance fell back to 76%, primarily due to delays in placing older children for adoption: the average age at being placed for adoption for those adopted was 3 years old, but for those taking more than 12 months, the average was 5 years old.



### 3. CURRENT NATIONAL MEASURES

There are two new sets of measures which cover aspects of adoptions and SGOs: Children in Care & Adoption Performance (League Table) Indicators, and the Adoption Scorecard. NB Some indicators are repeated across the sets, and they are reported by the DfE as three-year averages, rather than giving figures for individual years.

#### 3.1 League Table Indicators

This replaces the “National Indicators” set for Children’s Services, and contains 3 indicators relating to adoption and SGOs, including the former NI 61:

	Average 3 years to 2011		Average 3 years to 2012		Average 3 years to 2013		Actual 2014
	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC
<b>League Table Indicators</b>							
Adoption 1 – the percentage of children who ceased to be looked after that were adopted (high figures are preferable)	12%	12%	13%	12%	12%	13%	14%
Adoption 2 – the percentage of children who ceased to be looked after because of a special guardianship order (high figures are preferable)	7%	6%	7%	7%	9%	8%	16%
Adoption 3 – the former NI 61 – see section 2 above.	72%	74%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	76%



### 3.2 Adoption Scorecard

There are a number of measures relating to children in the Adoption Scorecard (AS):

Adoption Scorecard Measures	Average 3 years to 2011		Average 3 years to 2012		Average 3 years to 2013		Actual 2014
	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC
Children 1 – For those adopted, the average time from entering care to being placed for adoption (days)	565	625	567	636	551	647	617*
Children 2 – Average time from court authority to place child and LA matching to an adoptive family (days).	N/A	N/A	173	195	180	210	186*
Children 3 – children who wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.	N/A	N/A	68%	56%	N/A	N/A	51%
Related information 1 – adoptions from care (number adopted and % of all care leavers)	N/A	N/A	130 (13%)	9,740 (12%)	115 (12%)	10,540 (13%)	14%
Related Information 2 – children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption.	10%	7%	11%	7%	14%	9%	14%
Related Information 3 – average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (or foster carers that go on to adopt), in days.	N/A	N/A	474	546	479	545	N/A
Related Information 4 – adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to BME care leavers (ie any non-white ethnicity)	8%	7%	8%	6%	8%	7%	12%
Related Information 5 – adoptions of children aged 5+, compared to all care leavers aged 5+ years	4%	5%	4%	4%	3%	4%	7%
Related Information 6 – average length of care proceeding (weeks).	N/A	N/A	58	53	57	51	N/A
Related Information 7 – number of children waiting adoption (as at 31 <sup>st</sup> March).	N/A	N/A	55	5,750	40	6,890	54

\* Provisional DfE figures – the remainder in the “Actual 2014” column are calculated in-house.

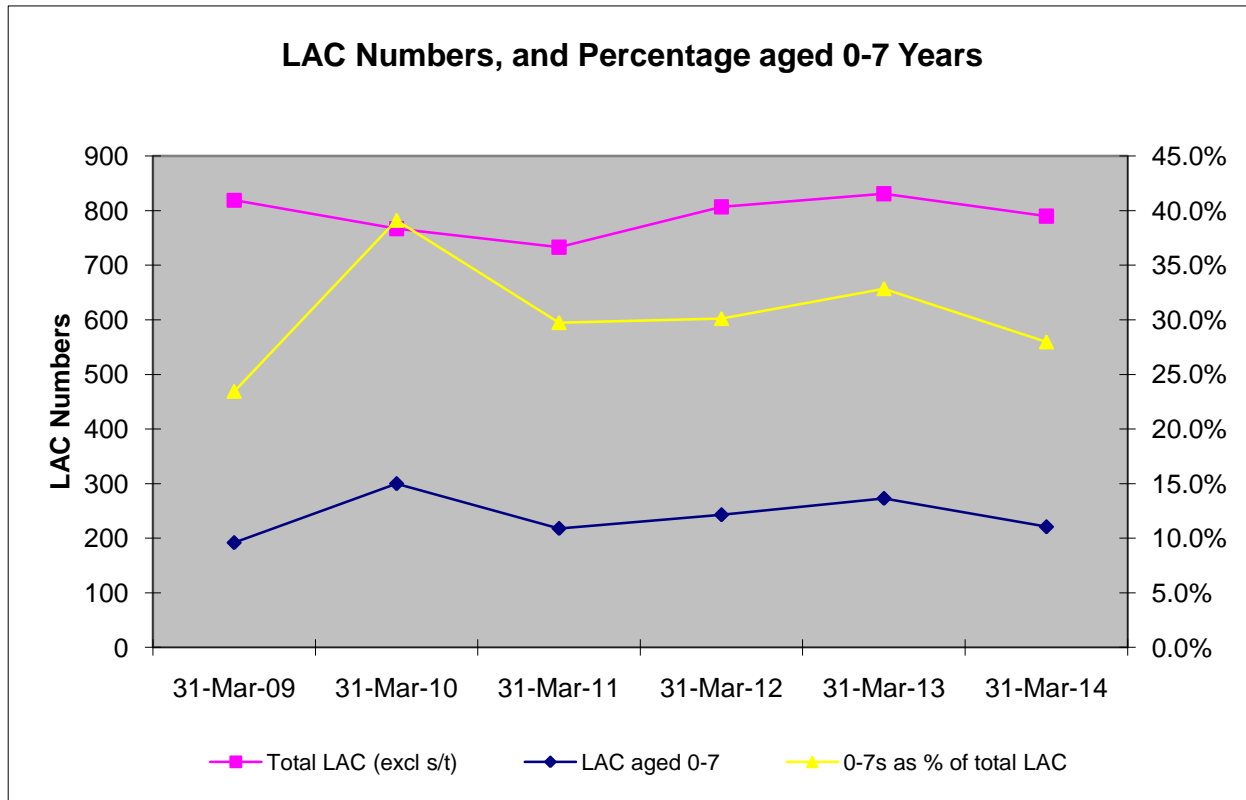
**NB** The above figures are provided by the DfE, who round any “child count” figures to the nearest 5 or 0 (ie RI 1 & 7).

## 4. LAC POPULATION

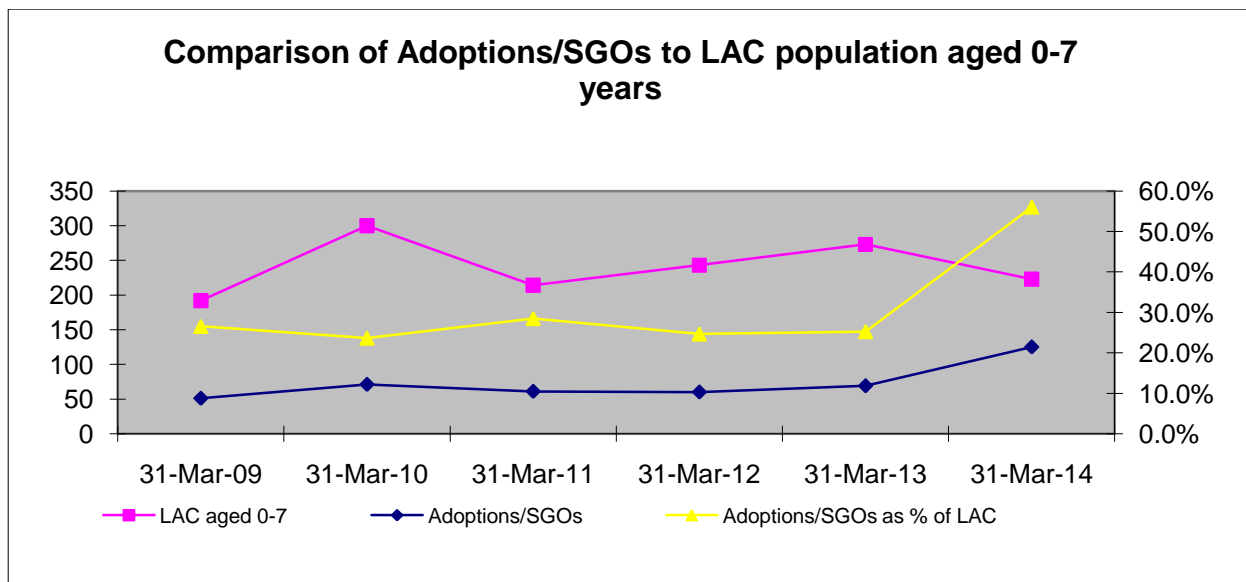
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### 4.1 LAC Age

After broadly rising for the 5 years to March 2013, Surrey's LAC population (excluding those on short-term agreements) decreased by 38 children, to 793, by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014. For children in the likely adoption age range of 0-7 years, over the year, the figure fell from 273 to 223, hence in comparison to the total LAC population, the percentage of 0-7 year olds fell from 33% to 28%.



In the 6 years to March 14, the proportion of Adoptions/SGOs in comparison to the size of its "core" 0-7 age group rose by 30 percentage points. For 2013/14, the 0-7 figure was 56.1%, more than double the 2012/13 figure (25.3%), however this rise will in part be due to the increase children aged 8+ leaving due to adoption or SGO. In 2013/14, for those aged 8+, there were 6 adoptions (1 in 2012/13), and 12 SGOs (18% of all SGOs), compared to 10 in 2012/13.



The average age at Order date for the SGO group in 2013/14 was 5.6 years (5.5 in 2012/13). The average age at Order for the adoption rose in 2013/14 to 4.0, compared to 3.5 years in 2012/13.

The age range of children granted SGOs in 2013/14 was 0-14 years, whilst the age range for children subject to Adoption Orders was 0-11 years. In 2012/13 the range for SGOs was 0-16 years, and 0-9 years for adoptions.

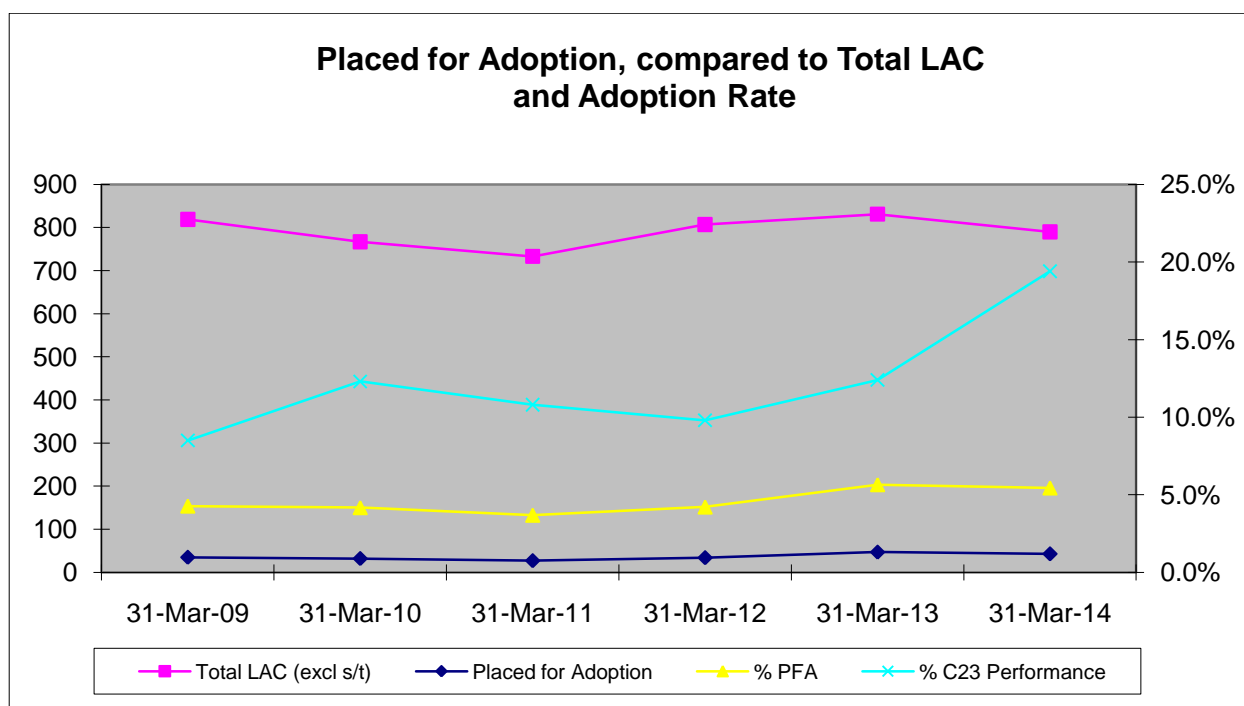
#### 4.2 Duration Looked After

Another aspect for consideration is the relationship between adoption numbers and the length of time looked after.

Looking at the average length of time a child is looked after prior to adoption, for adoptions in 2013/14, the average time was 2.5 years (2.3 years in 2012/13). The average for Special Guardianship Orders in 2013/14 was 1.7 years (from 2.0 years in 2012/13).

#### 4.3 LAC Placed for Adoption

The number of children placed for adoption, as at March 2014, had risen by 23% overall in the past 6 years. There doesn't appear to be any direct or inverse link between the number of SGOs and those placed for adoption in the period. There were 43 children placed for adoption as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014.



### 5. Kinship Care as an alternative to Adoption

One factor that the Adoption & Permanency Service believes has impacted on Surrey's adoption numbers in recent years has been the move, where appropriate to the child, to seek a kinship care placement rather than adoption/long term foster care.

This affects the numbers of (particularly young) Looked After Children in two ways: firstly, the availability of an appropriate kinship placement (usually outside the LAC system) is now routinely explored (without the child ever entering the LAC system, if this is appropriate to the child's circumstances).

Then, secondly, for children identified as never being able to return home, a kinship placement with the legal & financial support of a Special Guardianship Order (from Dec 2005) has given families an alternative to an Adoption or Residence Order. The SGO is intended to give relative carers greater security than the Residence Order can offer, without the perceived awkwardness of becoming the legal parent of one's own niece, grandson etc. Of the 66 SGOs granted in 2013/14 fifty nine (89%) were to kinship carers (the remainder to other former foster carers).

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