

## Annual Progress report of the East Sussex Adoption Service

### 1. Supporting Information

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/2016
1. Number of Children Adopted	57	43	45
2. Number of Adoption Matches (children)	50	56	32
3. Number of Permanent Fostering Matches (children)	10	7	10
4. Number of East Sussex Adoptive Matches (children)	40	33	26
5. Number of Consortium Adoptive Matches (children)	1	6	0
6. Number of Inter-Agency Matches (children):			
Permanence:	4	3	2
Adoption:	9	17	6
7. Number of Prospective Adopters Approved (households) *	44	50	41
8. Number of Permanent Carers Approved (households)	8	4	2
9. Number of Children Approved for Adoption up to 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2016 (including 2 re-approvals)	52	43	53
10. Number of children Approved for Permanence up to 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2016	24	26	14
11. Number of Approved Adopters waiting to be Matched	17	20	22
12. Number of Disruptions presented to Panel:			
Permanence:			0
Adoptions:	1	0	1

### 2. Recruitment Activity

**2.1** The two stage recruitment process which is now fully embedded within East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) Adoption Service, received very positive feedback from adopters during 15/16. Prospective adopters reported that they particularly appreciated the support they received during the process. Not only did ESCC's reputation as a welcoming and helpful recruitment service lead to local enquirers choosing to adopt with ESCC, it also attracted significant numbers of adopters from outside East Sussex borders which have been pursued if the geography is helpful. During this period the service continued to offer a dedicated telephone number for enquiries, a specific adoption recruitment email address and an on-line enquiry form to ensure that all enquirers received a prompt and personal service.

**2.2** The time taken to approve prospective adopters was maintained at an average of nine months, from registering their interest to approval at Adoption Panel. While the service continued to explore ways to reduce this timescale where possible, it was clear that adopters taking control of the timescales during Stage 1 led to delays at this point more frequently than might have been predicted. It had been anticipated that most adopters would want to progress to approval in the quickest time possible, but in reality more applicants chose to take more time to prepare themselves for adoption. However the time taken to assess applicants in Stage 2 remained on target.

**2.3** During 2015-16 the agency had 287 enquiries about adopting with ESCC. Following receipt of information packs, 81 requests were received for registration of interest forms. The conversion rate from enquiry to registration was 28%, which is a drop compared to 34% in 2014-15, however this still compares well with the Coram BAAF suggested national figures

of around 10%. While difficult to be certain, it is suspected that the reduction was due to the decision to pause accepting applications from potential adopters to adopt babies. This decision was taken in order to prioritise applications from adopters wanting to adopt older children and sibling groups. In line with the national picture, there was an increasing mismatch between adopters wishes compared with the profile of children needing placement. Consequently there was a significant drop in new registrations from December to April 2016. Given the recent rise in numbers of children being referred for an adoption placement, as well as an encouraging increase in the number of adopters matched with children, ESCC have reviewed the decision to pause applications to adopt young single children. This appears to have resulted in an immediate increase in the rate of registrations of interest from enquirers.

**2.4** Throughout 15/16 the Adoption Service continued to organise regular recruitment activities for prospective adopters; profiling the range of needs of each child waiting for a placement. Advertising and recruitment activity in 2015-16 included providing information about open events on the Government Gateway, First4Adoption, New Family Social and Coram BAAF websites as well as reviewing and updating information on the ESCC website, radio advertising, and bespoke advertising on ESCC payslips, at supermarket sites, and on buses travelling around the county. The Adoption Facebook page remained popular in reaching a range of prospective adopters, particularly as it was updated regularly with information regarding local adoption services, and key national developments. Monthly information drop-in events were also held in the evenings and at weekends.

**2.5** The continued trend of ESCC receiving enquiries from applicants living outside ESCC borders resulted in the service generating increased levels of income from interagency fees. Four ESCC families were 'purchased' by other local authorities in 2015-16. In addition, there have been a further 6 matches identified with other local authority children that are at various stages of progress at time of writing. All will bring income to the service should children be placed ultimately.

**2.6** All recruitment processes, including stage 1 meetings and preparation to adopt courses, were reviewed during the year in order to streamline practice. A post approval training course was piloted to give adopters a better understanding of the additional attachment needs of their adopted children with tailored support strategies available at the point of placement. There was very positive feedback from this pilot and consideration is being given to setting up two six week courses in 2016-17.

**2.7** During 2015-16 a further 6 experienced adopters returned for assessment, and one set of foster carers applied to be assessed as adopters for children in their care. In addition, four families were recruited to offer fostering for adoption placements for four children. Three of these four children were placed on a fostering basis with adoptive families where their siblings had previously been placed. The fourth child was placed with a childless couple willing to take the risk of offering a foster placement prior to an adoption placement being made, and subject to the Court agreeing to the care plan for adoption for the child. He has since been adopted, thus ensuring he had the minimum number of moves possible during his time in our care.

### **3. Children with a plan for Adoption.**

**3.1** The number of children with a plan for adoption increased from 43 14/15 to 53 in 15/16. This scale of increase was not reflected nationally; indeed many Adoption Agencies reported that the number of approvals for adoption had significantly decreased in favour of Special Guardianship Orders. Locally however, the courts responded to a clear Government directive which suggested that adoption should continue to be promoted as a realistic permanence option for young children at the earliest opportunity. During 15/16 28 children

were matched with local adopters, with only 2 sibling pairs placed out of county giving a total of 32 children matched in the 12 month period. There was also a marked rise in the number of sibling groups with complex permanence plans, some of which involved adoption for the younger children and permanent foster placement for the older children. These arrangements were very challenging in terms of contact and involved detailed professional and co-ordinated working across children's teams.

**3.2** The family finding service was refined to more effectively co-ordinate and develop local in house provision, and explore placement options for children approved and waiting for both adoption and permanence. Improving communication between this service and the family support and looked after children's teams and resulting in timely notification of children entering the system with a possible plan for adoption minimising any potential delays. One of the greatest challenges in the past year was the number of children who remained at home during care proceedings and the impact these arrangements had on permanence planning.

**3.3** The specialist recruitment and family finding staff within the adoption service worked closely together during this period to identify the types of adopters needed to meet the needs of the children coming forward. It should be noted that there was a continued rise in the number of children identified with a plan for adoption who had experienced domestic violence, trauma and loss. Many of these children will have ongoing complex therapeutic post adoption support needs in the future. During this period it was enormously beneficial to apply to the Adoption Support Fund with an identified support package for adopters and their families at the earliest stage in placement.

**3.4** In November 2015 ESCC participated in an adoption activity day with our former consortium partners. Whilst there was initial interest in a number of East Sussex children sadly it did not result in any matches. However, the children have been successfully matched since with both in house and inter agency adopters.

#### **4. Staffing**

**4.1** There have been a number of staffing changes over the last 12 months with a number of long standing members of the team moving on. A small number of these posts were recruited to, but 5 staffing vacancies have been held in order to manage the very difficult budget position the council found itself in during 15/16.

#### **5. Permanence**

**5.1** The Adoption & Permanence Service continued to use targeted family finding for those children with a plan for permanent fostering; particularly those children with complex needs or who were part of a sibling group. The permanence tracking workshop met regularly during 15/16 to monitor closely the timescale of permanence plans and ensure suitable matches were progressed.

**5.2** The service had a number of in-house foster carers who were willing to put themselves forward to offer long term care to children already in placement with them, or for those for whom they have expressed a specific interest. This was particularly advantageous for those children who had been "claimed" by the foster carers, and for those children who had expressed a clear wish to remain in that placement. The number of children approved for permanence reduced from 26 in 14/15, to 14 in 15/16. At year end there were 12 children with a plan for permanence for whom the service was actively family finding, this included four sets of sibling pairs.

#### **6. Adoption Support**

**6.1** Between April 2015 and March 2016 there were 36 requests from adopters for post adoption support assessments. Of these, 28 resulted in the provision of support. At year

end, 141 families were in receipt of post adoption support packages. This represents a significant increase on last year.

**6.2** The specially commissioned CAMHS service for adopted children and their families 'AdCAMHS' was funded by the Local Authority CAMHS grant throughout 15/16. The aim of the service was to offer post adoption support to families with dedicated therapy and consultation services. The service was commissioned to work with 40 families at any one time, however there are currently 68 cases open to the service. The service was designed to contribute to adoption stability, promote positive attachments within adoptive families and ultimately to prevent placement breakdown. There was clear evidence collected by the service which indicated that these interventions had had a very positive impact on placement stability.

**6.3** The adoption service also commissioned individual therapists to provide specialist support to families in areas such as therapeutic life story work and 'Theraplay'. Play, Drama and Music therapies were identified as effective tools in enabling children to communicate and express themselves more creatively. There were also a number of adoption cases where child to parent violence was identified as a key factor and a systemic family therapist was commissioned, with expertise in the 'Non Violent Resistance' (NVR) approach, to offer advice and interventions to families. These interventions were all funded by applications to the national Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

**6.4** Excellent links were maintained with the Virtual School, who continued to fund two part time adoption support workers within the service. These roles provided adoptive families with support for educational and school-based issues, in order to promote the educational achievements of adopted children within East Sussex. The Virtual School also offered advice and guidance to schools in drawing down the Pupil Premium for adopted children. Training for schools on attachment and on the needs of adoptive children in an education setting, was identified as a key area of intervention.

**6.5** Closer collaborative links between the Adoption Support Team and Locality Services, particularly with the Duty and Assessment, Family Support, Youth Support and Targeted Youth Support teams were forged, enabling a more seamless service to be provided to families when a family assessment was required. In complex adoption support cases, a team around the child, particularly though not exclusively in adolescence, is vital in managing risk and safeguarding issues as well as preventing some of our young people returning to care.

**6.6** During the last 12 months, the Adoption Support Team facilitated a group for adopted children aged 10-12 years, and 2 groups for adoptive teenagers facilitated jointly with AdCAMHS. A further 12 week therapeutic parenting programme was successful in bringing adopters together to focus on adoption issues with the support of two child and adolescent psychotherapists, also under the umbrella of AdCAMHS. ESCC continued with its contract with Adoption UK to deliver support to adopters and funded four support groups at different locations across East Sussex. This contract was regularly monitored and reviewed by the adoption service and evaluated by service users.

**6.7** The Adoption Service also maintained its close working relationship with the Adoptive Families Group (AFG), set up in January 2013. This is an independent adopter-led group which focuses on lobbying and raising the profile of the needs of adoptive families both locally and nationally. During this period AFG focused on education, the use of Pupil

Premium and raising awareness of the Adoption Support Fund in relation to therapeutic support.

**6.8** The Adoption Service has continued to commission the services of CMB Counselling (a small independent agency) to provide an intermediary service to adopted adults and their relatives, and the Adoption Support Team provided a service to adopted adults wishing to access their records. In March 2016, 45 families were in receipt of adult adoptees support packages (not one off advice).

**6.9** The adoption service in 2015/2016 held two events for adoptive families. These were social events organised and supported by the service, and designed to enable adopters and their children to meet informally and have a fun day out. These events were well received and attended.

**6.10** The same sex adopters group met on a regular basis with speakers in attendance from time to time.

**6.11** The direct contact service supported 300 arrangements during 15/16, and a further 781 indirect contact agreements; both of which demonstrate a substantial increase on 14/15. This aspect of the service requires a high level of professional scrutiny as well as dedicated full-time administrative support.

**6.12** In 15/16 the Adoption Service trained a caseworker to become a licensed practitioner in the use of 'THRIVE', funded through Pupil Premium. THRIVE is a systemic approach used in relation to the early identification of emotional developmental need in children. It has been used increasingly in schools to help children in their relationships with others and equips them to be open to learning. There were also several THRIVE workshops commissioned for adopters, funded via the Adoption Support Fund.

**6.13** The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was rolled out nationally in May 2015 (following the prototype phase which involved East Sussex). As part of its programme of adoption reform, the Government made a financial commitment to fund the ASF until the end of this parliament. This was an acknowledgement of the need to strengthen arrangements for adoption support. The ASF is available specifically for the provision of therapeutic support. Since the roll out of the fund, the scope has broadened for 16/17 with the eligibility to include children from the time of placement in their adoptive families, intercounty adoptions and Special Guardianship. Since the national roll out of the ASF, East Sussex made 64 applications to the fund and the total agreed is £219,965.80.

## **7. Adoption & Permanence Panel**

**7.1** There have been a number of changes to the membership of the Adoption and Permanence Panels during 15/16, but quoracy was maintained. Panel processes and venues were reviewed during this period in order that best value for money was achieved, and savings made. This resulted in a change to the venue, a reduction in the frequency of Panel meetings and all panel members now receive their papers electronically. A very successful Panel training event took place in September 2015 facilitated by Elaine Dibben from Coram BAAF. The topic of Adoption Matching was enthusiastically discussed.

**7.2** Kent Health Care Trust (KHCT) were commissioned for 15/16 to deliver all medical advice to the Panels, and all initial health assessments and adoption medicals for Looked after Children. They encountered a number of personnel issues during this timeframe which resulted in the emergency appointment of a number of locum staff. At year end KHCT were

in the process of recruiting to two permanent medical advisor posts specifically to work with ESCC children and the Adoption Panel.

## **8. Consortium & Regionalisation**

**8.1** For 12 years East Sussex was a member of the South East Regional Consortium together with Brighton and Hove, Bromley, Bexley, Kent and Medway. Brighton and Hove left the consortium in July 2014, and Kent's position changed following the differently commissioned relationship with Coram. Medway, Bexley and Bromley forged links with Central London local authorities. In Jan 2015 ESCC joined the South Central Consortium in together with a number of South Eastern local authorities and PACT, a voluntary adoption agency. In April 2015 the government and DfE announced the introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies whereby existing consortium arrangements were reviewed. There was an expectation that all local authorities would join together in regions to submit a bid to become a new entity, and that it should include at least one voluntary agency. ESCC were instrumental in compiling a bid together with Brighton & Hove, Surrey and West Sussex. This was submitted in September 2015 but was not successful. However, the four local authorities have continued to work closely together, developed a senior management board and an operational group to drive forward this agenda under the banner of Adopt South East.

## **9. Management Priorities 2016/17**

- Using the expertise developed in ESCC's outstanding Adoption Service to drive forward adoption recruitment, practice innovation and collaboration both locally and across the region, with a view to generating income or attracting grant funding.
- Consolidate targeted recruitment of adopters for ESCC children, whilst maintaining a strategy of over recruitment in order to release additional resources/funds particularly in the Southern region.
- Work together with other Local Authority partners in Surrey, Brighton & Hove and West Sussex to develop an effective region. Ensure regional developments bring added value to the service and greater local placement choice for children.
- Update and revise policies and procedures in accordance with new regulations and strategy guidance.
- Maintain and extend adoption support developments, including the revised CAMHS contract and close partnerships with the Virtual School. Ensure continued use of the Adoption Support Fund to full effect.
- Ensure the contract with KHCT maintains a good standard of medical support across Adoption and Fostering Services.

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