

Surrey County Council

Adoption Agency

Report

2016

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 2015 to March 31 2016.

A further midyear report will be provided to the Lead Member in a further 6 months, capturing activity for the first half of 2016-17.

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

Our most recent inspection took place in 2014 as part of a comprehensive inspection of social care and safeguarding services, when a 'good' rating was made with regards to adoption.

Service Overview:

Surrey provides a full adoption service covering the following areas of business:

- **Family Finding** for children in the care of Surrey County Council with an adoption care plan.
- **Recruiting adopters** who can offer placements to Surrey's looked after children, or children placed from other local authorities.
- **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 Courts in respect of proposed adoption arrangements which were not made by an adoption agency-typically step parents, connected persons and inter country adoptions.

Special Guardianship

Mindful that adoption is not the only means by which permanency can be secured it is important to highlight the increasing use of special guardianship orders (SGO). This order confers parental responsibility until the child reaches majority age, but unlike adoption the legal relationship between child and birth parent is maintained, albeit that the birth parent is limited in the extent to which they can intervene in decision making or care arrangements.

Two cases heard in the Court of Appeal courts: Re B and Re BS are attributed as triggering a rise in special guardianship and a corresponding drop in adoption. These cases prompted a statement by the President of the Family Division with regards to the need to improve analysis of options presented to courts in care cases, setting this against a presumption that adoption is appropriate only when 'nothing else will do.'

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

National context: the 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 in 2011. Jointly they inform the current policy context with regard to reform of the family courts and the adoption process. The main aims being to reduce the time taken to determine children's futures, and to provide greater impetus for children to be adopted from care. Ironically however, the result has been a tension between this policy and judicial approaches following the statement of the President of the Family Division referred to previously.

The Adoption Action Plan also included a commitment from Central Government to speed up the adult adoption process, with the result that from 2013 a 'national adoption gateway' was created with Department of Education funding, to provide initial information for would be adoption applicants. At the same time adoption reform grants were provided to adoption agencies to support recruitment of additional adopters, and from 2013, a revised pathway was implemented for those wishing to adopt. This introduced a 2 stage application process.

The result is that significant numbers of adopters were recruited between 2013 and 2015, and that from a position of there being an 'adopter gap' there is now a national surplus of adopters. This has had some positive effects in that it has increased placement choice for children, meaning that social workers can ensure a good 'fit' between children's needs and what a family can offer.

However, many of the current cohort of approved adopters are only willing to consider a narrow range of children, with the implication that these adopters face longer waiting times for matching, and the possibility for some that they may not be matched at all. This has resulted in frustration and disappointment, and created an additional challenge for agencies to manage adopter's expectations.

Inter agency placements

Temporary financial support was provided by the Department of Education in 2015-16 to incentive local authorities to make placements with adopters approved elsewhere ie by voluntary adoption agencies or by other local authorities. This was achieved by refunding the interagency fee (currently set at £27,000 for a single child, and paid to the approving agency following placement.) The refund occurs where the child to be placed meets certain criteria and is intended to improve outcomes for these 'harder to place' children, deemed at risk of delay in being adopted.

This, combined with so called 'adopter lead matching' has resulted in higher numbers of inter agency placements than before, given that use of electronic registers such as Link maker now enable adopters to search independently for children in need of a family, rather than waiting to be matched by agencies.

The result of this is that of 37 Surrey children placed for adoption last year, 10 were placed with adopters approved by other agencies, and 16 children from other local authorities joined Surrey approved adopters.

Although these placements provide challenge for placing agencies in terms of monitoring and supporting children from a distance, it has increased the likelihood for some children of placement with a family within a reasonable timescale. As age at adoption is known to be a factor in future placement stability, use of interagency placements should therefore generally be regarded as a positive initiative.

Local activity

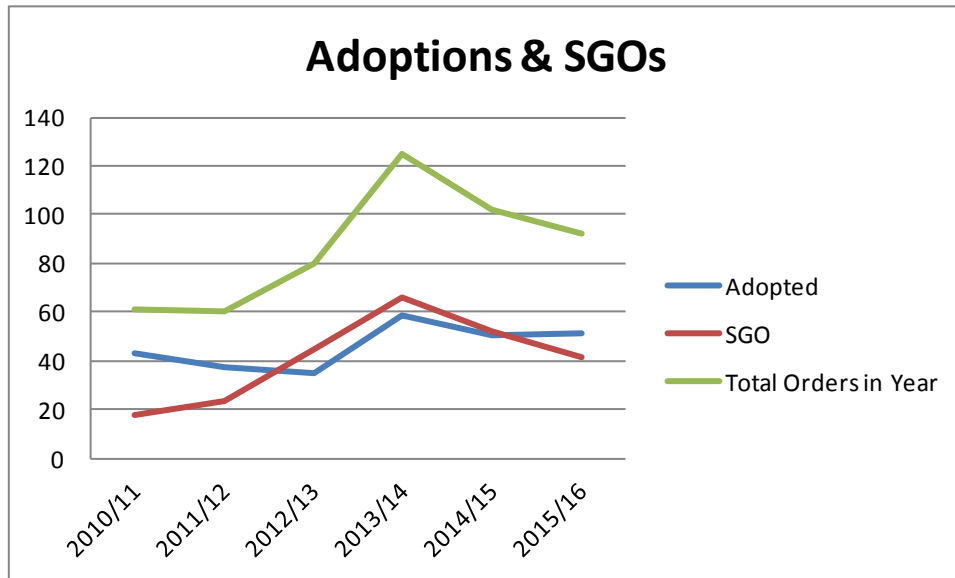
After a number of years of increasing levels of adoption, activity now seems set to revert to earlier levels. This local trend is broadly in line with national activity, as measured by the Adoption Leadership Board which promotes best practice and sector improvement.

Paradoxically, numbers of adoption orders in Surrey made remained high in 2015-16 at 51. However this figure largely reflects care cases concluded in the previous year where the outcome was that the court agreed an adoption plan. There is always a delay whilst final contacts take place (with the birth family,) and before the child is placed with adopters, followed by a 'settling in period.' Only then can the child be legally adopted by their new family. This explains why the number of adoption orders made is not directly linked to numbers of children with an adoption plan or children placed in the year.

Based on current cases in care proceedings we therefore expect to see a drop in the number of adoption orders made in 2016-17.

In considering future trends a further factor is the number of under 7s within the looked after population. When this is high the likelihood is that there will be a high number of adoptions the following year.

At the current time there is a high number of teenagers looked after in Surrey, and relatively fewer young children-again pointing to the likelihood of a drop in adoption activity in 2016-17.



The table below gives the actual numbers of orders granted in Surrey in the last 7 years, with special guardianship included also.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Adopted	47	43	37	35	59	50	51
SGO	24	18	23	45	66	52	41
Total Orders in Year	71	61	60	80	125	102	92
% of LAC cohort at year end	12.3%	10.8%	9.8%	12.4%	19.4%	18.0%	15.4%

National performance indicators:

There are currently two main 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		Average 3 years to 2015		Actual 2016
	SCC	England	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%	16%	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%	11%	10%

The figures indicate Special Guardianship in Surrey is used more than most other authorities, and adoption less, reflecting a tendency wherever possible to place children with connected people.

In most instances this is a relative or family friend with whom the child has had a meaningful relationship, and who has been assessed as able to meet the child's needs throughout childhood.

In other instances the foster care who is caring for the child during proceedings expresses an interest in offering a permanent home to the child, and following a successful assessment they are awarded a special guardianship order.

When adoption and special guardianship are taken together however, permanency orders are currently higher than the national average.

Adoption Scorecard There are several 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		Average 3 years to 2015		Actual 2016
	SCC	England	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	550	593	470
Children 2 – Average time from court authority to place child and LA matching to an adoptive family (days).	173	195	180	210	175	217	179	223	205
Children 3 – children who wait less than 16* months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. *20 months up to 2013 & 18 months for 2014	55%	47%	56%	49%	56%	51%	47%	47%	65%
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%)	145 (13%)	14,390 (16%)	13%
Related Information 2 – children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption.	11%	7%	14%	9%	18%	12%	19%	14%	10%
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	460	490	439
Related Information 4 – adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to BME care leavers (ie any non-white ethnicity)	8%	6%	8%	7%	7%	8%	6%	9%	5%
Related Information 5 – adoptions of children aged 5+, compared to all care leavers aged 5+ years	4%	4%	3%	4%	4%	5%	4%	5%	4%
Related Information 6 – average length of care proceeding (weeks).	58	53	57	51	54	48	47	39	N/A
Related Information 7 – number of children waiting adoption (as at 31 st March).	55	5,750	40	6,890	35	4,680	35	4,600	40

Local performance with regards to timeliness of child placement is above the national average (related information 1) particularly when figures are adjusted for cases where the child is adopted by their foster carer (related information 3.)

Performance with regards to related information 1 is influenced by the time a case is held in care proceedings, prior to obtaining court authority to place for adoption. For much of the reporting period the average time for a case to progress through court has been above the national average, although current indicators suggest that this is improving (related information 6.)

Of note is the high percentage of changes of plan away from adoption (related information 2) This is influenced by a number of factors including the court failing to agree with the local authority care plan for adoption and making a different determination, there were 4 such cases in 2015-16

In other cases there was a change of care plan initiated by the local authority, because the child's foster carer wished to offer a permanent home but under a different legal arrangement, or relatives emerged late in the process and were assessed as able to offer a home.

Also of note is the number of children awaiting adoption figure (related information 7) This was 40 at the end of the reporting period. This statistic can be confusing as it implies that 40 children are still in need of a new family. The reality is that 40 children had not yet received their final adoption order-in practice many will either be already placed with a family and this is a transitional period prior to the adopters applying to court for an adoption order, or there is a family who have been identified and wish to adopt them but the placement has not yet commenced.

Children placed in 2015-16

37 Children were placed for adoption within the reporting period. As noted earlier, adoption orders are typically made 6-12 months following placement, so the number of children placed in a year does not directly reflect the number of adoption orders (51)

Most 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. In 2015-16 no children were adopted as a result of parental request.

The range of ages at which children were placed for adoption was broad, with the youngest placed at 3 months of age and the oldest 7 years.

1 child was adopted by their foster carers and a further 6 placements involved a foster2adopt arrangement ie by adopters who were given temporary approval to foster the child ahead of court agreeing an adoption plan.

20 single children moved into new families, and 17 as part of a sibling group of 2 or 3 children.

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, some children have never shared a home with their siblings or half siblings and there may not be any capacity on the part of the adopters/carers to care for additional children. Some siblings have very difficult relationships, borne out of a shared history of trauma and need to be parented apart to enable them to flourish.

Occasionally it may not be considered likely that a placement can be made within the children's timescales, that will meet all their needs

Case example

Seven children were removed from their family of origin, of whom the 2 oldest children had strong and positive relationships with their foster cares who wished to offer them a permanent home. The court agreed adoption plans for the remaining 5 children, accepting evidence that it was not likely that one family could be identified for all 5 together, but agreeing that the children should be placed in 2 families with provision for contact.

The adoption service identified a local family for the 2 younger children and through family finding a second family was identified within an hours travel time for the remaining 3 children. All children were matched and placed within 5 months of the court decision.

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.

The percentage of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) children exiting care through adoption, (related information 4) in Surrey this is below the national average, reflecting a higher age for most young people who are looked after, and of non white ethnicity.

Early Permanence

With the aim of reducing numbers of moves for children, and enabling them to join what might become a permanent family sooner, the Children and Families Act (2014) introduced a requirement to consider placing children with dual approved (fostering and adoption) families, and this is now routinely considered for any child who may require adoption.

This can be a very positive thing for children given that they do not need to move again if the outcome of court proceedings is a decision in favour of adoption. However it involves a high level of uncertainty for the prospective adopters who must care for the child in the knowledge that they may be returned to live with their birth parents, or placed with a relative at the end of the court process.

We therefore give Surrey applicants the option to be considered for foster2adopt placements, or to restrict themselves to being considered only for children where the court has already agreed an adoption plan, and where the pathway to adoption will be more predictable.

6 foster2adopt placements were made over the reporting period, of which one child was later moved to relatives within the court process under a special guardianship arrangement.

Case example

At the time that Josh was born his sister (then aged 1) had recently been placed with Surrey adopters. The court decided that Josh and his birth mother should be assessed in a residential unit to see if she could successfully parent him, however Josh's mother suddenly left the unit, leaving Josh behind. As the court process had not been concluded and Josh's mother was not at that time in agreement that he should be adopted, he could not be matched and placed under adoption regulations meaning that a foster placement was needed.

The adopters for Josh's sister were approached and agreed to care for Josh as his foster carers until a decision about his long term future could be made. Josh continued to have contact with his birth parents until the final hearing and the written exchanges (via the contact book) served to develop a relationship between adopters and birth parents. The birth parents were delighted that he was able to be cared for alongside his sister, and in the end did not contest the plan for adoption at the final hearing. The placement is now proceeding to adoption.

Placement challenges:

Our greatest challenges continue to be placing children over 4, those with health and developmental uncertainty or complex emotional and behavioural needs. Children from BME backgrounds and large sibling groups also risk waiting longer for a family.

We therefore designate these as 'priority children' and this is reflected in our recruitment strategy, as set out in our public facing website and communications with all enquirers. We also work closely with our adoptive families to enable those with potential to parent priority children to access additional training and support, to build confidence that they can successfully meet the needs of these children.

Family Finding

For a small number of children there is no immediate match available from the local pool of adopters, and so a family finder is allocated to work alongside the child's social worker and extend the search beyond our own pool.

Regular family finding meetings are held to ensure that the search is effective. These are chaired by an assistant team manager from the adoption service, and attended by the child's current carer alongside the child's social worker and an assigned family finder.

The meetings review efforts 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 the child's care plan is implemented.)

Alongside sending out profiles to other adoption agencies, children are also referred to the National Adoption Register, which seeks to identify possible matches between waiting children and approved adopters. We also subscribe to a further register (Link maker) which enables adopters to conduct their own search for children across the UK, and has been a major contributor to so the growth in so called 'adopter lead matching'.

Case example

Luke is a toddler of complex heritage, whose father is unknown. Although delightful to care for, Luke's health needs and developmental delay deterred many potential adopters, meaning that a nationwide search for a family was launched. A family finding social worker circulated Luke's profile to all adoption agencies, attended a series of adopter events to share information about Luke and profiled Luke on a national adopter database.

Eventually, an adoptive family was secured for Luke some 300 miles away, following Luke his foster carer and social workers attending an adoption activity day where prospective adopters meet children informally.

Although the Department of Education target for securing a family (4 months from the court authority to place for adoption) was not met in this case, this represented a very good outcome for Luke who joined his new family just before his second birthday. The placement is going well and it is expected that an adoption order will soon be made securing Luke's place in his new family.

Disruption

Sadly the placement of 2 siblings placed for adoption disrupted prior to the adoption order being made, and these children's care plan are currently under review whilst they are cared for by short term foster carers.

In the event of any placement disrupting before an adoption order has been made, 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 this case the adopters were approved by another agency, and the disruption meeting process was convened to enable both agencies to take part and share learning.

Recruitment of adopters: Adult adoption pathway

We offer bi monthly 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 for them (mindful that they can 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 informal meeting with experienced adopters and complete e learning and a number of self assessment tasks, before the agency makes a formal decision about whether or not to progress them to a second more intense stage (lasting 4 months)

Stage 2 is lead 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 concerning approval 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.

Applications

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. Most enquiries we receive are from applicants hoping to adopt one or two children, typically applicants say their ideal would be to adopt a child 'as young as possible'.

Given the range of ages and needs that children with adoption plans bring, we have to help develop understanding of this and the potential rewards of parenting children who might not match the image the applicants has of adoption.

We achieve this over a period of time, through training and involving experienced adopters in the process.

Case example

Jeff and Liz were approved in November following a 6 month process. In their early 40s, they are childless and given fertility issues on both sides recognised that they have limited options with regards to pursuing their goal of a family.

Although like many applicants they hoped that adoption might enable them to adopt a very young child, the agency was happy to accept an application given that they brought a good deal of experience with young children, including Liz acting as an independent person for a young person who is looked after.

Having undertaken additional training following approval they are currently hoping to have a child placed under foster2adopt process, and accept that this may or may not result in their being able to adopt the child, depending on the outcome of the court process.

Some families seek approval for a second child (having adopted 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 from 2015-16, 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 welcome.

Approvals in any year might 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 that there is no upper age limit for adoption so much as a need to focus on the health and wellbeing of applicants.

Approvals and recruitment strategy

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 context of central government directing adoption agencies to approve more families. By contrast numbers were considerably lower in 2015-16 at 33, and we expect to achieve broadly similar numbers in 2016-17.

Determining a 'target' number of adopters is a dynamic process, which needs to take account of many variables including children with adoption plans, the needs of those children, and the existing cohort of adopters either approved already or currently undergoing assessment.

Therefore having set a target of 50 at the beginning of 2015, we revised this downwards during the year in light of changing need. We expect moving forwards that our target figure will be 40 families, but this will remain subject of regular review.

As noted previously, increasingly Surrey adopters may chose to pursue a match with children from other authorities, meaning that we must expect to factor in the loss of these families as a resource for our own children.

Increasingly we work collaboratively with other agencies to agree regional priorities and ensure that the pool of adopters is sufficient for our collective needs.

Currently we review our recruitment strategy on a three monthly basis, and this informs our approach to enquirers meaning that at times when we have a healthy number of adopters willing to consider a range of children we are less likely to accept a registration of interest than at times when adopter numbers are low or range limited.

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 was one appeal was considered under the Surrey process resulting in a decision to uphold the original determination (not to approve.) No appeals were made to the IRM.

Adoption support

A requirement to inform adopters of the right to an adoption support needs assessment following adoption was introduced in the Children and Family Act, and therefore we are proactive in publicising this locally through our public facing website, a secure portal for adopters, newsletters and information packs.

A support planning meeting is convened for each child adopted from Surrey prior to the match being considered by the adoption panel and a plan is presented as part of the matching information.

However, the sector has been influenced at both local and national level by the first national study of adoption breakdowns and adoption support, published in 2014 by Professor Julie Selwyn of Bristol University which reported that although overall breakdown rates following adoption were low, (between 2 and 9%), significant numbers of families experienced considerable challenge and require targeted and specialist support.

Accessing therapeutic support was cited as especially difficult, with few Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services providing interventions that were suited to the needs presented by adopted children.

Adoption Support Fund

Subsequently in May 2015, the Department of Education established an Adoption Support Fund of £19 million pounds, administrated by a private consultancy: Mott McDonald. The aim of the fund is to enable children adopted in England to access timely and specialist therapeutic support.

Funding is applied for on a case by case basis by local authority adoption services, following assessment of a child's specific support needs and identification of an appropriate service provider.

To enable us to respond to the opportunity that the fund presented, we have created a project officer within the service to act as the interface with the fund, and to develop a list of independent providers to complement existing provision. We are grateful to our colleagues within the commissioning service who have helped us to develop effective commissioning processes.

Pleasingly, we have made 67 successful applications to the fund on behalf of Surrey children between May 2015 and the end of the reporting period. This has enabled families to access services in a timely manner, and increased provider choice.

Recently a commitment has been made by central government to increase funding to ASF on a year on year basis for the next 4 years.

Case example

Kelvin was adopted aged 5 following a history of neglect. At this time Kelvin found it very painful to think about his family of origin and although a life story book which outlined his story was provided, Kelvin was resistant to talking about this with his adopters or social works.

An assessment of need was requested by Kelvin's parents some years later, and indicated that Kelvin now was wishing to understand his story in greater detail. An application was made to the support fund which enabled a therapist to be commissioned to work with Kelvin and his adoptive parents and will build on the work done earlier when Kelvin was much younger and his level of understanding more limited.

As well as direct interventions with young people, the fund is able to support therapeutic parenting courses for adoptive families on a regular basis. These are run by Adoption UK on our behalf, and we are now able to offer these on a quarterly basis. We have also been successful in securing funding for groups for adopted children of different ages, with the aim of reducing their feelings of isolation, integrating adoption as part of their story and identity, thus increasing self esteem.

Child and adolescent mental health Services (CAMHS)

Following a local needs analysis, which consulted extensively with adoptive families and professionals, a tendering process was initiated by Surrey County Council and the 6 local clinical commissioning groups who committed to jointly fund a new specialist service for adopted young people and those subject of a special guardianship order. The contract for the new service has been awarded to the Surrey and Borders Partnership.

The new service came into being from 1st April 2016, with the aim of enabling these young people to access mental health services in line with existing commissioned services provided to looked after children by Surrey and Borders Partnership service.

The new service is currently recruiting to 6 practitioner posts and developing care pathways with support from the Adoption Service, and we look forward to the service becoming fully operational by September 2016.

In house support

We support significant numbers of families as they manage the realities of parenting their adopted children; many of whom still exhibit complex needs. The adoption social worker for the family continues to provide support at least until the point of adoption but can remain involved beyond this on a case by case basis, depending on needs at the time.

In practice, we often end our formal involvement with families following the adoption order, but stay in touch informally through regular family events, training and support groups for adopters and adopted children, as reflected by the 600 and more families currently on our mailing list.

Managing contact with birth relatives following adoption

Some families continue to receive support if there is a plan for direct contact between the birth and adoptive families which requires our involvement. Contact is most often supported with birth parents, grandparents, siblings or any combination of the above. Currently we support 39 families with regard to one or more face to face meetings a year.

In other instances it may be possible for families to manage a contact without our direct support, this is most likely to be the case where children from the same birth family have been adopted into more than one adoptive family and following introductions of the adults they are able to take the children's contact forwards together.

We also have a post box service which provides a service to over 800 young people, enabling annual or twice yearly exchange of information between adoptive and birth families. This service is provided until the young person is 18 years old.

Assessment for targeted adoption support

We have a statutory duty to conduct an assessment of post order need where this is requested. Adopters can request re-assessment of their needs, their child's needs or a siblings needs at any time during the child's growing years. In 2015-16 we conducted 79 such assessments, and taking account of support plans agreed over this period and support packages carrying over from the previous year 141 families received a targeted service during the year-some provided directly by our own staff, in other cases from services from whom we contracted a service.

Examples of work that results from post order assessments includes identity/ life story work, managing relationships, adoptive parenting support, and advice and support with regards to education. This often involves multi-agency working given that frequently young people referred struggle in different areas of their lives. As such, we frequently work alongside other services including the Youth Service, Early Help, CAMHS, Education, and colleagues from the Referral Assessment and Intervention Service (RAIS.)

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 152 children, to the tune of £1.1 million pounds. 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.

Case example

Stella is a single adopter whose daughter was aged 4 at the time of placement. Carinna has significant emotional needs as a result of her earlier history, and a therapist provides fortnightly support.

Stella has delayed returning to work for the present time in order to be available to Carinna, who find it difficult to cope without her Mum. She is slowly being introduced to a child minder and out of school activities, with the plan that eventually Stella will return to work on a part time basis. Payment of a weekly adoption allowance and support and guidance about entitlement to benefit has enabled Stella to plan and remain available to her daughter.

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 (intermediary work.) Activity is always high throughout the year, peaking at times when adoption reunions are featured in the media. In 2015-16 we provided a service to 182 individuals.

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.

Adult adoptees can access the following services:

- Birth records counselling
- Support and advice in relation to their adoption records.
- Intermediary services for adoptees who have received support and counselling from our service
- Access to independent counselling
- Access to a monthly support group.

Case study

Andrew, a professional man in his 50s grew up knowing that he'd been adopted as a baby. He believed his birth parents died in a car accident so never previously requested access to birth and adoption records. Encouraged by his younger adopted sister, he applied to the General Registrar's Office for a copy of his original birth certificate and was referred for statutory birth records counselling (required for anyone adopted prior to 1976.)

We discovered that a voluntary adoption agency had arranged the adoption, and records were accessed. Andrew learnt not only that his birth parents were alive when he was placed for adoption, but also that his birth mother had kept in touch with the adoption agency for many years.

Assisted by a professional researcher his birth mother was traced to America. Andrew requested and received an intermediary service from Surrey Adoption Service to open up contact, with the outcome that Andrew and his birth mother went on to meet and establish a meaningful relationship. Further research sadly revealed that Andrew's birth father died some years ago, but further work with respect of 4 half sisters again resulted in a happy, accepting outcome.

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 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 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 2015-16 we received 47 new requests for birth relative support relatives.

Case example

Student Elspeth relinquished her daughter Grace at birth. Grace was placed with Surrey adopters shortly afterwards. As is the norm, a voluntary agreement was made between Elspeth and the adopters to keep in touch via the adoption service, through an annual exchange of letters. This enables birth relatives to receive news of the child they are no longer able to see and conveys a powerful message to the adopted child that although their birth parent was not able to parent, that they not forgotten.

After the initial exchange, the arrangement broke down owing to the reticence of the adopters to provide updates. This was devastating to Elspeth. Over a period of many months, the birth relative worker supported Elspeth and mediated with the adopters, with the outcome that recently the adopters provided a very full letter for Elspeth with news of Grace and her progress.

Non agency adoption

We provide a service to applicants wishing to adopt a named child, who was not placed for adoption by an adoption agency. Most of these cases involve a step parent who wishes to assume legal responsibility for their partner's child. This is a significant legal step which severs the child's legal relationship with the other birth parent in most instances.

Accordingly the court requires a comprehensive welfare report and balanced analysis of the case for and against adoption in order to reach a decision that takes account of all available options and acts in the child's best interests.

In other cases the service may involve reporting to court on the merit of adoption for a child who has been adopted overseas, whose jurisdiction is not recognised in the UK.

This work is complex and challenging, and requires consideration of the impact of adoption for all the parties and most importantly the child. Where the child's age and level of understanding is such that they can be consulted and their views represented this is an important element of the work.

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 continue to support an adopter lead initiative '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 very successful adopted children's groups XXplorers for 8-12 year olds, and #amazing for 12-14s. The groups meet in school holidays and undertake activities supported by staff with funding secured from the Adoption Support Fund. The groups are much valued by the young people and their families and provide a supportive space for the young people to have fun alongside others who have adoption as part of their personal identity.

We are also developing a further group for 14-19 year olds adopted young people, offered in conjunction with the youth service.

Staffing:

At the close of 2015-16 the team is fully staffed as follows:

1 Team Manager (the responsible individual) and 1 Agency adviser

3.5 full time equivalent Assistant Team Managers

15 full time equivalent registered Social Workers,

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

3 Assistant Social Workers

1 Referral and Information Officer

Many 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.

Adoption Panel:

Panel currently operates on Tuesdays, offering 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. Under adoption regulations the panel must be chaired by an independent, the current chair is David Goosey following appointment in 2014.

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.)

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 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.

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. Consequently regular business meetings between the panel chair and the adoption team manager ensure that the panel process operates effectively. In addition, a Quality Adoption Forum 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.

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.

Service development:

From 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.

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

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 5 new complaints, on a range of matters. All resolved at stage 1 with the need for better communication being the underlying theme in 3 of the 5.

One complaint lodged in a previous year (by applicants who were unhappy about how a decision not to progress to stage 2 of the adoption application process was made) was finally concluded this year at stage 3, with a determination that the complaint was not upheld.

Although the complaint was not upheld, the service endeavours to reflect and consider if there is learning-in this instance we will review the way we communicated that we are not able to progress the application, recognising that this signals the end of the adoption journey and in all likelihood extinguishes hope of achieving a family.

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.

Regionalisation

From November 2014 to April 2016 we were part of a large consortium of adoption agencies (Adoption South Central) which included 10 local authorities and 2 voluntary agencies, which sought to share best practice and develop working relationships across agencies.

The recent Children and Social Work Bill (2015) introduced an expectation that by 2020 adoption services will be provided by larger regional agencies, rather than the current 150 plus local authorities, and a smaller number of voluntary adoption agencies. Accordingly, there has been a regrouping within the sector with agencies entering into talks to establish new partnerships.

At the current time we are working closely with local authority adoption agencies: Brighton and Hove, and East and West Sussex under the banner Adoption South East (ASE)

ASE has established both an Executive Board and a Project Board, to examine ways of collaborating as a tentative first step to the creation of a regional adoption agency.

Conclusions:

The adoption service continues to provide a range of services, despite the loss of special guardianship work from January 2014. In practice an increase in 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 delay 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 providing proactive family finding 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 making best use of internal providers, our new CAMHS service and a range of other providers will be key to our efforts moving forwards.

Suzanne Chambers
Team Manager