

Surrey Adoption Service Report – April 2018-March 2019

1: Introduction and service overview

The Adoption & Children Act 2002 requires that local authority adoption agencies present regular reports of Agency activity to Elected Members. This report captures activity for the period April 1 2018 to March 31 2019.

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 range of activity is captured on the Service's Statement of Purpose, which is reviewed annually and published on our public facing website. In brief, however, we provide a full adoption service covering the following:

- Family finding for looked after children with adoption plans.
- Recruitment and assessment of potential adopters.
- Adoption support services for all whose lives have been touched by adoption
- Non-Agency adoption.

Surrey's Adoption Service, as is the case for all adoption agencies, is required to produce performance data for the Department for Education (DfE) and the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB). As some performance data was not available during the production of this report, some figures reported here have been sourced direct from the Adoption Team, rather than from our data performance team and from data which have not as yet been published.

2: The national context of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and Surrey's involvement with ASE.

In July 2019, a report was submitted to Surrey's CABINET MEMBERS FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & FAMILIES to seek approval for Surrey County Council to enter into a partnership agreement with three other local authorities, Brighton and Hove City Council, East and West Sussex County Councils, to establish a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), to be named Adoption South East (ASE). Cabinet approval of the plan was provided.

3: Changes to the Adoption Leadership board

The national Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) was established in 2014 to provide leadership to the adoption system and drive improvements in performance. In 2018 the Board became the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), with a remit to cover previously looked after children subject to Adoption or Special Guardianship Orders. Since 1 July 2019, the management and secretariat service is delivered by Coram.

The ASGLB is made up of 12 senior officials from key organisations in the adoption and permanence system in England. This includes colleagues from local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies, the Department for Education, and independent experts.

The ASGLB is chaired by Andrew Christie CBE, who was appointed by the Education Secretary in March 2016.

4: Summary of trends in adoption

Recent data from the ASGLB suggests that overall numbers of looked after children are rising nationally, with an overall increase of 13% between 2012-13 and 2016-17, but with over 5s and over 16s, in particular, showing sharp rises. As such this would be expected to have relatively limited impact on adoption activity.

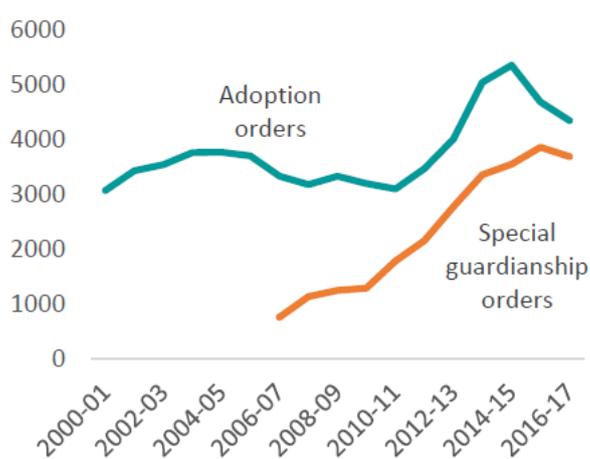
Adoption levels during 2013 – 17 are higher than any other period in the last 20 years and is largely considered to be as a result of the government at the time's ambition to increase rates of adoption, from 2012 onwards. Whilst this resulted in a temporary spike in Adoption Orders peaking at approximately 5,000 per year, two subsequent Court of Appeal decisions (Re B and Re BS) questioned the quality of decision making with respect of some adoption plans, and this appeared to reset the judicial bar with regards to endorsing adoption plans, resulting in a sharp decline in Placement Orders from 2014 (Placement Orders confer permission to the local authority to place a child for adoption.)

Following these recent peaks and troughs, there are now signs that activity is stabilising within the sector, with approximately 4,000 Adoption Orders per year being made-a small but steady increase on the pre- 2012 levels. However, closer examination shows that this is not a uniform picture, with significant divergence across the country.

5: Growth of use of Special Guardianship

Alongside this, use of an alternative legal order (Special Guardianship Order) has been rising steadily since 2012 with 3,700 such orders made in England 2016-17.

Again, however, there is wide variation across the country. Our local trend in Surrey is for a steady rise of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) - indicating a tendency to place children with connected persons and the high value placed on retaining links with the child's family of origin. This has impacted on adoption outcomes with some children who previously would have been adopted becoming subject to SGOs-which can be seen as a less draconian outcome, given that ties with the birth parents are not severed, albeit that parental responsibility of the parents is significantly curtailed.



6: Surrey children with adoption plans:

Data compiled for the ASGLB and the DfE which is used to compile the national adoption scorecards has not as yet been published at the time of this report. The data is therefore not as yet confirmed. Data used within this report consists of reporting data used for benchmarking between members of Adoption South East, the Regional Adoption Agency which Surrey is jointly developing. Much of this data reflects Surrey's 2018-19 adoption data which is to be reported by the soon to be published 2016-19 scorecard.

Data submitted to the ASGLB shows that the 56 new Agency decisions in 2018/19 showed an increase of 8% compared to the 52 Agency decisions for 2017/18. (An Agency decision means this is the local authority care plan, and this is pre requisite to the court making a Placement Order-if it accepts the local authority analysis and recommendation.)

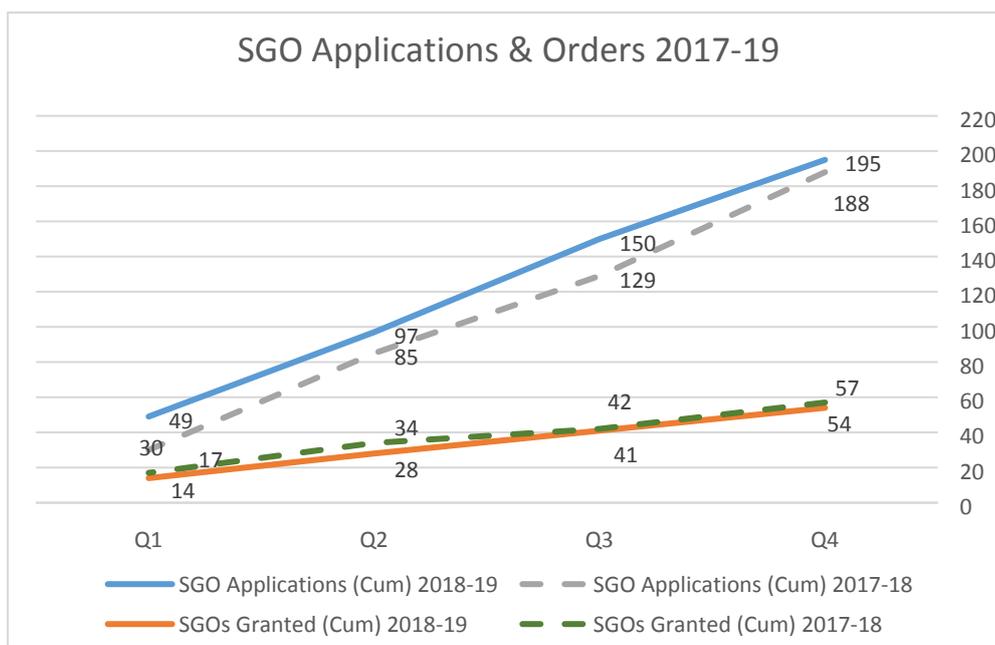
As stated in the 2017/18 Annual Report, Surrey has a relatively low number of children where an Agency decision is made and a Placement Order is granted. The reason for these low figures is in large due to demographic factors: Surrey is an affluent county, and this impacts on the numbers of children in the 0-7 age range who become looked after-much of the increase in Surrey's looked after population is attributable to over 10s (including a rise in unaccompanied asylum seekers although this still only accounts for 0.04 % of the overall child population)-all of whom are not likely to require adoption.

For benchmarking purposes, the Department for Education lists the following as our closest statistical neighbours in descending order: Windsor and Maidenhead, Buckinghamshire, and Wokingham. ASGLB data indicates that they too have low levels of adoption compared to many other authorities.

A further factor in Surrey is the relatively high use of connected person placements-which often result in an alternative legal order (special guardianship) and a culture of moving away from adoption in favour of retaining links with the child's family of origin.

At the end of the period 2018/19:

- There were 68 children undergoing the adoption pathway, of whom 19 were by then living with their adoptive families and awaiting a final adoption hearing.
- 34 Surrey children were matched for adoption in 2018-19 (a 3% increase to the previous year), meaning that a formal decision was made by the Agency that they should be placed with an identified family following a period of introductions. The number of children placed is a slight increase to 33 matched in 2017/18.
- The number of matches which resulted in adoptive placements was 25 placements which is a 26% drop compared to the 34 children placed in 2017/18.
- A total of 25 Adoptions Orders were made, 7 fewer than the previous year which is indicative of falling numbers of Placement Orders from 2014 onwards and the continued growth of the use of legal orders such as SGO's.
- 48 Special Guardianship Orders made (from the care of the local authority) during 2018/19 which is almost similar to last year's 50 orders granted.



7: Change of plans

Although a local authority may make an Agency decision of a plan of adoption, there are occasions where the local authority may change this plan for the child.

During 2018/19 adoption plans were made for 56 children but 39 actually received a Placement Order during that period. Of the 17 children where a placement order was not granted within the year:

- 5 children did not receive a Placement Order during the reporting period due to legal proceedings still in process.
- 12 children's cases concluded with the Court failing to endorse the local authority plan, and thus driving a change of plan. 4 children were placed for long term fostering, 4 children remained with their kinship carers and the Court supported 4 children being returned to their birth parents with the making of a Supervision Order to the local authority.

8: Matching and timeliness

In 2013, the Department of Education introduced a number of national performance indicators that were focused on early permanence for children with permanent carers. These indicators will be soon be changing but at present, the key indicators that all local authorities are measured against are placed within the scorecard league table.

Currently the main **(A1)** target timescale is still 426 days (14 months) – this represents the number of days between the child first becoming looked after and the date of their being placed for adoption. As such, in order to meet this target it is necessary for both the Court and family finding

processes to be conducted effectively. Where there are delays in issuing proceedings or delay in concluding proceedings, we are less likely to meet this target.

This means that effective management of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, in which assessments required to assist the Court are undertaken, is critical. Even when this is achieved, not all proceedings are concluded within the statutory 26 week target with late requests for consideration by connected persons or the requirement for further assessments to be undertaken often leading to an extension of the proceedings being granted. The other variable is the time taken to secure an adoptive family and place the child, with this generally taking longer for the harder to place categories of children and cases where we need to extend our search beyond the local Surrey pool of adopters.

The secondary **(A2)** target is set at 121 days and measures the days between obtaining a Placement Order and ratifying a match between the child and a family - so this is essentially a measure of how long it took for the adoption service to secure a family. At times when the local and national adopter pools are low, this is likely to have a negative impact-especially for siblings, older children and those with complex needs. Currently this is a challenge for the sector following a downturn in recruitment activity over the past 2 years (which was itself a correction against the high numbers of adopters approved and waiting following incentives from central government from 2012 onwards to recruit additional adopters.)

A third measure **(A3)** is not a target per se, but captures the percentage of children who were adopted in the year where placement for adoption was secured within 14 months of becoming looked after. Clearly for smaller authorities, it might be expected that there is year on year variation given that the numbers of adoptions can be very small. For an authority such as Surrey where numbers are greater, we tend to see less fluctuation.

The scorecard for 2016-19 is presently not officially published, but looking at our data for the period 2015-18, it is important to take on board the variables that affect adoption agencies such as Surrey.

For A1, for example, the data shows we were outside of the DfE target of 426 for the number of days a child is in care to the point of being placed for adoption by 93 days. Local authorities that strive to consider permanence for children who may have previously stayed in the care system under a plan of long term fostering, can see this affect their A1 target, due to the time that the child or young person has been looked after up until that stage. Surrey has a number of adoptions within the 2015-18 data where the children have been in fostering placements for longer than planned while exploring permanence or where previous matches had broken down and the children had returned to their foster placement.

The present A1 indicator has therefore been seen as penalising local authorities who have been child-centred in attempting to find adoptive placements for older children, children with special needs, hard to place children who would normally have long term plans. The DfE's plan to change this measure taking on board the fostering element will therefore show local authorities such as Surrey in a far more positive light and acknowledge the good outcomes for these children.

Although outside of the DfE targets, Surrey's key indicators compare favourably to our neighbouring local authorities as can be seen below.

Summary of the Department for Education Scorecard for the period 2015-18

Comparators (England average/closest statistical neighbour)		A1 measure Target 426 England 3 year average (2015-18) 486	A2 measure Target 121 England 3 year average (2015-18) 201	A3 measure
Surrey		519	213	62
Windsor and Maidenhead	Extremely Close	509	206	44
Buckinghamshire	Very Close	583	269	51
West Berkshire	Very Close	529	138	38
Wokingham	Very Close	x	x	75
Hertfordshire	Very Close	487	231	54

Looking at Surrey's 2018/19 data gives a more accurate snapshot of how Surrey and its approach to a whole system is working for children with a plan of adoption. The 2018/19 snapshot shows that over the last year Surrey was well within the DfE targets for indicators A1 and A2 with A1 averaging at 367 and A2 at 113. Where A1 reflected the days stopping for children adopted by their foster carers at the date the child moved in with their foster carer, this showed us to be averaging this year 332 days which is 94 days within the DfE target.

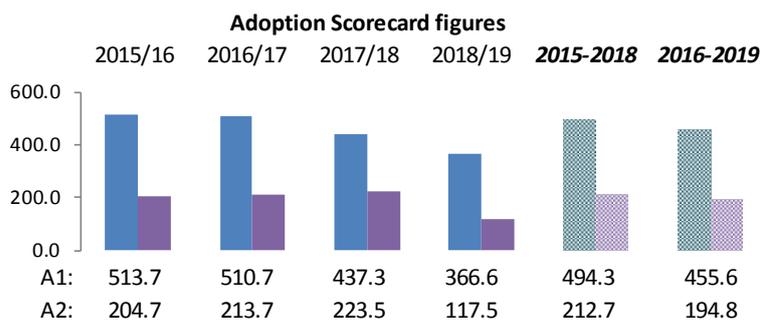
Please note that this data below has not as yet been signed off by the DfE.

2018/19 Scorecard data

Scorecard indicators:

	2018/19 Q1 - 2018/19 Q4
A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family	367 days
A1 timeliness where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family	332 days
A2: Average time between an LA receiving court authority to place a child and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family	113 days
A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)	14 (56%)

Surrey's predicted 2016-19 Scorecard based upon Coram-I's interpretation of Surrey's Data on behalf of the ASGLB shows that the averaging of the three years of data is producing an A1 of 456 which is 30 days outside the DfE threshold target but comfortably 30 days within the national average. For A2 the data is showing a predictor of 195 which is within both the DfE threshold and national targets.



9: Characteristics of Surrey children who were adopted in 2018-9

- 16% of those adopted in the year were over 5 (compared to 29% in 2017/18)
- 20% were siblings, (compared with 51%)
- 0% had a disability (compared with 5%) and
- 20% were from a BAME background (compared with 11%)

With respect to Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children above, we take a positive approach to enquirers who display understanding of the needs of children from diverse backgrounds, mindful that nationally BAME children often wait considerably longer for a family. With regards to matching children from BAME backgrounds, in line with our legal obligations, we take account of the child's ethnic, cultural, linguistic and spiritual needs and consider the ability of prospective adopters to meet these alongside all other identified needs.

This means that in practice adopters matched with our children may not always reflect the child in respect of all these issues, but they would be expected to demonstrate understanding and willingness to promote the child's needs. Given that all matches are presented to Surrey's Adoption Panel for a recommendation and only then able to proceed to introductions if ratified by the Agency Decision Maker, there are clear safeguards in place to ensure that the proposed match does take sufficient account of the ability of the proposed family to meet the child's needs.

Siblings needs are considered on a case by case basis- whilst in most instances it will be in a child's best interests to be placed alongside siblings, however the structure of many families today is increasingly complex, meaning that whilst sometimes the relationship reflects years of shared lived experience, in other instances children actually have very little if any sense of relationship to siblings who have been born and raised under different circumstances. An assessment is completed to determine whether the siblings should remain together or be placed apart.

Unless there are clear reasons not to seek to place siblings together however, we will make every effort to identify a family able to parent the sibling group, including approaching adopters who have adopted a sibling previously. However in recent times, the number of families available for siblings locally and nationally has declined, meaning that sometimes it is necessary to review plans for resource reasons - either in terms of splitting siblings and addressing their relationship and identity needs differently (through contact) or considering long term foster care as an alternative means of securing permanency.

For this reason, we have recently prioritised recruitment of adopters willing to consider siblings in recruitment campaigns.

10: Children still waiting to join a family at year end

As of 31st March 2019, 26 children with Placement Orders were not yet placed, of those 17 did not at that point have a family identified, meaning that 9 children had potential matches but were not as yet placed with their families.

The characteristics of the children waiting to be placed included:

- 4 sibling groups (a sibling group of 3 and 3 sibling groups of 2).
- 19 of the 26 are under 5 years old
- 14 are females and 12 are males
- 4 of the 26 are BAME
- 0 children have a disability.

Regular progress meetings are held in these cases and a Team Manager within the Adoption Service takes an overview of all such cases, applying a RAG rating system to each case-alerting us to the length of time a child has been waiting.

11: Use of inter-Agency placements

In order to maximise opportunities for matching children with available adopters beyond the local pool, agencies increasingly make use of adoption registers such as Linkmaker. Anonymised information can be seen concerning children and adopters who are available for matching purposes to subscribers and this can lead to enquiries and possibly matches.

The register can be accessed by both professionals and adopters-in order to stimulate thinking about possible links that might otherwise not be considered, and where a possible link is identified there is follow up through the adoption social worker with the relevant parties to explore whether the link is viable. This has encouraged adopters to become more active in their own matching process and the vast majority now opt to join one or both registers, often resulting in higher numbers of inter-Agency matches than previously.

Adopters are also able to learn about children through receipt of specialist publications, our own adopter website and through attendance at events organised by the National Adoption Register, Adoption Consortia/RAA's and aimed at promoting matching. We also work collaboratively with our ASE colleagues to provide more local events with a view to promoting matching within ASE.

Where this results in a so called inter-Agency match the placing Agency pays a fee to the receiving Agency. For a single child this would be £27,000 to reflect the cost to the receiving Agency in recruiting, assessing and supporting the family up to adoption. In 2018-9 we placed 2 Surrey children with adopters approved by other agencies and a further 11 children from other local authorities were placed with our own adopters.

12: Early Permanence

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a requirement to consider placing children with dual approved (fostering and adoption) families. This has become known as early permanence, and is now routinely considered for any child who may require adoption. Where the plan is to

place the child directly from hospital, this is known as concurrency. This is viewed as an option for children where there is a family history of abuse and where siblings for example of a new born child have been previously placed for adoption. Making use of this pathway can significantly reduce the time a child is in care and minimises the number of care givers the child has, with the foster carers potentially eventually becoming the child's adoptive parents.

However following this path involves a high level of uncertainty for the early permanence carers, who will not know if the child will be staying with them / be adopted until conclusion of the proceedings. Only when this has happened and a Placement Order has been made can the Adoption Panel consider the match.

In 2018-19, Surrey made 5 early permanence placements under fostering Regulation 25a (fostering for adoption). The outcome was that all 5 children were eventually matched for adoption. In addition, one child was placed with potential adoptive parents under fostering Regulation 24 (this enables a child to be placed with a connected person-typically adopters of a birth sibling to the child in proceedings). This placement was also ratified as a match for adoption.

In order to grow the number of approved adopters willing to consider a child via the early permanence route, Surrey has this year decided that all prospective adopters will participate in the fostering for adoption training as part of their formal training. Making the training mandatory means that all our adopters will have the information at approval to make an informed decision whether they want to be considered at the point of approval. At the present time, the majority of our adopters prefer to restrict themselves to consideration for children where the court has already agreed an adoption plan, and where the pathway to adoption will be more predictable. It is hoped that by making the training mandatory to all prospective adopters, the number willing to consider fostering to adopt pathway will increase.

13: Disruption

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 2018-19, Surrey had no disruptions occurring with Surrey children placed for adoption. Surrey has had no disruptions of Surrey adoptive placements for the last two years. During this period, 17 young people who have come into care of Surrey had disruptions from adoptive families. These young people were placed with their parents by other local authorities or their family moved into the Surrey post placement. The Adoption Service is in the process of auditing the cases of all post order disruptions for non-Surrey adoptive families, so that we can look at learning from these cases and develop planning in how we support potential adoption disruptions in the future.

14: Adopter recruitment

We endeavour to ensure that all enquirers receive a prompt and positive response, through initial information sharing online or by phone, with a focus on myth busting to encourage consideration of what the applicant can offer. Enquirers are invited to attend an information session- we deliver these fortnightly- and to meet with a social worker to discuss their individual circumstances after which they may apply to enter the 2 stage application process. We accepted 49 new applications

in 2018-19, and by the end of the period 42 adoptive households were approved, compared with 27 the previous year.

In thinking about our recruitment needs, we try to make a best estimate of the numbers of children who will receive a Placement Order in the coming year, accepting that we need more families than children in order to meet the range of needs the children will present, and to accommodate matches with children from other authorities.

We also know that some applicants will drop out during the process-having decided perhaps that adoption is not for them after all and in a small number of cases each year we decide not to continue an application as we have significant doubts about the capacity of the applicant to meet the needs of an adopted child. When this occurs in stage 2, the applicant has a right to have their case heard either by the Surrey Panel or an independent review panel although the ultimate decision concerning approval is still taken by the Agency Decision Maker. In 2018-19 we did not have any cases that took this review route.

Whilst our current maximum prediction of the number of Surrey children who will need placing in 2018-19 is **40**, we are aiming to accept registrations of interest from at least 60 applicant households to ensure that we can approve a minimum of **40** additional families on top of our presently approved families in the coming year which will help the Service in its drive to place children promptly and with reasonable placement choice. It is important that we do not just focus on numbers as a targeted approach will offer us a pool of adopters that are diverse and will hopefully meet the varying needs of Surrey's children.

In recent years, we have been pleased to see increasing diversity, including significant numbers of same sex adopters and single adopters, groups which in the past were legally excluded from adoption or underrepresented for other reasons.

Approving sufficient adopters open to parenting children of school age, siblings, children with complex needs or children from Black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds is always challenging, and it is important in deciding whether or not to accept registrations of interest to consider the potential for an applicant to grow in understanding and willingness to take on complexity, not least given that so many indicate a wish for relatively straight forward children at the initial point of contact.

We therefore highlight the needs of children who risk waiting longest for an adoptive family through our public facing website, our recruitment booklets, publications such as Surrey Matters and digital marketing-all supported by our local communications team.

In reality many applicants make very good use of the learning on offer and do extend their range following training and contact with families who have successfully adopted. The learning for the service over several years has therefore been that it is counter-productive to accept too few applicants based on the initial expression of interest - as the reality is that applicants underestimate their own capacity at that stage, downplaying their potential for adoptive parenting. Whilst some inevitably do drop out during the process (or may be considered unsuitable) we have learnt that it is best to start with a large cohort in order to achieve both range and sufficient numbers.

We continue to review our recruitment strategy 3 monthly, taking account of trends for children and monitoring our adopter pipeline-ensuring that we have sufficient applications tracking through each stage of the process to give us the desired number of adopters.

Characteristics of adopters approved in 2018-19

- 3 single applicants approved (all female),
- 6 same sex households (5 male and 1 female)
- 7 families from BAME backgrounds
- 7 families approved with a birth child
- 6 families approved with an adopted child and 2 with a child under SGO
- 3 foster families approved for children whom they had been fostering (two for 1 child and one for 3 children)
- 2 families were approved with a view to a specific early permanence placement (sibling to child already in the household)

15: Adoption Support

Although research shows that adoption breakdowns are generally low compared to the number of adoptive families nationally, the support that families are wanting post order is growing. Prior to the Department of Education establishing the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), adoptive families were feeding back to government that accessing therapeutic support was often difficult, very much a lottery depending on where they lived and there were relatively few services providing the trauma and attachment based interventions most suited to the needs of adopted children.

In response to this the Department of Education established an Adoption Support Fund (ASF) administrated by Mott McDonald. The aim of the fund is to enable children adopted from care to access timely and specialist therapeutic support by distributing £19 million a year. The funding is applied for on a case by case basis, by the child's local authority. This follows an assessment of adoption support need and identification of an appropriate service provider. Initially the fund was intended only for children whose adoptions had been finalised, although this was later extended to children placed with adopters but not yet formally adopted. It has also now been extended to children subject of Special Guardianship Orders and children adopted from overseas. Funding for the ASF is presently confirmed up to March 2020. Future funding of the ASF is to be looked at in the Government's Spending Review which is to occur in the autumn of 2019.

Local authority adoption agencies have a statutory duty to conduct an adoption support assessment and complete a support plan prior to placing a child with adopters. We then review this pending the adoption being finalised in court. A re-assessment of the child, their parent's needs or the needs of a sibling can be requested at any time during the child's growing years. For families approved by other agencies but living within Surrey, this responsibility lies with the local authority for the child. This is the case until three years post order when it then becomes the responsibility of the local authority where the adopters live.

For many adoptive families in Surrey, the request for post order support starts with informal adoption support through the Adoption Service, including support groups for children and their parents, therapeutic parenting training, and family events. Where identified needs are higher, or of a more specialist nature, then the above adoption support assessment is a gateway to additional targeted support from the adoption service, our specialist CAMHS or an independent provider (with ASF funding.)

In 2018/19 Surrey received 111 requests from adoptive families for an assessment of support. 65 families joined the 149 families who in 2018/19 received provision funded via the ASF. At the end of the March 2019, 43 families were still in the assessment process or awaiting a decision if funding was to be approved.

16 Contact following adoption

The majority of children placed for adoption continue to benefit from some form of contact with people from their past-whether this is a parent, siblings, a grandparent or their former foster carer. Whilst some contacts can be managed independently by the families, in most instances some support is required to enable the contact to happen successfully.

Accordingly we operate an adoption post box which has nearly 600 open case files managing several thousand exchanges of information annually (a single child may have exchanges with several birth relatives more than once a year.) At the age of 18, we write to the young person to ask whether they wish to continue to receive information and if they would be willing to manage this themselves.

Where face to face contact requires our support either to make the arrangements (to preserve the confidentiality of the adoptive family's identity and location) or to help the participants manage the actual session, one of our family support workers provides this help. We currently have just over 35 such cases.

In many other instances families are happy to manage contact independently-often where this involves siblings placed in more than one adoptive family.

Where needs change and more support is required we are able to review the arrangements with the parties involved and hopefully enable them to agree a way forwards.

17 Finance

Under adoption legislation (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 to 87 families in respect of 117 children, 3 less than in 2017/18. 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 because they have enduring and additional needs that are likely to result in additional expenditure.

The majority of allowances are means tested to ensure that they are targeted where they are most needed, and an annual review is conducted accordingly.

18 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. Last year we received 183 new enquiries from adopted adults, resulting in most instances in support that may continue over a period of time whilst records are accessed and then shared -often the search for records is complex given that most were created by what are now long defunct adoption agencies.

This is sensitive work which provides us with a reminder that adoption is a lifelong issue for adoptees, even when their adoption experience has been a positive one. The work in this area was managed mainly by a full time specialist worker, with assistance from our referral and information officer. This is to change in September 2019 with this work being managed by two part time social work adult specialists and a part time family support worker with adult services experience. One of the social work posts is presently being recruited.

19 Birth Relatives

We have a duty to provide a service to relatives who face losing children to adoption or who have previously experienced the loss of a relative to adoption. 29 referrals were received by our birth relative worker during the year from children's teams, involving parents, siblings and grandparents. Information and support is provided and where appropriate counselling can be arranged from a specialist counsellor.

In addition, we supported over 70 birth relatives to maintain contact with the adoptive family of their relative providing assistance with writing letters for post box exchange.

20 Intercountry adoption assessments

We no longer provide an assessment service for Surrey residents who wish to adopt a child from overseas given that this is a highly specialist service accessed by a small number of people annually. We instead contract a service with the Inter Country Adoption Centre (IAC) in London, who provide advice, guidance and assessment to such residents for which they pay a service charge directly to IAC.

21 Non Agency adoption

We provide a service to applicants wishing to adopt a named child, not placed 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. 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.

We received 107 initial enquiries during this period and provided a counselling interview to 25 applicants to support them with thinking about their available options-in most instances there are legal alternatives to making a step parents adoption which would meet the child's needs well, avoiding the need for what can be a lengthy and intrusive process. 10 orders were made as a result of applications made to court for adoption orders.

We additionally provide a service to a small number of children annually who were adopted overseas following assessment of the adults by IAC (see above) and whose adoption orders are not recognised in the UK, requiring a non-Agency adoption application to be managed through our own domestic courts.

22 Service user involvement:

We continue to meet with adopters quarterly to discuss service development, produce a quarterly adoption newsletter, and consider training needs. Adopters are gradually making more use of Yammer which is a closed membership social media application which uses a format similar to Facebook. This is open to both prospective and approved adopters as well as all adoption staff to discuss various subjects within groups such as education, post order support, children needing placements and general news and information about adoption.

We 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.

Approved adopters giving the 'adopter's hands on point of view' is now an established part of the training that Surrey offers to prospective adopters. This continues post approval with experienced adopters becoming buddies for newly approved adopters when this is needed and offering advice on their experience such as with older siblings or working with children with special needs for adopters who are considering similar matches.

23 Practice hubs:

We continue to operate practice 'hubs' within the service whereby our staff members can develop special interests

- 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.

Membership of the hubs enable staff to take on specific responsibilities in accordance with their grade and experience.

24 Adoption Panel:

The Adoption Panel meets twice monthly on alternate Tuesdays, with added sessions added as needed to avoid delays for children. The purpose of the Panel is to:

- Make recommendations with respect of adoption of voluntarily relinquished children (we had only one case in the past year).
- Make recommendations with respect of approval of prospective adopters

- Scrutinise proposed matches between Surrey children and prospective adopters

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 member, the current chair is David Goosey following his 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 of the panel.

Legal advice is provided in writing to the Panel by the corporate legal team, but advisers do not routinely attend Panel meetings. 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 the Panel, not least given that each panel meeting they attend requires several hours of reading before the meeting.

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

Any general themes or trends in relation to quality assurance of work presented to the 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 the Adoption Panel and the Agency.

25 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 meetings, 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 in order to continue to improve the service.

As highlighted above, 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.

26 Complaints and learning

The adoption service received 8 complaints, all of which were resolved at stage 1 of the Council's Complaint's process.

27 Conclusions and looking to the coming year

In summary, 2018/19 has been the beginning of change for the Service, whilst at the same time the continuation of the Service striving to build on its good outcomes of finding families for Surrey children and recruiting families all within a timely way. In terms of changes, there has been a number of staff who for various reasons have either left, planned to retire or reduced their hours in preparation to retire in the near future.

In terms of service management, Suzanne Chamber, the long standing Service Manager for Adoption, took on the role of Project Manager for ASE and has been steering the work to create the new entity, Adoption South East, on behalf of Surrey, East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove. While Suzanne is focused on the development of ASE, Barrymore James, an interim manager, was appointed in April 2019 to support the Service with day to day management and support with the future transition and structural changes that Surrey adoption services will go through in becoming part of the new regional adoption service.

Placing children in a timely manner continues to be our highest priority, underpinned by effective ongoing recruitment of prospective adopters and timely and effective support. Working together with our colleagues in ASE will produce systems to have a unified and consistent approach and strategy that will over time result in a larger pool of adopters that will meet the needs of Surrey and the other members of the ASE.

With the drive to see more children placed and placed quickly, we will continue to monitor timescales and work with other services to try to ensure that both decision making and family finding keep the child at the centre. This will be challenging during the transition but again only a collaborative approach with a clear system of engagement between ASE within Surrey and Children Services is likely to bring improvement for our children. By doing this we will continue to ensure that there is good liaison with the front line social work teams to identify opportunities for early permanence and encourage more prospective adopters to consider this option. We will also continue to provide training to front line colleagues on writing good quality later life letters and work with colleagues to ensure that consistency of quality is improved. The adoption management group has also participated in the Children Service's audits of all children entering the care of the Surrey helping to monitor the quality of all that we do as a service.

A further priority is to ensure that our prospective adopters continue to be well prepared and receive good quality training and support that does not end at approval. We already offer a regular programme of post approval training, but over the coming year ~~plan~~ will be reviewing this and refining our training offer, looking for opportunities to innovate where possible. With Surrey becoming part of ASE, it is hoped that the pooling together of skilled trainers and resources will mean that Surrey adopters will benefit from training that may be available at other ASE hubs. The potential for a regional training programme for adopters is exciting and the possibility of putting together innovative training programmes, which presently we would have to be purchase externally, shows the potential for the joined up working of the new Agency.

Finally, with support and placement stability in mind, we will continue to build strong partnerships with our specialist post order CAMHS service and the Early Help and Family Support Services to ensure that the range of support available to adoptive families is accessible, relevant and comprehensive, where possible evolves based upon need and at all times is child and young person centred.



Barrymore James

Interim Service Manager