

# ADOPTION SOUTH EAST

ANNUAL REPORT  
FOR 2024/25



# ADOPTION SOUTH EAST

## INTRODUCTION

Adoption South East (ASE) is the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) delivering the adoption functions on behalf of the Local Authorities of Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Surrey and West Sussex.

This is the fifth Annual Report for ASE. The Adoption Act 2002 s3 requires each Council to continue to maintain within its area an adoption service designed to meet the needs of children who may be adopted, their parents, their first parents and former guardians (the Adoption Service). In this context an adoption agency refers to a local authority under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 s2 (1). ASE delivers the service for four local authority adoption agencies and is underpinned by a legal partnership agreement.

This report meets our obligations under the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011), the Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to provide an annual report to each local authority. It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2025.

ASE launched on 1 April 2020. It is led by Head of Service, Michael Wilson, who leads the senior leadership team of ASE. The team comprises of Pascale Davison, Team Manager, Brighton & Hove Council - Lead for Adoption Panels; Jo Elsey, Service Manager, East Sussex County Council - Lead for Adoption Support; Candice Levy, Service Manager, Surrey County Council - Lead for Adopter Recruitment; Michael Wilson is standing in as the Lead for Family Finding and Matching, until a new Lead is recruited to replace Wendy Wood who left earlier this year.

ASE underwent a restructure in 2024/25 and now operates under a service hub model with service managers leading specialist hubs in Recruitment, Family Finding and Adoption Support,

Alongside the three hub teams ASE also has a central hub which employs a finance officer, a data officer, a marketing and communications officer and a project manager.

From April 2024 to March 2025 ASE had 14 new employees start and 18 employees who moved on.

# ADOPTION SOUTH EAST IMPACT

## **82 CHILDREN**

Adoption South East has found families for 82 children. This reflects our continued commitment to finding families for the children who need them within time scales that best meet their needs.

## **64 FAMILIES APPROVED**

Recruitment activity in ASE's fifth year generated 542 enquiries from people wanting to know more about adoption which led to us accepting 94 Registrations of Interest (ROI). ASE assessed and approved 64 adopter families in this period.

## **OVER 2000 FAMILIES ACCESSED ADOPTION SUPPORT**

ASE's adoption support and development has continued to provide over 2000 families with different strands of support. This has included assistance via our website; online courses; online and face to face groups; activity days; statutory birth record counselling; birth record information sharing and Keeping in Touch. This year we have provided therapy for over 1000 children and their families with £4 million funding from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF).

# ASE RESTRUCTURE

Last year we reported on our in-depth review of Adoption South East, within which we took stock of how well we had made use of the opportunities provided by regionalisation. Our review processes identified that our structure was working against our continuous improvement as a regional service.

This year we completed a formal consultation process with staff and stakeholders and moved to a new structure which operates three discrete specialist services; Recruitment and assessment; Child assessment and family finding; and Adoption support. Staff were invited to register an expression of interest in the specialism they wished to work in and we were pleased to place 92% of our staff in their first choice.

The new structure went live in September 2024 and this year's staff survey revealed that the majority of staff are positive about the changes that this has made to their working lives, and their capacity to have a positive impact upon the lives of children and adoptive families.

The restructure required considerable change on the part of the ASE staff. They are to be thanked and commended for making those changes with professionalism and clear commitment to delivering impactful and quality services to children and families.

The restructured service now offers the opportunity for a more responsive service which learns more immediately from experience and feedback as we work to increase sufficiency and broaden support for the families we work for and with.



# ASE AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

ASE works in collaboration with Adoption England to develop our approach to adopter recruitment and support. We are part of the national marketing network and the challenges to adopter recruitment that we have experienced in our local region are echoed in the national picture. Throughout the year we have shared life stories, and interviews featuring ASE adoptive families who have featured in the national adoption campaigns. We also collectively promote the national adoption campaign through the local media and our social media channels, as well as ensuring we continue to highlight the need for adopters for children who wait the longest for a family.

In addition to the work we do to increase enquiries and recruitment, we work to enhance the experience of enquirers and applicants to ensure that people have the best chance of completing the process and get the most that they can from it. This has led to a review and redesign of our Stage 1 recruitment process, making use of mystery shopping, market research and feedback from applicants, and learning from other agencies. Importantly, this work has benefitted from the quality assurance activity and learning from the ASE adoption panels and agency decision making processes.

This year we launched 'Becoming a Family' as one of five RAAs in the first cohort of a national pilot. This is supported with research funded by Adoption England which will investigate the impact of this pilot. ASE was part of the national working group that developed the initiative in response to requests from adoptive parents for increased support in the early stages of becoming a family through adoption. This work includes supporting keeping in touch arrangements from the point of matching for adoption, and focussing on adult wellbeing and adjustment to parenting as new parents.

# ASE AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

This year also saw the publication and launch of [AfDit](#), which is a framework for social workers families and children understanding transracial adoption placements. The approach supports all families in understanding the different cultures that come together when an adoptive family is made. ASE are part of the second wave of regional adoption agencies implementing AfDit as an approach to underpin all aspects of adoption social work. The premise of AfDit is not to promote transracial placements but to support them well if they are to take place, and to provide social workers and others with the tools to complete this work with all parts of the child's network.

[Adoption England](#) promotes pan regional working now that regional adoption agencies are established. For ASE, our pan region also includes Adopt South and Adoption Partnership South East, whose central functions are hosted by Hampshire County Council, Kent County Council and East Sussex County Council on behalf of the three separate partnerships.

2024/25 has seen the completion of a regional commissioning review and the assessment of adoption support needs, and this has identified a number of areas of collaboration. The current focus for the pan regional partnership is the development of a staying in touch service for all newly and recently placed adoptive parents through proactive outreach. This will ensure that all families are linked into the universal services as they need to be.

Further work is planned for the coming year to understand and plan for joint working in developing the offer for adopted adolescents and young adults.

# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

In 2024/25 Adoption South East placed 82 children in new adoptive families and supported them as they adjusted to their new lives together. We placed 60 children as individual children and 22 children were placed alongside their sibling/s.

Of the children placed, five were from Brighton and Hove, 21 from East Sussex, 26 from Surrey and 30 from West Sussex.

Of the 82 children who joined their adoptive families, 20 were placed in Early Permanence Arrangements (23%).

## **Placement Choice and Sufficiency**

We anticipate better outcomes for children who can be placed locally, with families whom we have built relationships and to whom we can commit to ongoing support. We also recognise that for some children, there are insufficient local families to meet their assessed needs.

Those children include children with a diagnosed disability, sibling groups, older children and global majority children. Of the global majority children, children of mixed heritage can wait longer than those children with two black parents. We aim to place at least 80% ASE children with ASE families. The others we place through other agencies.

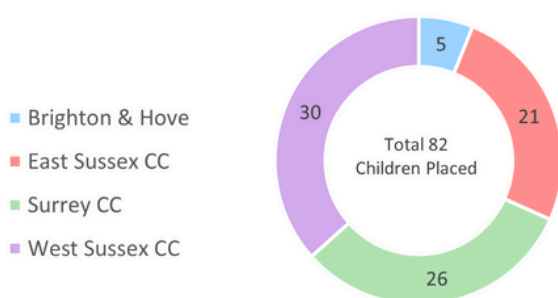


# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

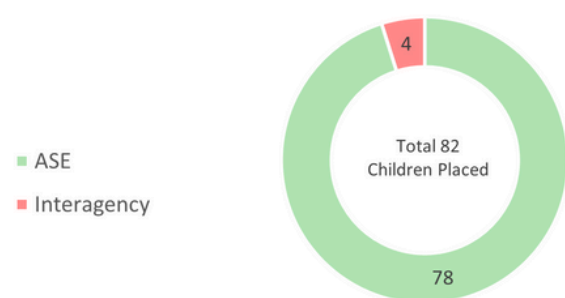
This year, 95% of ASE children joined ASE families. This is largely due to extensive work undertaken over the past three years to broaden our own and prospective adopters' ideas about what a good match might look like. However, it must be acknowledged that our reduced use of interagency placements also reflects a significant drop in the number of approved adopters available from other agencies to meet the steady and significant rise in across the county in the numbers of children with a plan for adoption. There is a national sufficiency challenge with falling numbers of enquiries and approvals and a rising number of children with a plan for adoption and this is beginning to be reflected locally.

When reviewing the work of Adoption South East, it is important to consider whether there are children not placed for adoption within the year who had a plan and for whom we could not find an adoptive family.

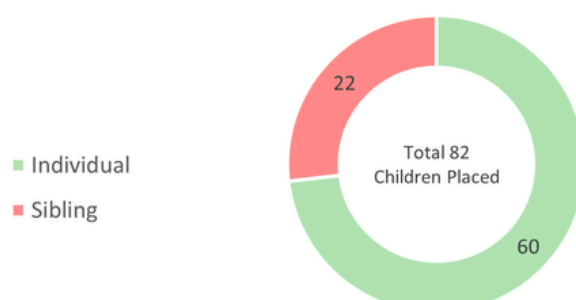
Children Placed 2024-25 - by Referring LA



Children Placed 2024-25 - ASE v Interagency



Children Placed 2024-25 - Individual v Sibling





# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

## Changes to Care Plans

At the beginning of this year, we were family finding for 65 children who were subject to Placement Orders. Over the course of the year, we were successful in placing 40 of those children and another two children were matched but would be placed in the following financial year. We continue to work to find families for 16 of those children and seven of the children had their care plans changed for a variety of reasons.

All seven children who eventually had a change of care plan away from adoption had benefitted from significant family finding activity by ASE workers. In this timeframe, there were 387 families listed as available on the national linking database, [Linkmaker](#), with 816 children listed as needing a family. This is a significant sufficiency gap, which is more pronounced in the North of England, but is nonetheless growing in the South East, limiting the number of adopters that may consider adopting ASE children.

Two of the children had been found adoptive families but the matches did not progress due to limitations on the part of the adopters to understand the children and to respond to them in the way that the children needed. These deficits became apparent during the period of introductions and had not been observed during the matching process.



# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

## Changes to Care Plans (contd.)

One child was placed for adoption in a family who were unable to bond with them and they returned to their previous foster carer.

One of the children had experienced six changes of primary carer before he was referred for family finding at the age of two years and six months. The complexity of his developmental needs was such that whilst we found three potential families for him, they all withdrew due to their worries about his future development. The same was true for one of the children who was referred at age nine months, whose developmental challenges were such that 11 families were considered and all withdrew, concerned at the implications for the child of his genetic heritage.

Another child referred to ASE at two years and six months was able to return to the care of their wider family, and another child aged just under eight years of age at referral had a family finding window set at six months by the Court.

We continue to look for families for the remaining 16 children, alongside those children who were referred for family finding over the course of the year. Nine of those children have active links at the time of writing, including two children already living with likely adopters in an early permanence relationship.

The process takes time for many children given the complexity of their needs however the capacity of many of the approved adopters however, our teams work hard to maintain pace and purpose for all children referred to ASE.

# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

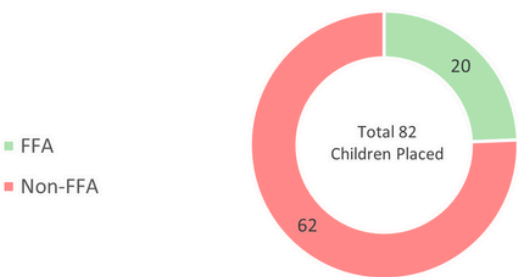
## Early Permanence (Fostering for Adoption)

Early permanence places children with approved adopters who act as their foster carers, whilst decisions are being made for them through legal processes. This enables children to experience fewer changes of care and means that they can begin their relationship with their possible future parents at an earlier stage in their lives, rather than waiting in temporary foster arrangements.

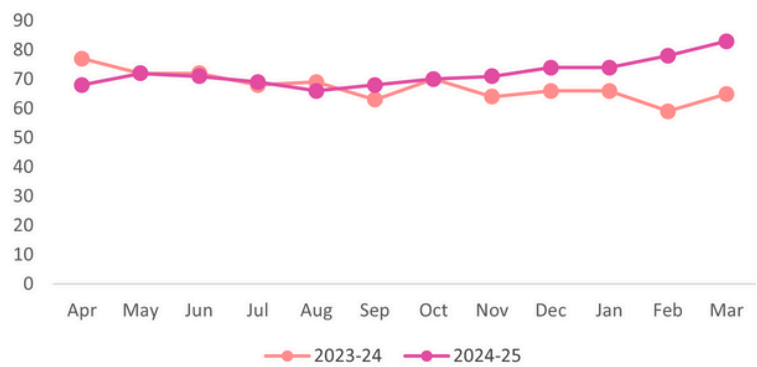
We work collaboratively with our partners to ensure that all children have equality of opportunity for early permanence where this suits their individual circumstances, this means that numbers do vary between the different areas.

This year we placed 20 of our children in Early Permanence arrangements. 11 of those children were placed before their Placement Order was granted, the others were placed post placement order.

Children Placed 2024-25 - FFA v Non-FFA



Children waiting with a Placement Order



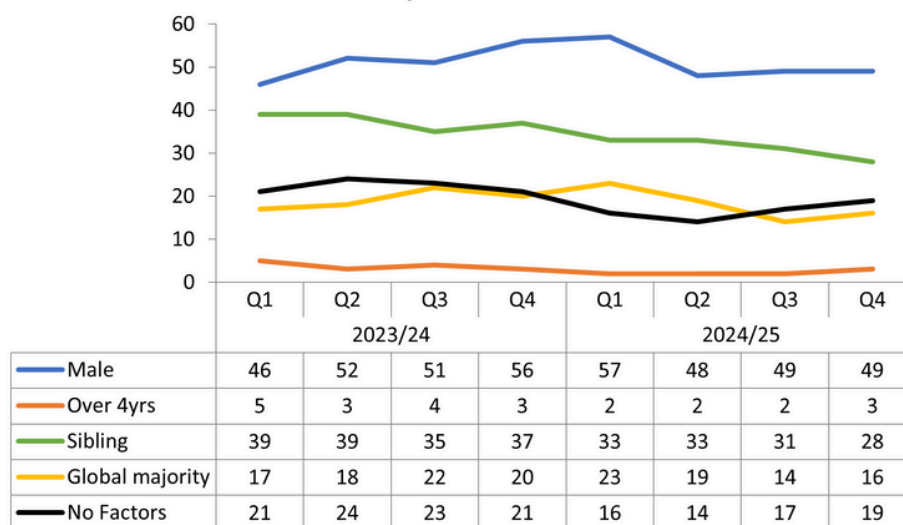
# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

## Timeliness of placing for adoption

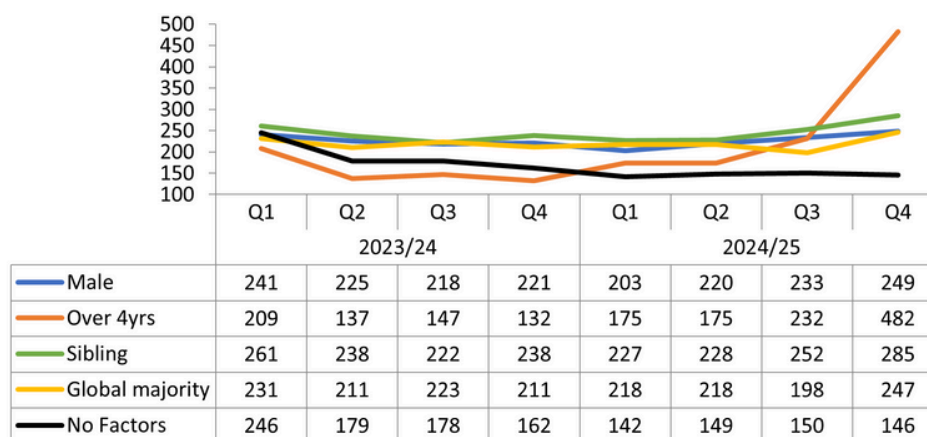
The time it takes once a child has a Placement Order for them to be placed for adoption has varied significantly this year. We have worked hard to refine our family finding processes and the need to do so contributed to the rationale for our service restructure.

We have seen a marked improvement in the average speed of placement for children. However the average timescales vary significantly according to the profiles of particular children and the corresponding availability of adopters.

**H. No. Children Placed Adoption in the previous 12 months by DTF factor**



**G. Time from PO to Placed Adoption by difficult to find families for (DTF) factor - Rolling Year Average for those Placed (days)**





# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

## Adoption Orders

Once a child has been placed for adoption and lived with the prospective adopters for ten weeks, they may make an application to the court to adopt their child. Given that the length of time that a court application takes to process typically exceeds a year, the number of adoption orders does not tally with the numbers of children placed in a given year. This year there were 99 Adoption Orders granted by the courts to families with ASE placed children. There were 100 Adoption Orders granted the previous year.

## Non Agency Adoption Orders

In addition to the 82 children we have placed for adoption according to the plans made by their Local Authorities, and the seven children we have worked hard but unsuccessfully to find families for, a further 20 children have become the subject of Adoption Orders made by the court. These are non-agency adoptions and include children adopted by their foster carers, those adopted by step parents or co-parents in surrogacy arrangements, and children adopted by British nationals from overseas.



# FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

## Meet and Play

This year we have been pleased to develop our online and in person profiling. Ten children came along to the Meet & Play with their foster carers, and were joined by ten adopter households. There were three girls and seven boys aged from one to five years, including two brother and sister pairs.

It was a really enjoyable event for everyone involved and feedback was positive. Some of the adopter feedback included:

*'We enjoyed the opportunity to meet the children and their foster carers. We were made to feel very welcome and supported.'*

*'The event was really well organised, we were expecting it to feel awkward but the way it was organised made sure it wasn't.'*

We progressed two children after event; this highlights the importance of adopter connection to children and how meetings between children, adopters and foster carers can have a positive impact.





# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Getting the right balance between children and adopters is an ongoing challenge inherent in the system, and in reality our need for adopters changes year on year. Last year we approved a relatively low number of adopters compared with earlier years after a period of very successful recruitment which resulted in some adopters waiting a long time to be matched, and in some cases choosing to withdraw from the process.

Given this low start point and with relatively high numbers of children entering care with likely adoption plans at the start of 2024 we knew that we needed to increase our approval rates this year to maintain sufficiency. To help us approve more adopters we undertook service reviews of some of our processes, taking account of feedback from applicants. As a result, we have now changed our approach to providing initial information to enquirers. This is now done via an online presentation which prospective adopters can watch at anytime, rather than requiring that they book into a scheduled event.

After this a meeting is offered for a more detailed individual discussion, the Ready2Adopt interview. We then provide a detailed report of the meeting and individualised advice to the enquirer.



# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Feedback from Ready2Adopt interviews:

*'Very polite and informative. Made the whole experience very comfortable for us.'*

*'The social worker was extremely personable and professional, taking our needs into consideration.'*

*'A good start to the process. The social worker was friendly and informative.'*

We have also improved our follow up after the Ready2Adopt interview by assigning a caseworker much earlier in the process. We have learnt that by providing this extra support we are more likely to see a well-considered and timely application. This then sets in place a sense of partnership that will hopefully result in a positive outcome.

We continue to review and extend our training and support offer to ensure that this prepares applicants better for the challenges ahead. Key to this has been the updating of our four day preparation groups, and the decision to deliver these with adoptive parents who can bring their authentic lived experience of adoption to the sessions.





# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

In 2024-25 we have also commissioned more training from Adoption UK for prospective adopters waiting to be matched following approval. This training includes looking at preparing for placement, and therapeutic parenting.

Feedback from our 'Getting Ready for Placement' one day training (compulsory for approved and waiting applicants):

*'Very useful and informative to share ideas and hear about lived experience.'*

*'Really good training and focus with other adopters. Nice to continue this support through the adoption journey.'*

This affirms that adopters are finding our comprehensive training package throughout their parenting journey a vital and useful resource. The response of families to the training has been very positive and their feedback continues to inform future commissioning.

Below is some of the feedback from the Trauma Informed Parenting Peer Learning programme. This is offered to families who have a child placed already.

*'Great tips to deescalate behaviour at home'*

*'Lots of practical solutions from an experienced adoptive parent'*

*"Such a useful course - we can already see that the strategies are making a difference."*

# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

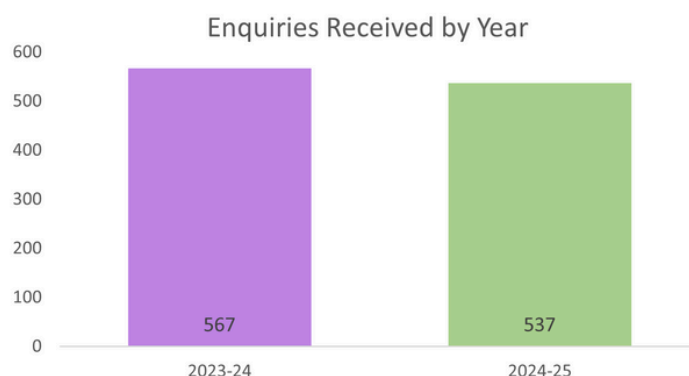
## Recruitment outcomes 2024/5

Over the year we received 537 enquiries, slightly fewer than the previous year (567), and we have seen these convert to 64 approvals (a conversion rate of 12%). The enquiries from people wanting to know more about adoption led to us accepting 79 Registrations of Interest (ROIs) which is the official start of Stage 1 of the assessment process for prospective adopters.

Additionally, there were an additional 15 enquiries from the previous year that created 15 ROIs. There were therefore 94 Registrations of Interest made and accepted by ASE in 2024 – 2025.

Following the acceptance of the application the assessment process has two stages, Stage 1 in which we undertake background checks including health assessments and provide four days of preparation.

A review is conducted at the end of the stage and over the year 75 households completed this successfully (reduced from 97 the previous year) and progressed to the second stage of the process.

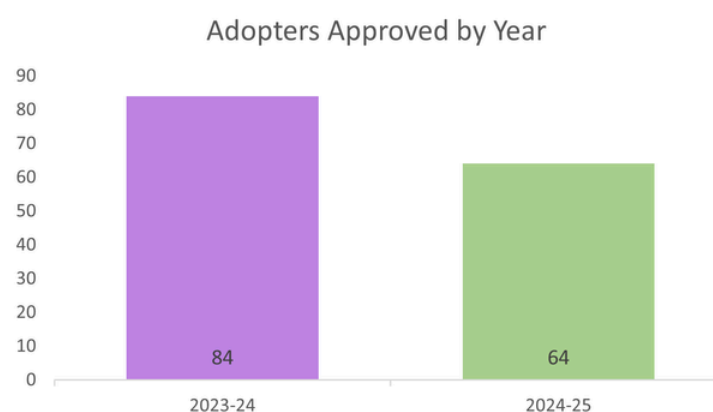
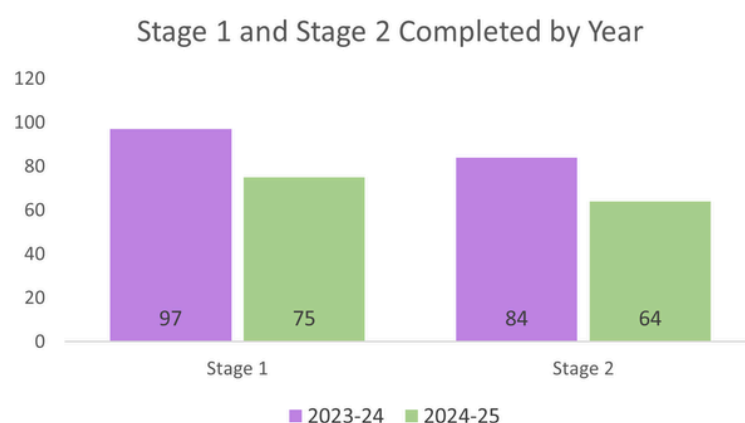


# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

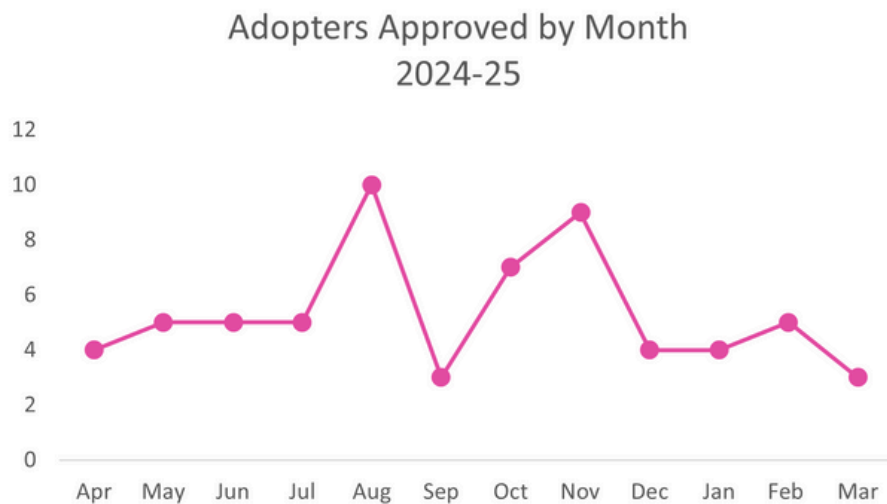
ASE approved 64 households as suitable to adopt this year, dropping from 84 the previous year. There is often as much work, if not more when assessments do not lead to a household being approved as suitable to adopt. This year, in addition to the 64 approvals, there were also two assessments that led to negative recommendations, and 13 assessments where the applicants withdrew before a negative recommendation could be made.

## RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Timeliness of Stage 1 continues to present challenges, not least given that many elements of the process are dependent on other agencies who provide background information. However, the average timescale at the end of the year was four months which is slower than the target of two months. Whilst this is a considerable improvement from previous years we recognise that there is room to make even more progress.



# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT



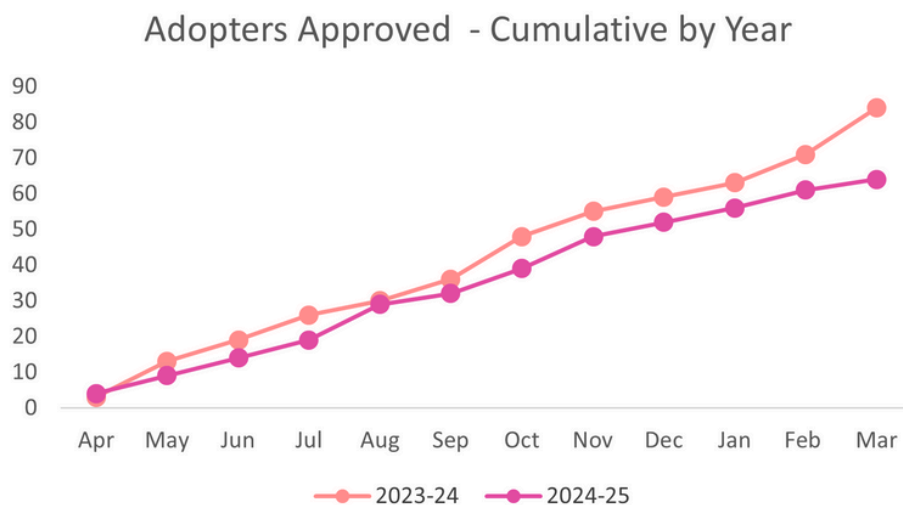
Stage 2 is led by a social worker who completes a thorough assessment of the household which is captured in a comprehensive report (the Prospective Adopter's Report- otherwise known as the PAR) The social worker's recommendation is considered by an adoption panel. This is an independently chaired body that brings a fresh pair of eyes before the Agency takes a final decision.

As with Stage 1 we monitor timescales closely and our current average time is 5.3 months. Taking both stages together and allowing for a short break between stages in most instances the average time from the end of Stage 1 to the end of Stage 2 is 10.5 months. This is significantly longer than the national target (8 months) and is the focus of current service improvement work.

This year we approved 64 families, which offers a potential opportunity for 83 children (based on the estimate that one adoptive family is needed for every 1.3 children as some children are placed with a sibling). This allowed us to place 95% of the children who were placed for adoption, with ASE adopters.



# RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT



51% of adopters approved this year fell within the 40 – 49 age bracket. 33% fell within the 30 – 39 age bracket. Six households fell within the 50 – 59 bracket and six households within the 21 – 29 age bracket (it is not legal to adopt under the age of 21).

20% of ASE placements made were with same sex couples, 72% with mixed sex couples, and 8% with solo applicants. White British and white applicants of other nationalities represent the largest groups at 75% and 15% respectively.

This is broadly representative of the population of the ASE region and of the diversity within the children's group. Proactive use of the interagency budget ensures that global majority children have access to all approved adopters who can meet their needs, as they relate to their ethnic and cultural identities and heritage.

A significant development and investment this year has been ASE piloting the "Becoming A Family" approach to early placement support. This is a national development which aims to ensure that new parents are supported pro-actively when a child is placed with them, and that they are linked in with other families at similar stages of family life.

# ADOPTION SUPPORT

Again Adoption Support continues to be an area of significant demand, growth and development within Adoption South East. The restructure of Adoption South East during the later part of 2024 has meant that our focus on aligning adoption support service across the region has continued and we now can provide a service to families living in our area that is consistent, and parents can know what to expect from us. The Adoption Support Hub is divided into three areas, the Advice Hub/Assessment and Intervention Team, The Keeping in Touch Team and the Adults Team.

It is well established that early life adversity has a long term impact on children and this can present with a range of additional and trauma related needs. Children have to make sense of their identities, and their parents are key to supporting them with these tasks. Adults too need to make sense of their identity and might come to us at a later date looking for information about their first/birth family. Consequently, families request support with a broad range of adoption support needs.



# ADOPTION SUPPORT

Some of these support needs include:

- Helping children settle within the family
- Talking about and telling children their adoption story
- Living with developmental trauma and how to parent therapeutically in response
- Keeping in Touch with a child's first/birth family
- Navigating a child's relationship with their first/birth family, during their childhood and into adulthood
- Living with child on parent violence
- Significant challenges for children in the school environment
- Significant challenges for parents in navigating school relationships and SEND services and processes
- Moving into adulthood
- Accessing Adoption Records

We continue to prioritise supporting the delivery of outcomes in line with [Adoption England](#)'s main aims which have been informed by the [Adoption Barometer](#) recommendations. Moving all our casework onto one data base (CHARMS) and arranging our services into specialisms has allowed us to have a much more accurate picture of the demand for adoption support and this means we can now plan and organise our services accordingly.





# ADOPTION SUPPORT

## The Advice Hub

We have now merged all four local duty lines to one Advice Hub. The Advice Hub is aimed primarily for parents and offers up to six sessions with a social worker. The focus is to provide helpful discussions with parents about their child, family life and to think through what support needs there are relating to adoption. We encourage parents to contact us at an early stage rather than waiting until their family feels in crisis and can signpost to the full range of our early help offer, as well as clear signposting to the services that sit outside of ASE.

We are aware of the heavy impact upon families with the period of waiting for support after referral. Our advice hub model means that parents are now able to receive support before challenges develop into crises. This year we have received 637 enquires through our Advice Hub. Feedback from parents on this service has been excellent.

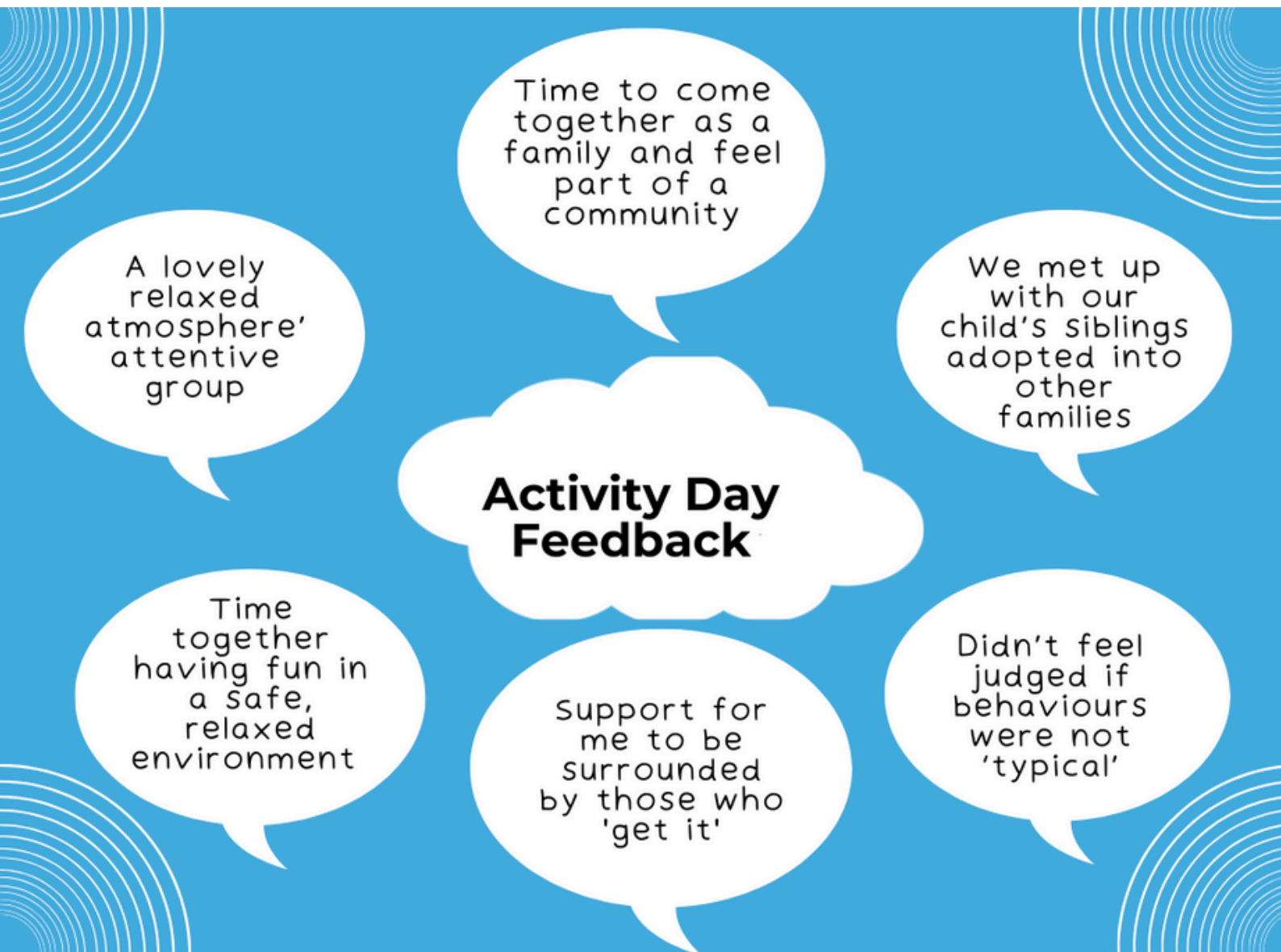
The social workers on the hub also offer advice and consultation to professionals working with children who have been adopted, although will only talk about specific children with parental consent.





# ADOPTION SUPPORT

ASE continues to host our extremely popular activity days. These are now fully regional with events co-ordinated so that there is something happening somewhere in the ASE region every month. We ran our first teenage event last year and the feedback from this was extremely positive. As a result of our adopter feedback we now have a series of teen events scheduled for the coming year.



Consultation with our adopters has also highlighted the need for a few hours break from childcare. We have been trialling ways to provide day time respite and in 2024/5 we held a number of activities session with a local holiday club provider, [Branching Out](#).

# **ADOPTION SUPPORT**

## **Approved Provider List and Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)**

Requests from parents for therapeutic support continues to make up a significant proportion of our work and in 2024-2025 we secured £3,949,762.72 in funding from the ASGSF for therapy for 1397 children following an Adoption Support Assessment.

The ASGSF funding is provided by a government grant and a delay in agreeing the revenue grant as well as a 40% reduction in the amount for each child which has caused a significant amount of additional work for our social work and business support teams as all applications had to be done again. This uncertainty was very stressful for families and for providers. ASE managers were busy holding this uncertainty while trying to identify which families might mean moved into a crisis. Regular updates were provided to parents and providers via our adopter voice newsletter, website and email.

Unsurprisingly there has been a consequence for the service ASE can provide and we now have a waiting list for new Adoption Support Assessments and can only allocate a social worker to families where the need for an assessment is considered as a high priority.

We have worked closely with our providers on our approved provider list at this time and again communicated this with families via our Adoption Voices newsletter, website and social work team.

# ADOPTION SUPPORT

## Catching up and Staying Connected Service

Adopt South, Adoption South East and Adopt South East Partnership have worked together to develop and launch a new service for parents who have adopted children. This initial roll out is funded by the Department of Education's Innovation Fund and the three RAAs have committed to embedding the service in their support offer going forward. The evidence of need for this service has been established through research and is clearly outlined as an outstanding need in the [Adopter Barometer](#).

The Service has three distinct services areas:

**Being a Family Peer group:** Parents can sign up to a monthly on line peer group facilitated by an Adoption Support social worker and our Adopter Voice Liaison. They can attend this group as often as they chose for the first year after their Adoption Order has been granted.

**Catching up calls:** Parents will be able to opt in to receive a catch up call from the adoption support team, offering advice, signposting and guiding relationships between adopters and the RAA. ASE are looking to employ an adoptive parent to undertake this role and work alongside our existing Adopter Voice Liaison worker.

**Focused training offer:** Parents can attend training run by AUK aimed at key developmental stages for a child and at key transitions times for them.

# ADOPTION SUPPORT

## Keeping In Touch (KiT)

The KiT team currently supports just under 1400 children and their families, co-ordinating and reviewing a large volume of post adoption KiT arrangements. Each year they facilitate over 3000 Letterbox exchanges and support approximately 80 face-to-face meetings between adopted children and their first/birth parents and/or significant family members. The team responds to, on average, 90 new KiT referrals per year for children who have recently been placed for adoption; setting up the KiT arrangements and offering advice, guidance and support to the families.

Recent research and national guidance, including work from the [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory](#) (NFJO), has highlighted the importance of modernising post-adoption contact and moving beyond traditional letterbox only, towards more meaningful, flexible face-to-face arrangements – where safe and appropriate. This shift reflects a growing understanding of how KiT supports identity, emotional security and connection for a child to their first/birth family.

As expectations around KiT evolve, the KiT team has required additional professional capacity to assess, facilitate and support these more complex and dynamic arrangements. ASE has continued to invest in this area of Adoption Support and appointed a dedicated team manager in the summer of 2024 who manages the KiT team which is made up of Adoption Support workers and business support officers. We are now in a position to ensure that every family has a named worker who manages the KiT arrangement between them and their child's first/birth family.



# ADOPTION SUPPORT

## Opportunities to Build Communities

ASE continues to host our extremely popular activity days, which are fully regional with something on every month. We also run ASE playgroups dedicated to providing a safe, supportive and nurturing environment for all parents who are approved to adopt and for children who have been adopted, under Foster for Adoption (FfA) or have an adoption plan in place.

Our playgroups are open to all of these families who reside within the region covered by Adoption South East and are delivered by Adoption Support workers from our KiT team with the aim that this create links between parents and workers they are likely to come across, as well as maintain links with ASE.

ASE Playgroups are free to attend and are designed as flexible, drop-in sessions, allowing families to attend for as long or as little as they wish and with the freedom to decide whether they attend or not on the day. This year we organised these groups to ensure that we have one every day across the region – Monday to Friday.



# ADOPTION SUPPORT

## **Adopted Adults**

This year we have responded to 227 enquires via our Adopted Adults hub. Enquiries can come from the adopted person, a birth relative, other agencies or intermediary services. The majority of enquiries come from people who were adopted wanting to view their adoption records.

This service continues to provide an effective efficient and welcoming response to people who request to view their adoption records. The appointment of a senior social worker in this area has driven up standards across the region.

There is increasing awareness of the lifelong impact of adoption on those who are adopted, and a growing focus on the need for agencies to provide a broader range of support than they have historically provided to varying degrees. The pooled budget of the RAA has offered the opportunity to provide groups across the region for adopted adults and to engage with those adopted adults to co-design those groups so that the purpose and culture of the groups are open to all those with lived experience and are not mediated or controlled through the lens of social work.

Following co working between our senior social worker and a steering group of adopted adults we invited organisation tender for a three year contract to provide peer groups for adopted adults across the region. This was a competitive tender and ASE awarded the contract to Family Action. The contract is due to start in June 2025, with the first groups starting soon after.



# ADOPTION VOICES

Lara Featherstone, Adoption Voice Liaison, looks back at the last year:

“In 2024/2025 our consultation and two-way communication with our adoption community has continued to grow as more adopters sign up to the ASE mailing list. The circulation of our newsletters increased over the course of this year and we now have over a thousand subscribers. We have continued to circulate a separate newsletter containing our events, groups and memberships.

The ASE team worked hard to provide eight family fun day events for adoptive families catering for those in the primary age range and below (though any age was welcome to attend).

In addition to this we launched a new programme of four events especially for families of secondary school young people, which has proved to be extremely popular.



# ADOPTION VOICES

Feedback from the events:

*"I enjoyed being around other adopted teenagers, I would like to attend another event"*

*"It was really, really, really enjoyable throughout my experience throughout my day"*

*"Would I do it again? Yes I would!"*

Bringing a large group of young people together at these events allowed us to consult with the young people directly to inform the next programme of events, which has been planned using their input.

Adopter consultation and feedback continues to highlight how valuable, and valued, these events are. They provide a space for the children and young people to be in the majority, in terms of their adopted status, and to make new friends who have adoption in common.





# ADOPTION VOICES

They also give families the opportunity to:

- Help the child/young person know they are not alone in their adoption status, there are lots of other people/families like them/theirs
- Be in a space where everyone understands adoption
- Speak, informally, to ASE social workers and re-connect with social workers who have been a part of their story
- Network with other adoptive families
- And importantly, have fun as a family!

As well as letting our adoption community know about events that we are holding, the newsletters have provided us with a way to share news of other opportunities open to our families from outside organisations. In 2024-5 these have included art workshops, training from the region's Virtual Schools, free tickets to Brighton Festival performances and family music workshops.

ASE has also worked with an outside provider to trial holiday clubs to facilitate fun and networking for our adopted children, at the same time as providing respite for parents. The provider, Branching Out, delivered their usual holiday club programme, which parents paid for, with days allocated specifically for adopted young people.

ASE complimented this delivery by providing staff training on modern adoption issues and by funding a higher staff/child ratio to allow children with higher needs to be able to attend. This model has proved to be very popular and we plan to continue this in the upcoming school holidays.

# ADOPTION VOICES

The 2024 ASE's Learning and Development programme has been very successful and has delivered training sessions on a wide range of adoption related subjects. We continuously evaluate feedback to inform the training programme going forward and this resulted in the continuation of the majority of training sessions, as well as the expansion of our Non-Violent Resistance programme going forward into 2025.

We have continued to run an Education Peer support group and have commissioned a FASD Peer Support and Learning Group, and a Therapeutic Parenting support group through Adoption UK. Working alongside other RAAs we started a monthly 'Being A Family' peer group at the end of the year, in response to feedback from adopters that they would like more support from ASE just after they receive their adoption order. This is part of a wider package being rolled out for new adopters.

The 'Meet the Adopters' sessions, which are a statutory part of Stage 1, have now been running for three years. The sessions aim to help prospective adopters think through their adoption journey, with input from those with lived experience. They have been very successful, with fantastic feedback from families.



# ADOPTION VOICES

The vast majority of attendees report that the sessions have been helpful in aiding them to think about the adoption journey that will be right for them and has prompted many to want to find out more about adopting siblings; adopting an older child; Fostering for Adoption (FFA), and a variety of modern adoption issues. Prospective adopters told us the Meet the Adopter sessions were useful because:

*“You get the reality of the situation from lived experience. To hear the human response to the challenges being an adopter and a parent.”*

*“As our journey continues, it's always handy to be able to access the experience of people who have been through the adoption process before, and are all at different stages of parenthood with diverse experiences.”*

*“It was a great experience asking our questions, the volunteers had a wide breadth of experience and different avenues of adoption”*



# ADOPTION VOICES

We have continued to invite national consultation, via our newsletter, by circulating consultations from Adoption England, Adoption UK, and research institutions, as well as locally from ASE.

I have continued to liaise with local adopter, peer led, groups through their group representatives, meeting them bi-monthly. The Adoption Support manager and Head of Service are invited to these meeting three times a year. This has proved to be an invaluable source of two-way communication with the adopter community.

The adoption support offer in Adoption South East has grown/changed substantially this year with the growth of the numbers of events, collaborations, the introduction of the Advice hub, the start of the Being a Parent group and the changes/consolidation of the Under 5s playgroups across the region. Adopter voice and consultation has played a significant role in shaping the structure of these services.

We have also consulted with adopters, and shared their voices, when working with other partners involved in the provision of services to our families.

We continue to learn a lot from all the consultation with, and feedback from, our adoptive families. We are deeply grateful to the many adopters who take part in our stakeholder engagement, which is used to inform and to shape our services.



# PANELS

The main business of the ASE Adoption Panels continues to be to make recommendations to the ASE Agency Decision Maker (ADM) as to the suitability of prospective adoptive applicants and as to the suitability of proposed matches for children to ADMs in our local authority partner agencies. In addition, the adoption panel has a quality assurance responsibility and provides feedback about practice to the social work teams, local authority agency advisers and ADMs in ASE and the local authorities.

There were 62 panel meetings in 2024-2025 which considered recommendations for 68 Prospective Adopter approvals and 84 matches.

All the matches presented had a positive recommendation from the panel and were subsequently agreed by local authority ADMs which indicates that the pre-panel quality assurance process is working well to ensure that all the relevant information is available for panels to reach a recommendation.



# PANELS

Of the 68 Prospective Adopter Approvals, two were deferred for further information after panel had considered the reports and of the remaining 66 approvals considered only one was a negative recommendation.

There are key areas where panels have offered advice and quality assurance feedback to the agencies about practice which are noted in the Chairs' Report below.

## **Feedback from applicants and social workers**

The panel service is keen to learn from social workers and applicants attending panel about their experience so that we can continue to improve consistency and transparency in the process.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive:

*"We were very pleased and thankful for how the panel talked to us and put us at ease during the meeting. It is a daunting experience and all panel representatives were friendly, welcoming and compassionate. We felt, and were pleased, that their questions were focused on the interests of all parties associated with the proposed adoption. Thank you for making our experience so positive."*

*"The panel were so friendly and welcoming we felt very at ease in what was a slightly unnerving situation! Thank you to everyone."*

*"Panel was a little late but I was kept informed and so was able to let my applicants know. Panel was very welcoming, and all questions were clear and relevant."*

# PANELS

While it remains the central focus of panel members that they have a responsibility for the scrutiny of recommendations and will always keep at the forefront the needs of children, the aim is to ensure that those attending panel are well prepared and supported to contribute the information needed to reach a recommendation. Social workers and applicants have indicated that they appreciate themes of the areas that the panel wish to explore further being sent out in advance and that panels also outline the strengths of the applicants alongside the issues needing to be discussed.

Having collated all the feedback, the Panel Service is in the process of finalising information sheets for those attending panel to make clear the panel's role and what they can expect when attending panel meetings. New social workers are also encouraged to take up the opportunity of observing a panel before presenting a recommendation to panel.

## **Panel membership and developments**

This year has seen significant changes with two new Chairs appointed and two new Professional Advisers allocated to this role as part of the reorganisation of ASE into specialist teams. This is alongside a dedicated administration team which is key to the effective running of panels and the continued commitment of independent panel members and Medical Advisers.

This has provided an opportunity to focus on consistency and connection across our three panels so that there is a shared understanding about standards, approach and learning. Our panel chairs now meet regularly together and with the Professional Advisers to agree improvements and to reflect on themes in quality assurance feedback to the agencies.



# PANELS

The service will also in future have six monthly business meetings with all panel chairs and members present, rather than individual meetings at separate panels. Business meetings provide feedback on national and agency developments, an overview of progress on cases considered and updates on research, as well as an opportunity to consider how panels are functioning and can continue to improve.

Alongside this the Professional Advisers have now established regular meetings with Child Agency Advisers from the four local authority partners to feed back on identified quality assurance issues, consider best practice and to work collaboratively on ensuring the panel service supports the avoidance of delay in achieving permanence for children. The current focus is on a shared approach to planning for implementation of the new Child Permanence Report across all four local authority areas.





# PANELS

## Training

ASE held its annual in person Panel training day in January 2025 with a focus on the modernising post adoption contact agenda. This included a presentation on recent research, case law and the outcome of the November 2024 Public Law Working Group. This facilitated a lively discussion about panel's role in exploring contact plans and their option to offer advice to local authority ADMs on proposed contact arrangements when any match is considered.

While the annual training days are well-received and are also an important opportunity for panel members to meet in person, the time commitment and distance make it difficult for all to attend.

The panel service is also aware that panel members bring a wide variety of personal and professional experience to their role and have different learning needs. All panel members have access to CATCH memberships through ASE - this is an online community of information and support which provides a wealth of training and learning resources including webinars, executive summaries, e-learning courses and links to explore further. Panel members are also directed to relevant [BAAF](#) briefings on topics such as the new Child Permanence Report.

Nevertheless, we have identified a need for short 'bitesize' online training sessions which we plan to run twice yearly so that we can update on relevant recent research, legislative and case law changes and practice developments such as the training offered to prospective adopters.

# PANELS

## Impact of ASE Restructure

Six months into the new structure it is clear that there are real opportunities to improve practice through quality assurance feedback as relevant themes can be focussed on the specialist teams working in a particular area. For example, now that there is a dedicated specialist team completing Prospective Adopter Assessments (PARs), there is regular dialogue with a smaller team about panels' expectations of what is required from assessments.

Examples of this include how work with existing children in families is approached, and what to take into account when assessing and preparing a family to potentially consider a trans-racial placement. There are already indications that as the specialist teams increase their confidence and expertise in a specific area, the consistency and quality of assessments and reports are improving with frequent examples of good practice.



# PANELS

## **Chairs' report**

Current panel chairs are Michelle Goode, Yashi Shah and Shirley Robottom. The Panel Chairs have been meeting together this year to support achieving consistency of approach and standards, to bring together quality assurance themes from that can be fed back to agencies and to provide appropriate challenge to ASE.

## **Children's work**

Overall, panel chairs have been able to identify and feed back on examples of excellent practice from child and adoption social workers. While there is still some variation in standards and areas for improvement, the potential for the specialist structure to drive up standards of practice and achieve more consistency is evident.

The Panel Chairs note the continued positive emphasis on Early Permanence with a significant number of matches presented to panel being for children already living with their proposed adoptive families on a Fostering to Adopt basis.

Panel Chairs have proposed that they be involved in recruitment of panel members in future and how this can be achieved is being considered when further recruitment of panel members is required.

Panel Chairs acknowledge that it is difficult to meet all the ADMs individually given the numbers across the local authorities. Therefore the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) will meet with them annually going forward. The ASE Agency Decision Maker will observe each chair's panel to contribute to his lead in their annual appraisals. Local Authority ADMs will be offered the opportunity to observe a panel if they are able to do so.

# PANELS

## **Chairs' report (contd)**

It is acknowledged that there is often a lack of clarity in reports to panel about how the risks and benefits of post adoption contact plans and arrangements are assessed and evidenced, and they often do not reflect the current case law and research. In particular, a tendency to resort to formulaic plans of starting with letterbox exchanges with the possibility of review in future. While it is clear this has been a national issue and a complex area of practice as highlighted by the President of the Family Division in his 2024 speeches - hence recent case law and proposals from the [Public Law Working Group](#) - significant improvements do need to be made. It is acknowledged, however, that there is evidence that adoptive families are better prepared and informed about contact and the support offered by the ASE Keeping in Touch service from the point of Preparation groups and throughout the assessment stage.

### **Areas for improvement**

The other main area for improvement is preparation and assessment of adoptive families open to considering trans-racial placements. While there are some examples of good practice there appears to be a lack of confidence and knowledge in this area. Panel Chairs are aware of social workers beginning to use the [AFDIT framework](#) issued by Adoption England to support their assessments ( this outlines essential principles and best practices that social workers can employ when working with transracial adoptive families and children) but this still needs to be embedded in practice to be meaningful. It is encouraging that this is a priority area for development for ASE and for the assessment and family finding teams.



# COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

This year our customer service team have received 34 contacts of which 13 were complaints, three of which were considered under the statutory process. These are typically complaints in relation to Adoption Support (2000 families received adoption support services in the same period). We received 19 enquires which were potential complaints and which we were able to deescalate and resolve for people, and we received one MP enquiry on behalf of an existing complainant.

We received the majority of complaints through our dedicated complaints inbox which indicates that our processes are working for people who wish to complain. Six people have complained about the adoption process and dissatisfaction with our decision making, Four have complained about Keeping in Touch / Contact services and three have complained about Adoption Support.

62% of complaints were not upheld, 31% were partly upheld and 7% were upheld. We saw no escalations of statutory complaints to Stage 2 or Stage 3 this year. There were no non-statutory complaints escalated to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. This indicates that complainants are satisfied that their complaint has been appropriately investigated at Stage 1 and that where we have got things wrong, we have been transparent about this and identified where we can learn from complaints.

The maximum time allowed to respond to complaints, as set out in the ASE complaints policy, is 20 working days. Nine complaints (69%) were responded to on time. This reflects that the policy is effective and supportive for all parties and that training and support from our Customer Relations team has a positive impact.

# COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

The complaints procedure can be accessed on the Adoption South East website [here](#).

## Learning and improvement

Throughout the year we record the learning identified from each complaint to build a picture of common themes or trends. Our learning from complaints is vital to our continued efforts to ensure high levels of service and to maintaining positive relationships with the families who use our services and need to be able to trust us. A learning report is produced every six weeks and shared with the Head of Service who then ensures managers are making the changes promised as a result of a complaint. One example arises from 31% of the complaints ASE received being about letterbox contact (Keeping in Touch).

Whilst the numbers of complaints and enquiries were relatively low given the volume of the work undertaken by the team, the issues complained about included, no letters being received, a delay in receiving letters, letters being sent to the incorrect address, and complaints about information shared. The complaints were not all upheld, but some changes were made as a result of the complaints. This included a senior management review of Keeping in Touch arrangements for families, implementation of new processes and training for the team, and the learning informed the restructure of this area of work within the wider service restructure. Additional resources have been allocated to ensure a more efficient, effective and reliable service for all families in order to ensure that we have a solid foundation from which to meet the expanding demands for contact support in contemporary care planning for children.

# **ADOPTION SOUTH EAST - CONCLUSION**

Each year the Annual Report for Adoption South East becomes longer than the last as our focus as a relatively new organisation shifts from our transformation from local services to a operating successfully as a truly regional adoption service. This year has been one of significant change which has likely played some part in the reduced approvals and placements reflected in this report alongside changes in national trends. The work we have reported on this year in relation to Adoption Support demonstrates that there continues to be a rising demand, and that we have continued to meet this both in terms of the number and value of our funding applications for therapy for children and their families, alongside an evolving and increasing offer of other support for families built by adoption.

Further to our service reviews last year, we spent this year preparing for and then moving to our new specialist structure. This is now fully operational and provides a solid foundation for the years ahead and from which to meet the challenges and opportunities set out for us in the modernising agenda in adoption.

Our service restructure has required a considerable amount of work from all involved and has been delivered, in time, within our existing budgets and resources. This has been achieved by our teams in addition to business as usual and has, even in its earliest months, delivered benefits. Early indicators suggest that many of the process issues and barriers in our original structure are now removed or more easily resolved and that our teams experience has improved. Our specialist hub model means that we are now better able to benefit from the creativity and practice initiatives of our ASE staff in each of our service areas now that our energies are not directed at working hard to achieve standard operating processes across four historically different Local Authority workforces.

# **ADOPTION SOUTH EAST - CONCLUSION**

The specialist model provides a solid foundation from which to respond to an evolving adoption landscape and the varied responses by our different stakeholders to those changes. That evolution can now include delivery of a CPD and learning programme for our teams as they now work to shared goals and more clearly articulated common purpose.

Examples of early impact include the regional Keeping in Touch service which now provides an equitable service across the four LA areas with a shared ethos and approach; the increase in our events and activities for adoptive families which are no longer dependent upon capacity in local teams and are now held evenly across the region; and our increased resilience to external challenges. The new specialist adoption service had the opportunity to test its resilience late in the year as the delays by central government in agreeing that the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund would continue for the coming year significantly impacted families and therapy providers causing the anxiety and dissatisfaction reported nationally. Our specialist model enabled us to deliver a proactive and coherent centrally managed approach and a well-coordinated recovery once the fund was confirmed in the new financial year, when our social workers and business support teams had to redo all the work they had had already done as it had become out of date given the delays from the Department for Education.

This year has seen us continue to recruit and approve prospective adoptive parents, find families for children and support significant numbers of those families. Our local performance and experience broadly reflects national trends and is in line with colleague agencies across the South East in relation to adopter recruitment and family finding, and it is considerably greater in adoption support.



# ADOPTION SOUTH EAST

## CONCLUSION

Our ongoing commitment to supporting families in a range of ways designed to offer support in the way that is wanted and needed is seen in the extended range of activities, events, learning and training, peer groups and community building described in this report.

Next year will see us using our CPD programme for our teams to enhance practice in relation to becoming a family, those early stages of adjustment to new parenting whilst children live with their new parents and families get used to this new stage in their lives. Our work to embed AfDit across the range of our practice will gather pace, and we will be exploring increasingly creative ways to recruit prospective adoptive parents in what is currently a shrinking pool as we see improvements in fertility treatments, uncertainty, for some people, about parenting in any form, an increased felt economic and political instability, and changes to practice in relation to ideas of open adoption within local courts. These are all challenges and circumstances that face any Regional Adoption Agency and we are pleased to have done the work this year to give us the best advantage in meeting and navigating them in the year ahead.

Michael Wilson, Head of Service, Adoption South East

