

Surrey County Council

**Adoption Agency
Report**

2014 - 2015

Introduction:

The Adoption & Children Act 2002 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 this report capture the period April 1 2014 to March 31 2015. A midyear report will be provided in a further 6 months, capturing activity in the first half of 2015-16.

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. As an Adoption Agency we are required to comply with a comprehensive range of legislation, statutory guidance and national minimum standards and are subject to inspection by OFSTED, the last inspection having taken place in 2014 with the outcome that we were rated as Good.

Service Overview:

Surrey provides a full 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** for all whose lives have been touched by adoption, including adopted children and their adoptive families, birth relatives of children who have been or are likely to be adopted and adopted adults.
- **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-typically step parent adoption or adoption by a connected person.
- **Inter country adoption** - non agency adoption welfare reports and post placement reports to the child's country of origin

Special Guardianship:

Mindful that adoption is not the only means by which children find a secure home, it is important to highlight the increasing use of special guardianship (SGO) to promote permanency. An SGO confers parental responsibility on the special guardian until the child reaches their majority. However the legal relationship with the birth parent continues (unlike adoption), albeit that the birth parent is limited in the extent to which they can intervene in decision making or care arrangements. This has made special guardianship a popular order for children who have enduring ties with their birthparents and is often favoured in situations where a former foster care or relative is offering a permanent home. 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. 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

National context:

Adoption Action Plan

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 and aim to make the journey of both children in need of adoption and adults wishing to adopt more timely and to increase the number of children who are adopted overall.

Accordingly from 2014 a 26 week limit was set for care proceedings given that the length of court processes was identified as a significant cause of delay for children. The adult adoption pathway was

reformed from July 2013 with the implementation of a 2 stage application process: to take 2 and 4 months respectively to complete.

Adoption reform grants were provided to local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to support the agencies to recruit additional adopters and close the gap between numbers of children with adoption plans and numbers of adoptive families available. A 'national adoption gateway' was also created, with Department of Education funding, to provide initial information for would be adoption applicants and help them identify assessing agencies. This resulted in higher than normal numbers of adopters recruited and approved both locally and nationally with the result that by the end of the reporting period the so called 'adopter gap' previously estimated at 6,000 families had been eliminated.

Again with the aim of reducing delay for children, the newly implemented Children and Families Act (2014) introduced a requirement to consider placing children with dual approved (fostering and adoption) families, and also made provision for the removal of the recruitment functions of local authorities who did not respond adequately.

Further government support was provided as an incentive for placing authorities to make placements with adopters approved by voluntary and other local authority adoption agencies by the equalisation of the 'interagency fee' payable in cases where an authority 'buys' a placement from another agency rather than placing a child with its own adopters. Adoption agencies were also encouraged to employ creative methods of family finding for their children, notably through the roll out of Adoption Activity Days whereby prospective adopters were able to meet children at specially designed and supported events.

Adoption support:

A national study of adoption breakdowns and adoption support was published in 2014 by Professor Julie Selwyn of Bristol University which reported that although overall breakdown rates following adoption were low, nonetheless significant numbers of families experienced considerable challenge as a result of the long term additional needs of their children, which were often poorly understood and they found it difficult to obtain adequate support.

With the needs of adopting families in mind, a requirement to inform adopters of the right to an adoption support needs assessment was introduced in the Children and Family Act, and from May 2015 an Adoption Support Fund will provide £19 million pounds of additional funding to enable better access to therapeutic support for adopted children. (The money to be applied for on a case by case basis by local authorities, following assessment of the child's support needs).

The extension of priority school admission status for former looked after children and pupil premium plus to the same children were further supportive measures designed to promote confidence to adopt children beyond infancy and with additional needs.

Measuring performance:

Adoption performance of local authorities is now monitored by the Department of Education and a National Adoption Leadership Board through annual league tables. These highlight percentage of looked after children and young people exiting care through both adoption and special guardianship-another legal order conferring parental responsibility. Each local authority also receives 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.

Recent trends- the court process:

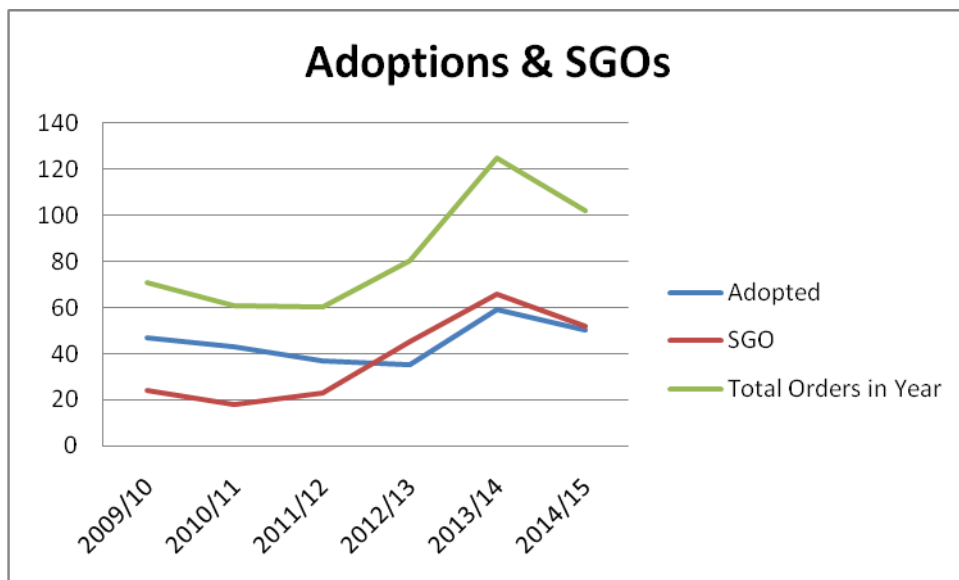
After a period of significant increase in safeguarding activity with more cases resulting in adoption outcomes, there has been a recent and dramatic reversal in the second half of the reporting period-both locally and nationally.

Recent case law (Re B and Re BS) has had the effect of reducing both the number of applications for placement orders (an order which enables local authorities to make adoptive placements in the absence of parental consent), and the number of instances where placement order applications are

successful. This has flown in the face of the very clearly articulated government objective (of ensuring that higher numbers of children can be adopted) with courts exerting their independence, and taking the view that adoption is only appropriate when it is the only option available.

The outcome has been that there are now more instances where a child remains within their family of origin following care proceedings, either because they return to live with a parent or as a result of being placed with a relative following a successful assessment. In most cases this would be under the terms of an SGO. In other instances children have continued to be looked after in a long term with foster carers and the relationship with the birth family is maintained by supported contact.

ACTIVITY



The above graph indicates that the past year saw high levels of activity with respect of both adoption and special guardianship, albeit it nearly a fifth lower than the previous year (which represented an all time high for both adoption and special guardianship, reflecting high levels of safeguarding activity in previous years).

When safeguarding levels (as indicated by high numbers of cases in care proceedings) are high, the number of young children in the looked after population typically rises. When the percentage of under 7s in the looked after population is high the likelihood is that there will be a high number of adoptions the following year.

Currently the looked after population has declined somewhat, and the proportion of under 7s is also lower, making for lower numbers of adoption orders expected in 2015-16. The table below gives the actual numbers of orders granted in the last 6 years.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Adopted	47	43	37	35	59	50
SGO	24	18	23	45	66	52
Total Orders in Year	71	61	60	80	125	102
% of LAC cohort at year end	12.3%	10.8%	9.8%	12.4%	19.4%	18.0%

National performance indicators

There are two new sets of national measures: Children in Care & Adoption Performance (League Table) Indicators, and the Adoption Scorecard. 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.

League Table Indicators

League Table Indicators	Average 3 years to 2012		Average 3 years to 2013		Average 3 years to 2014		Actual 2015
	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC
Adoption 1 – the percentage of children who ceased to be looked after that were adopted (high figures are preferable)	13%	12%	12%	13%	12%	14%	13%
Adoption 2 – the percentage of children who ceased to be looked after because of a special guardianship order (high figures are preferable)	7%	7%	9%	8%	12%	10%	14%

The figures indicate that Special Guardianship in Surrey is used more than most other authorities and adoption slightly less. This reflects a local tendency wherever possible to place children with connected people (with whom there is a prior relationship) in preference to so called 'stranger' placements-most commonly for adoption.

Taken together however, permanency orders are higher than the national average.

Adoption Scorecard

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

Adoption Scorecard Measures	Average 3 years to 2012		Average 3 years to 2013		Average 3 years to 2014		Actual 2015
	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC	England	SCC
Children 1 – For those adopted, the average time from entering care to being placed for adoption (days)	567	636	551	647	568	628	480
Children 2 – Average time from court authority to place child and LA matching to an adoptive family (days).	173	195	180	210	175	217	163
Children 3 – children who wait less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.	55%	47%	56%	49%	56%	51%	64%
Related information 1 – adoptions from care (number adopted and % of all care leavers)	130 (13%)	9,740 (12%)	115 (12%)	10,540 (13%)	130 (12%)	12,530 (14%)	50 13%
Related Information 2 – children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption.	11%	7%	14%	9%	18%	12%	11%
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.	474	546	479	545	492	525	372

Related Information 4 – adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to BME care leavers (i.e. any non-white ethnicity)	8%	6%	8%	7%	7%	8%	2%
Related Information 5 – adoptions of children aged 5+, compared to all care leavers aged 5+ years	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%	5%	3%
Related Information 6 – average length of care proceeding (weeks).	58	53	57	51	54	48	N/A
Related Information 7 – number of children waiting adoption (as at 31 st March).	55	5,750	40	6,890	35	4,680	75

Local performance with regards to timeliness of child placement is above the national average, particularly when figures are adjusted for cases where the child is adopted by their foster carer.

Of note however is the high percentage of changes of plan away from adoption (local 3 year average of 18%) which can be due to a number of factors including the local preference for special guardianship in cases where there is a connected person – typically a relative willing to offer permanency. Sometimes this happens late in care proceedings whereby it is necessary to re-consider the child’s plan.

In 6 children cases children’s plans changed to long term foster care as no adoptive family could be identified after a period of active family finding. The children in these cases were mainly older children in adoption terms, aged between 6 and 8 years and of these all had complex emotional and behavioural needs. One child remained with the same foster carer as a long term arrangement, and 4 went to live with other foster carers on a long term basis.

The remaining child was still in infancy, but with very significant medical and developmental needs and she also remained with her foster carer.

Children placed in 2014-15:

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 4 months of age and the oldest 8 years.

3 children were adopted by previous short term foster carers, and a further 4 by so called foster2adopt carers.

38 children moved into new families by themselves and 17 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.

Whilst we recognise the value of adopters reflecting the ethnicity and cultural, spiritual and linguistic backgrounds of a child-in the interests of promoting these aspects of a child’s sense of identity, we also appreciate that it can in some instances be difficult to achieve exact matching, and that to delay placing a child in a permanent family is itself detrimental. However, recently the percentage of BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) children exiting care through adoption has been low reflecting a rise in the BAME numbers across the looked after children population-the majority of whom did not have adoption plans.

Sadly the placement of 1 child placed for adoption disrupted prior to the adoption order being made, and this child's care plan has subsequently changed to long term fostering.

Disruption:

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. In 2014-15 1 child's placement disrupted prior to adoption.

Adoption orders:

Orders are made by courts, after a child has spent several months settling into their new family. As such the number of orders also reflects the activity of the previous year when the children were actually matched and placed. In 2014-15 50 adoption orders and 52 special guardianship orders were made.

Placement challenges:

As in previous years, children over 4, those with health and developmental uncertainty, complex emotional and behavioural needs, children from BAME 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. Sometimes this is through adoption, and in other instances through special guardianship.

These often are typically 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.

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).

Alongside our sending out profiles to other adoption agency, 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. From last year we have also subscribed to a further register Adoptionlink which enables adopters to conduct their own search for children across the UK.

Family finding activity aims to bring the child to the attention of as many potential families as possible. We will routinely 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.

From November 2014 we have been part of a large consortium of adoption agencies (Adoption South Central) which includes 10 local authorities and 2 voluntary agencies and will give our children access to a wider still range of adopters. Since last year we have run a further 2 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.

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).

Revised Adult adoption pathway:

From 1st 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 1 couple successfully appealed an initial decision not to approve.

Approvals:

We approved a record number of adopters in 2014-15 at 68, the high numbers representing a response to high numbers of children with new adoption plans at the time, and the national context of central government directing adoption agencies to approve more families.

Given that we were successful in recruiting above and beyond our own local needs, a significant number of Surrey adopters chose to adopt children from other placing authorities, as a result of adopter led matching meaning that in addition to the 55 Surrey children placed over 20 more arrived from elsewhere.

However moving into 2015-16, national data from the Adoption Leadership Board is indicating that the so called adopter gap has been closed and accordingly we have revised our recruitment target for this year to 50 new families taking account of waiting families approved last year and who are not as yet matched with a child from Surrey or beyond.

This means that at the present time we are taking a targeted recruitment approach, limiting entry to applicants willing to consider children at risk of waiting for a family. We will be reviewing this position 3 monthly and communicating our needs to the general public via the Surrey CC adoption website.

Most enquiries we receive are from applicants hoping to adopt one or two children, typically below school age. The majority of applicants continue to be childless couples although we also receive significant numbers of enquiries from families with one or more children already. Some families seek approval for a second child (having adopted through us previously), and 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.

Approvals include a number of foster families seeking approval for specific children placed with them as foster placements. As with 'second time' adopters the assessment of foster carers is generally shorter.

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

Foster2adopt:

The past year has seen increasing use of foster2adopt placements. This involves approved adopters assuming care of a child under fostering regulations, pending court endorsement of the adoption plan whereby the current carers then adopt the child, removing the need for the usual move between foster carers and adopters. 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. 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 support:

We 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. Typically we end our formal involvement with most families after the adoption order is made but retain contact with many through informal groups and training events.

Allocation of a social worker or sign posting to alternative adoption support services is typically the outcome of an assessment of need, given statutory entitlement for adopters to request re-assessment at any time during the child's growing years. In 2014-15 we conducted 29 such assessments, and taking account of support plans agreed over this period and support packages carrying over from the previous year 70 families received a service - whether provided directly by our own staff, or from services from whom we contracted a service.

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.

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. Consequently, we are currently engaged in an analysis of local need with our colleagues in the commissioning team to inform our post order strategy for the next 5 years. This work will focus both on identifying need and market engagement with potential providers, in order to take advantage of new funding to be accessed on a case by case basis through an Adoption Support Fund from May 2015.

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

- post approval training for adopters-Surrey provision

- 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, Surrey provision
- A monthly drop in with surgery slots (social work/educational psychologist) Surrey provision
- Social work service-Surrey provision
- Adopter surgeries provided by PAC (Post Adoption Centre) under terms of a service level agreement
- TAP (the attachment project) a specialist multi-agency consultation panel, designed to facilitate and promote attachment between adopters and adopted children. Surrey provision.
- An education psychology service to support adopted children experiencing difficulty in school. Surrey provision.
- Supported contact: typically setting up and supporting over face to face meetings a year between children and birth family members and 700+ post box cases involving over 2,000 exchanges annually. Surrey provision.

Christine's story

Christine was placed for adoption aged 5, after 2 years in foster care. She was referred to the Adoption Service following a series of failed engagements with other services including CAMHS, with concerns about her emotional well being and poor school attendance. Christine was assessed as very anxious and unable to manage well away from home and her adoptive mother. A post adoption social worker worked with her over a period of 2 years, developing a close working relationship with Christine, her parents and the school. Over time Christine has been better able to manage in school and school have become more understanding of her needs which are connected to her very early life experiences. She has undertaken life story work to make better sense of who she is and where she came from and is more confident about taking on new life experiences such as learning to drive.

Recent feedback from Christine's mother: 'very appropriate (service) for our daughter, reached out to her in the way she needed.'

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 sibling 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 174 children, at a cost of £1.3 million. 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.

Adult Adoptees:

We continue to receive a 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 2014-15 we dealt with a total of 246 enquiries, most of which became active cases).

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.

Julia's Story

Julia was 52 when she approached us, her adoptive parents had recently died and her young adult children were curious about her roots. Julia had had a happy and fulfilling childhood and had not wished to upset her parents by tracing earlier. Julia was advised to apply to the general registry office, who provided the name of her birth mother and the court where the adoption order was made to a Surrey counsellor who met with Julia in accordance with adoption regulations. Julia then wrote to the court and found that the agency that oversaw her adoption is no longer in operation but it was possible to find out that her records are now held in the archives of a voluntary adoption agency. The Surrey worker applied to the voluntary agency for the records and received an electronic copy of all of the records held about Julia. An appointment has been made with Julia (who is bringing her husband for support)

Julia will shortly discover that her birth mother believed that her relationship with a local man would lead to marriage but was disappointed to find that he was not as committed to the relationship as she was. She spent some time in a mother and baby home, giving birth to Julia and caring for her for 4 weeks until her adoptive family were found. Julia will discover full details about her birth mother which, if she chooses, may enable her to try to trace her. If she chooses to do this, either herself or via a tracing expert, she can return to Surrey to ask for an intermediary service, whereby links will be made sensitively with the birth mother to assist in whatever contact the pair would wish to initiate. Sadly it has been possible to ascertain already that the birth father is deceased which will be difficult news for Julia and she will be helped to process this information at the time of meeting.

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 choose to seek this via their child's worker. In addition, we support relatives who come forwards 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 2014-15 we provided a service to 54 birth relatives.

Lucy's story

Lucy is the birth mother of two children who have been adopted separately, and was herself in care from the age of 13. She has a learning disability, and a history of mental illness including periods of depression, and drug misuse. The birth relative worker attached to the adoption service has been working with Lucy, initially to help her understand the process and impact of adoption, and more recently with regards to contact issues. She has supported Lucy with writing her letters to the adoptive parents, and also arranged a meeting for Lucy to meet with the adoptive parents of her elder child. Unfortunately she was unable to manage this meeting, as it triggered old painful memories and created high anxiety in her. Lucy has been reassured that the meeting can be postponed for now given that she hopes to go ahead with this at a future date and to show how she has worked so hard to improve her life – attending college and gaining further qualifications in Maths, English and IT, as well as doing voluntary work in a local shop.

Lucy continues to attend a support group for birth mothers whose children have been adopted, and her relationship with her present partner is far more stable than previous adult relationships she had been involved in.

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 last year called 'meet the adopter' sessions during stage one of the application process, enabling first hand experiences of adoption to be shared with new applicants. This has gone from strength to strength and is much appreciated by applicants.

As a result of consultation with our families and in particular the young people themselves we have developed 2 adopted children's groups XXplorers for 8-12 year olds, and #amazing for 12-14s. The success of the groups is such that we expect to launch a further group for 14-19 year old adopted young people later this year in conjunction with the youth service.

Staffing:

At the close of 2013-4 the team was fully staffed albeit that we had some staff absences owing to long term sickness, 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 counselling 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

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

Service development:

In 2014 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 on 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. Our panel chair is David Goosey

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 introduced 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 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 and learning:

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 have introduced 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.

Complaints:

The adoption service received 9, all but 1 concluded within stage 1 of the complaints process. (We currently have one case at stage 3 which relates to our decision not to progress applicants to stage 2 of the adoption process on the basis of information received in stage 1)

In some 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. Birth relatives may 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 beyond the remit of the complaints process.

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.

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 and post adoption support requests has more than filled the capacity vacated by special guardianship.

Placing children in a timely manner continues to be our highest priority, not least because research indicates that age at placement is one of the most significant factors in placement stability and that delays can be a risk factor for placement breakdown. We are pleased to see so many of our children being placed very soon following courts granting authority for them to join a new family and acknowledge the efforts of the team in ensuring that we have a healthy pool of adopters ready to receive children, as well as proactive family finders for the minority of children who are not matched with a local family.

With the drive to see children placed and placed quickly, we endeavour to ensure that adopters are well prepared and have received good quality information about the children to prepare them for the task ahead. Ensuring this continues and that we can continue to develop appropriate support services both internally and from external providers will be key to our efforts moving forwards in 2015-16

Suzanne Chambers
Team Manager