

2016/17

Annual Report

Southwark Adoption Service



KEY MESSAGES

Southwark Children's Services were inspected in March 2017 and rated good overall with an outstanding sub-judgement for adoption performance.

The number of adoptions reduced by approximately a third to 20. This was still amongst the highest numbers in London and reflects a national trend.

Children are being adopted quicker (over a year quicker than 5 years ago). This is supported by a sector leading Early Permanence Scheme and well embedded early tracking approach.

The number of adopter assessments undertaken reduced by half to 10 reflecting a focus on the needs of Southwark children and a national downturn.

PURPOSE OF ANNUAL REPORT

The purpose of the document is to report on the activity of the adoption service, fulfilling obligations in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) to report to the executive side of the local authority. It will cover: performance and developments in Southwark's delivery of adoption services; how the Council is compliant with key national minimum standards and the service offered to those seeking to adopt and those affected by adoption through the provision of adoption support. It will also identify any significant trends within adoption and how Southwark can continue to meet changing demands within the adoption service. This report details the work of Southwark Council Adoption Service from 1st April 2016 to end of March 2017.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Adoption is one of the most important and significant decisions that can be made for a child. As part of its wider agenda to create a fairer future for the most vulnerable children and families, Southwark Council wants every child to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. For those young children who cannot remain or return safely to their birth families, adoption offers them the best opportunity to experience a warm and loving family environment throughout life. Southwark Adoption Service is part of the Permanence & Resources Service within the council and there is a strong focus on working closely with all the Children's social work teams, in particular the Safeguarding Service to ensure permanence is thought about as early as possible for children and for most children the best possible permanence option is remaining with their birth parents or extended family but for those for whom this cannot be safely achieved then considering adoption as early as possible increases the chances of finding a matched adoptive family in the child's timescales.

Southwark have invested in having a high-quality Adoption Service and this has led to on-going improvements in the quality and pace of the adopter assessments undertaken and with the pace at which children are matched with prospective adoptive families. The service invested in having a team dedicated team tracking child as early as possible to ensure that where appropriate the parallel plan of adoption is considered as early as possible enabling consideration of early permanence. This team working closely and successfully with colleagues in Safeguarding and Assessment and Intervention have enabled several children to be placed in Early Permanence placements rather than experiencing moves from a foster carer then to adoption.

Southwark continues to develop its practice and systems in order to deliver the extensive change agenda outlined in *Putting Children First: delivering our vision for excellent children's social care* (July 2016). This sets out the programme of reforms to children's social care over the next four years. 2016 is a period of unprecedented change with key adoption reforms being implemented. *Adoption – A vision for Change* (March 2016) reiterates the government pledge to tackle delay for children in the adoption process. This is followed by a critical development that requires all councils to combine their adoption functions by 2018 and was highlighted in the Queen's Speech in June 2016. The London Regional Adoption Agency project team are due to publish a proposed draft business plan for the regionalisation of adoption in London by the end of October 2017 which will be shared with the Directors of Children's Services across London. Given the scale of London it is highly unlikely that any regional model in London will be implemented by 2018.

The Family Justice Review, which introduced the 26-week timescale for care proceedings, has had a significant impact on the Adoption Service over the last few years. Local Authorities are now required to develop permanence plans for children and place them in alternative family arrangements more quickly. Southwark Adoption Service is rising to this challenge through having developed highly effective early tracking through Permanence Consultations. As well as this, the impact of the Court of Appeal cases re B (June 2013) and re BS (September 2013), triggering a more robust approach to decision making, has been visible in the significant reduction of children available for adoption through placement orders being made in the year.

PERFORMANCE

Activity Overview - children	2016-17	2015-16	2013-14	2013-14	2012-13
Children with a Placement Order made (plan for adoption agreed by Court)	17	13	21	40	42
Children matched with adopters	14	21	32	29	28
Children with an Adoption Order granted	20	32	39	33	20

Numbers of children adopted have decreased to 20 in 2016-17. This was anticipated as in 2015-16 only 13 Placement Orders were granted compared to 21 in the previous year. This was the equal highest number in London alongside 4 other boroughs with the same amount.

The reduction in the numbers of Placement Orders being granted, and thus Adoption Orders made, is in line with national trends. For 2016/17 the 20 adopted represents 8% of children leaving care which is a 4% decrease compared to in 2015/16. The reduction in the number of Placement Orders also appears linked to a greater percentage of children coming into Local Authority Care in Southwark being aged 10 or over and therefore while there are no fixed age boundaries on when adoption is the right plan it is less likely to be the agreed plan for children aged 10 and over. Despite this reduction, 2016/17 figures indicate Southwark had the 2nd highest number of children adopted within South London Permanence Consortium and the level remains high compared to other London Boroughs.

In the last decade from 2006 the range of adoptions per year in Southwark ranges between 17 and 39 children per year. The main reason is the number of proceedings in the previous year and the number of children waiting. The decrease in adoptions is also impacted as children now move to their adoptive families in a much more timely way, so there are less children waiting for long periods. Support plans are now drawn up in detail prior to children being matched at Panel and this is meaning adopters are putting in their applications to adopt consistently within 6 months of a child being placed with them so adoptions are happening more quickly and children are not remaining placed for adoption without being legally adopted for long periods as discussions on ensuring the right support is in place for children is happening in advance of them being placed for adoption.

Of the 20 Children adopted in 2016/17 8 (40%) of these children were aged 4 or above at the time they were adopted and 4 out of 20 (20%) were aged 7 or above. The aged range for children being adopted was from aged 9 months to aged eight. Three of the children who were adopted had been placed from hospital with their carers under the Early Permanence Scheme. In Southwark 70% of the 20 Children Adopted were from a BME background and this compares to 74 % of Looked After Children in Southwark as at 31st March 2017 being from a BME background.

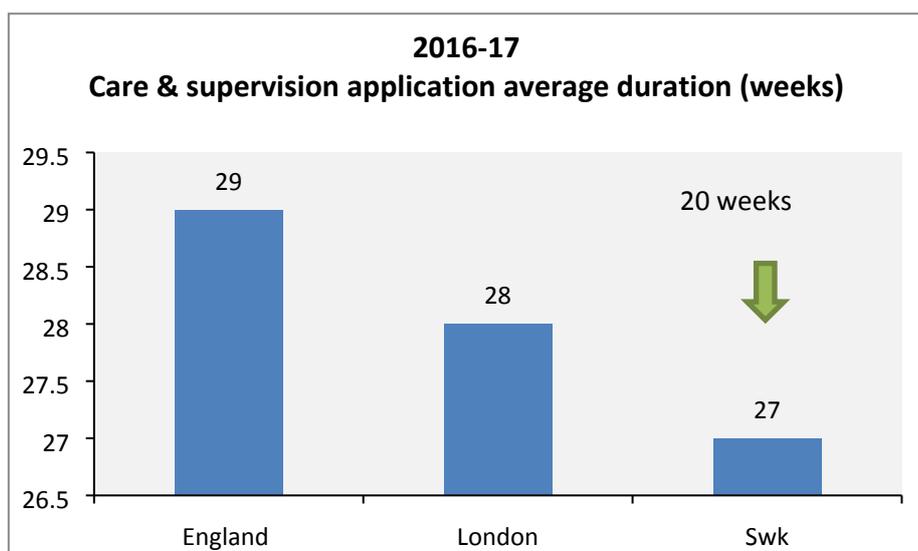
Numbers of placement orders made increased from 13 in 2015-16 to 17 in 2016-17 this is a small increase and it is anticipated that the number of Adoption Orders made in 2017-18 will be at a similar level of around 20 children.

Adoption timeliness for children

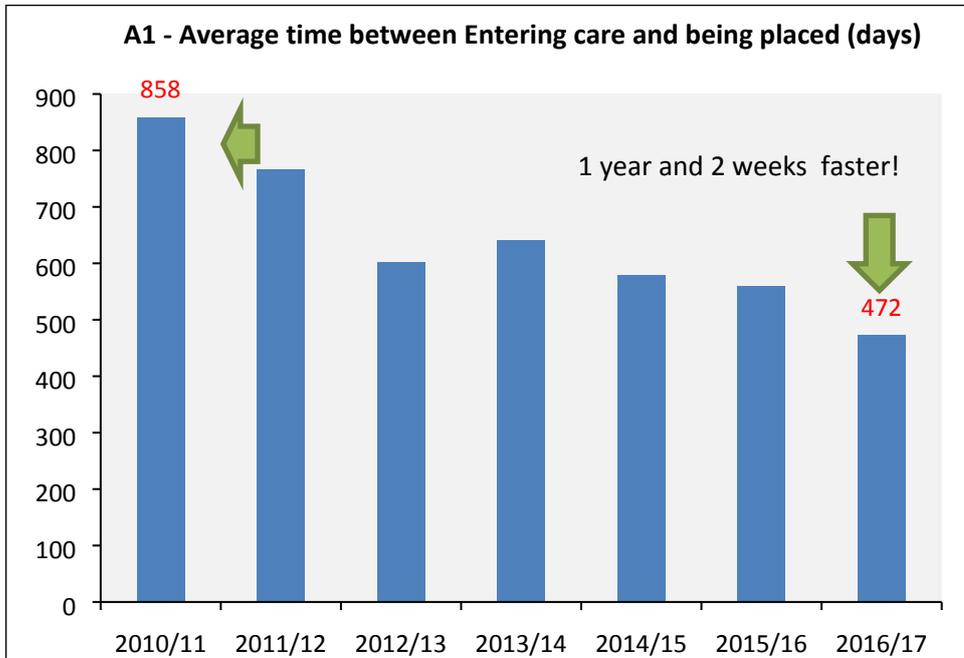
<i>The average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (A1)</i>					
Rolling 3-year average					
2009-12	2010-12	2011-14	2012-15	2013-16	2014-17
775	736	684	615	603	549*
Threshold 639	Threshold 608	Threshold 547	Threshold 487	Threshold 426	Threshold 426

(*Please note that data for 2014-17 is provisional as not yet published)

The table above shows continuing improvement since 2010 in the A1 figure which measures how many days from a child becoming looked after to the date they move in with their prospective adoptive family. The figure of 549 days for the rolling period of 2014-17 is indicative of ongoing improvement. Latest 2013-16 published data shows London at 599 days and statistical neighbours at 642 days. Southwark are successful in care proceedings being concluded within 26 weeks and this much swifter decision making is having a huge impact on reducing the amount of time children spend being Looked After before being placed with an adoptive family. This success in reducing the length of care proceedings is illustrated in the graph below.



The graph on the next page shows the average number of days for A1 in each individual year, rather than the 3-year rolling average, that children waited between entering care and being placed for adoption. The chart shows that in 2010/11 this was 858 days, last year 2015/16 this was at 560 days which was on par with the national average and in 2016/17 this reduced further to 472 days which is now below the national average.



Matching children with adopters

<i>the average time between court authority to place a child and match decision (A2)</i>					
Rolling 3 year average (days)					
2009-12	2010-13	2011-14	2012-15	2013-16	2014-17*
173	218	233	221	240	262*
		Threshold 152	Threshold 121	Threshold 121	Threshold 121

**Please note that data for 2014-17 is provisional as not yet published*

This performance area measures the number of days from a Placement Order being granted until a match is made for a child with an adoptive family. In looking at the rolling three-year average above the figure has increased and so it appears based on averages that the speed of finding adoptive families is declining. Detailed analysis of the data shows however that this is not the case but that the data is significantly impacted by some outliers. Latest 2013-16 published data shows London at 232 days and statistical neighbours at 267 days.

In 2016-2017 two children have really high A2 figures which significantly impact the averages set out in the table above. Both have an A2 figure in excess of 1000 days, one is a disabled little girl where a family member of her foster carer was assessed as her adoptive carer it meant she was adopted and remained in the foster family network and this was an excellent outcome for her. The other case was a little girl whose kinship placement broke down and she was then adopted by her former foster carer and this was again a very positive outcome for her. Analysis shows in 2016-17 that without these two cases included in the A2 average the A2 figure would be 162 days.

In 2016-17 there were 14 matches presented to the Adoption and Fostering Panel. In 9 of these the A2 figure was below the government threshold with a range of between 0 days and 92 days. The range was between zero days and over 1000 days. In the five cases where the A2 is over 92 days an explanation report is written to understand the reasons why and this is presented to the Permanence Taskforce which is chaired by the Director for Children and Families so that the Service is capturing the learning on the reasons for this which can be challenged by the Director and members of the Permanence Taskforce.

Children who are harder to place will continue to comprise a significant proportion of those that the Adoption Service in Southwark needs to find families for. This will need to remain an area that needs continuing focus and challenge to ensure we are not limiting the children for whom adoption may be the right Care Plan. The Service are committed to give all children the best possible opportunity of finding an adoptive family if that is the right care plan for them. It is critical to our service that we understand individual children's journeys and that our focus is on these not on the 'averages' in timescales. Southwark has during 2016 - 2017 sought to utilise their own adoptive placements, and use a range of other placements from Voluntary Adoption Agencies and other Local Authorities to ensure choice and that children do not wait longer than necessary for an appropriate match.

Early Permanence

The Early Permanency scheme began in October 2014 and gave it this name to cover both 'Concurrency' and 'Foster to Adopt' placements. The scheme built on an initial partnership and expertise from Coram as well as multi-disciplinary support from CARELINK who are a key part of the ongoing steering group for the scheme. We have had ten Southwark babies now placed in Early Permanent Placements. Five were placed soon after birth and 5 later but all under the age of 1 year old. Four cases were relinquished babies with one becoming subject to care proceedings due to mother's disengagement with social workers. Within the Permanence service, we also provided birth parent counselling and took on case responsibility for the relinquished babies once their parent/s had met with CAF/CASS worker which made case planning easier. Eight out of ten of the children were from a BME background and three out of 10 were placements made transracially. The Early Permanence placements require a high level of support to the adopters throughout the process as they are managing the uncertainty about whether they will be able to continue to care for the child, while assessments are undertaken of both birth parents and of extended family members. The key benefits of the Early Permanence scheme have been identified as being:

- Promotes early attachment and no disruption for the child if care plan for adoption is agreed.
- A high level of commitment and love has been observed towards the babies from carers from the start
- More opportunities for birth parents to build a relationship with the carers. In 7 out of 10 cases the early permanence carers have met the birth parents and in several cases the carers regularly bring the child to contact.
- Good for life story work in the future as carer is involved from beginning of story and knows birth parents more than mainstream adopters who may have one meeting.

Since March 2016, Southwark adoption service has led a steering group for South London Adoption and Permanence managers to discuss how we can work in partnership to promote early permanence placements across South London using adopters from both local authorities and voluntary agencies. This steering group has met bi-monthly to develop a strategy on how to work together and sharing information on children and adopters who are being considered for the early permanence scheme as well as disseminating learning across the boroughs. With Coram Southwark also submitted a bid to the "Practice and Improvement Fund" to the DfE and have got to the second stage of the application and are in the process of negotiating with Coram about our plans to develop the Early Permanence Scheme across London. This includes developing the training for early permanence carers, support group, some therapeutic input and improving consistency across south London regarding these placements. The outcome of this bid will be known during 2017-2018.

Relinquished Babies

The Adoption Service provide a service for birth parents that wish to voluntarily relinquish their babies for adoption. These assessments require intensive support by social workers including highly skilled counselling. The Adoption Service supported 2 relinquished babies during this period, both proceeded to placement with adopters. In one case the birth mother supported the identification of a foster to adopt placement to prevent her child needing to experience another loss moving from foster carers to an adoptive placement. In one case there is a high level of direct contact between the birth family and the adoptive family.

Children waiting for adoption

Number of children waiting as at the 31st March for each year:

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
35	44	48	45	18	7	9

The Adoption Service and in particular the Achieving Permanence Practice Group (APPG) carefully track children now working closely with colleagues in both Assessment and Intervention and Safeguarding using a permanence consultation approach. The aim is working together and achieving the right permanence for every child. The numbers for individual children can have a very statistically high impact for both A1 and A2 figures. As a service as well as looking at averages we have detailed management oversight of the journey for individual children and we want to be ambitious to find adoptive families for more children who cannot return to their lives in their birth families. Proactively exploring adoption for a greater number of older children and those with complex needs is a desired outcome to reduce the numbers of children in care and to open up this possibility for more children. It is however very likely to achieve adoption for more children then the impact could be skewing timescales so that averages increase and this will reflect on the Adoption Scorecard.

At the end of 2016/17 there were nine children waiting for adoption with Placement Orders. This included two sibling groups of three and two children. The sibling group of two were already linked with a prospective family with Panel booked in April 2017. The sibling group of three had high level of needs and the assessments indicated they would benefit from individual placements with ongoing support and contact with each other. For the four remaining children there was highly proactive family finding with possible links being followed up. The chart above shows while as of the 31st March 2017 there was a slight increase of 2 with 9 children waiting compared to 7 the previous year there is a trend to less children waiting for adoption.

The Adoption Service continues to extensively use all means possible to find adopters for children including Link Maker, the Adoption Register, advertising in Be my Parent, exchange days and activity days. All resources possible are used including DVDs and iPads to be able to show prospective adopters the most recent picture of children. Creative support packages that have been designed around the needs of the child in the adoptive family have enabled children with a higher level of needs to be adopted.

Siblings

The Adoption Service is highly committed that whenever possible siblings should be placed together and where this is not possible it is crucial that placements are found that enable brothers and sisters to stay in touch. Sometimes the needs of each sibling are too great for one carer to be able to meet them all. Siblings are considered harder to place because of their greater needs and the smaller pool of adopters who wish to care for them. All sibling groups for whom there is a plan of adoption are assessed using the Together or Apart Assessment Model (BAAF 2008) and work is often jointly undertaken with Carelink the CAMHS service for children looked after.

Of the 20 children adopted during 2016/17 there were 3 sibling groups of 2. Two sibling groups of two are placed together. One sibling group was separated due to a Together and Apart assessment showing both had such high needs in light of the abuse they experienced that a placement together would place them at significant risk of a placement disruption. These two siblings are in separate adoptive placements but have regular direct contact with each other which both adoptive families report has gone really well.

It is of note that the two sibling groups placed together who were adopted one group were both aged over 4 and the other was from a BME background and had been matched with an adoptive family in under the government target of 91 days.

Recruitment of adopters

Activity Overview - adopters	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013/14	2012/13
Adopters approved	10	21	25	29	19
Percentage approved within Government Minimum Timescales	100	21	16		
Adoption inquiries	319	264	262	341	217
Adoption breakdowns prior to Adoption Order	0	0	2	0	1

Numbers of adopters approved in 2016/17 significantly decreased. Recruitment became more focussed on assessing adopters who are able to meet the needs of Southwark children waiting for adoption, and in particular to meet the needs of older children, children in sibling groups and children who need early permanence placements. The service became really aware that assessing more adopters but adopters who were clear they only wished to care for children under two, meant in 2013-14, 2014-2015 there was a high number of adopters who waited a very long time to be matched which then required a high level of support to them waiting to be matched for children. The reduced number of adoption assessments also reflects that the adoption service moved from having two small teams assessing Social Worker's to one team and not replacing some assessing social workers when they retired or moved on.

There have been 319 adoption enquiries in the last year. This was an increase on the previous year. The team are now staying touch with more enquirers who are interested in fostering and adoption but are not at the time of enquiry ready to go forward with this due to other life events. Recruitment has also now got more of a focus on helping a Southwark child, so people can enquire and consider Adoption alongside Fostering or becoming a Family Link Carer. The Adoption Co-ordinator has also developed a link with the Service recruiting Independent Visitors for children looked after and for some applicants not feeling ready to pursue adoption or fostering they have volunteered for this scheme recognising it gives them really relevant experience if they later decide to pursue being assessed as a Foster Carer or Adoptive parent.

Adopter assessment timeliness

In 2016/17 10 adoptive households were approved from a wide range of backgrounds, reflecting the diverse ethnic communities in Southwark. This includes single carers and same sex couples. 6 of these 10 households were approved under the Early Permanence scheme as both foster carers and adopters.

In 2016/17 100% adoptive households were assessed within the National Minimum Standards of six months. This improvement began at the end of 2015/16 and has been consolidated and built upon by the service with visible and effective management oversight of key areas including:

- Efficient allocation of cases to Social Workers
- Contingency arrangements to cover periods of staff absence to ensure assessment continuity
- Efficient panel processes and referee visits
- More in-depth analysis of couple complexities
- DBS completed at earlier stage

Having reviewed these improvements all of these have been achieved and are now embedded in the adoption assessment practice. The aim over the next 12 months will be to continue to try to maintain all assessments being completed to an excellent standard within the required timescale while increasing pace in a new more robust framework to ensure the target of 15 adopter assessments are completed.

Approval to matched performance

The pace of matching adopters to children following their approval has improved in 2016/17. Out of 8 families approved as at Q3 2016/17 4 of these families were matched within 3 months. Four families were not matched within 3 months; one family were just 4 days over the 3 month threshold, one family was matched in 7 months (224 days) this family wanted a specific child who is the younger sibling to the two older siblings and the delay was in the Court process for this child, 1 family – matched in 10 months (321 days) were referred to the register promptly with regular and active family finding with links made however adopters decided not to pursue these and were matched with a London LA child, 1 family – was matched in 12 months (355 days) - referred to the register promptly, regular and active family finding with links made, including one with very complex needs.

Adoption disruptions

During 2016-17 there were no disruptions of placements of children placed for adoption and no information about any post Adoption Order placements made by Southwark disrupting in the year. Learning previous disruptions has been embedded into matching practice. The service aim is to continue to ambitious in trying to find adoptive families for older children, those in sibling groups and children with additional needs. In placing older children and those who have experienced high levels of harm prior to placement, a robust support plan is crucial, but it is also recognised that there is increased risk in adoption disruption in particular for children aged 4 or above at the time of placement.

Six adoption placements have disrupted prior to Adoption Order in the years 2006 to 2017. Two were placements with voluntary adoption agencies, three with Southwark and one with another local authority. This highlights a disruption rate of under 2%. From national research the estimated rate of post-order disruption is 3.2%. There is no data on pre-order disruption.

ADOPTION SUPPORT

The need for adoption support has continued to grow as more children have been placed for adoption and adopted. It is very much recognised that adoption now is not a one-off event, but something that evolves over a lifetime involving the child, birth parents and family and the adoptive family (the adoption triangle). It is a complicated and often a mix of joy and loss. Bespoke support is needed over time to support all involved in adoption and this will be required to varying degrees with some families never needing support and others requiring an ongoing package of support and most requiring some time limited support at critical points.

Adoption support plans are tailored to the individual needs of the child and their adoptive family, and are prepared prior to cases being presented to the Adoption and Fostering Panel for a match. There is a good range of effective pre and post adoption support provided by the in-house workers and commissioned services that are spot purchased as needed. The nature of support provided varies considerably, from advice on strategies for integrating children into families, telling difficult life story information, Theraplay support to promote attachment, in addition to specialist commissioned support with attachment difficulties.

A real strength in the Post permanence team is that a Psychotherapist from the Carelink CAMHS Service attends fortnightly group supervision and provides expert guidance and support to social workers and sometimes directly to adoptive families and accessing the right types of therapeutic support. In addition, the team is able to offer therapeutically informed support as all of the social work qualified staff are trained in Theraplay Level 1.

On 31st March 2017 there were 162 financial support packages for adopters. The adoption team are creative in utilising support packages for adopters to enable more children to be adopted. It remains the case that the majority of adoptions are made without an ongoing package of financial support.

Support groups

The Adoption Service has worked closely with Southwark We Are Family (WAF) to support and promote a number of groups within the area to meet the needs of adoptive families. The service greatly values the relationship with WAF which is an adopter led support and advocacy charity, established by Southwark adopters. WAF convenes a weekly support group which alternates between a morning play group one week and an evening adopter support group the next. These groups have both a support and social function and meet in Southwark. In addition, WAF holds monthly family meetings at the weekend to include working adoptive families. WAF also run a monthly support group for adopters who are waiting for children to be placed and have invited social workers from Southwark's post adoption service to share information at their group as well as speakers from the Virtual School and other interesting speakers.

In 2016/17 Southwark started a group facilitated by an Advanced Practitioner to provide help, advice and support to Adopters waiting across the South London consortium. Early feedback from this group is that it has been helpful and appreciated by adopters in addition to the group run by WAF. Southwark have also started a bi-monthly group for single adopters across the South London consortium and this is also reported by adopters to be helpful and was attended by a mix of adopters from across the consortium.

Southwark set up a South London Adoption and Permanence Consortium support group for all Early Permanence carers. This group runs on the last Friday of each month and has a varied programme which has included baby massage training and learning about Theraplay techniques.

Training

A rolling programme of training and workshops is provided for adoptive parents directly by the Southwark Adoption Service as well as training available through the South London Adoption Consortium and training events run by the Adopter led group 'We are Family (WAF). In 2016-17 this included a rolling parenting course "*The Great Behaviour Breakdown*" and rolling Saturday workshops. The topics for the Saturday workshops have included:

- "Exploring Identity and Difference in Transracial Placements"
- "An introduction to Adoption for Family and Friends" –
- "Managing the challenges of Adolescence"
- "Building attachment"
- "Making sense of adoption"
- "Moving into placement"
- "Supporting your child's education"

Southwark runs preparation training for adoption in partnership with Lambeth and Wandsworth and these groups run regularly at weekends and are facilitated by Social Workers and Managers across the consortium.

In 2016/17 Southwark were a lead agency together with PAC in setting up a PAN London Conference on supporting Adoptive Children in Education which took place in February 2017 and received very positive feedback from adopters and Social Workers who attended.

Adoption support fund

The Adoption Support Fund has been in operation since 1st May 2015 with 19.3 million available for agencies to apply for on behalf of their adoptive families for the provision of therapeutic services. The fund has been set up to reduce the gap between adoptive families needing therapeutic services and receiving them. In October 2016 the government has made an additional £2m available for the fund with a fair access limit of £5k per child for the duration of 2016 and which has continued since it was implemented.

To date Southwark have made 55 applications to the adoption support fund to support children and families placed for and post adoption and this includes some group applications and applications for some children to attend residential camps together with other adopted children. The total funding to date received by Southwark is £351,496.26.

Post adoption contact

The Adoption Service managed approximately 160 'letterbox' contacts during 2016/17 as well as in the region of 10 face to face contacts between adopted children and their birth families. The nature of this contact will vary from an annual meeting to very complex arrangements involving a number of birth family members (siblings, grandparents and parents).

The impact of social networking on adoption is far reaching and extremely difficult to support effectively. There can be safeguarding concerns as young people do not recognise the issues that necessitated the plan for adoption. It can also undermine the stability of the adoptive placement. The South London Adoption Consortium (SLAC) which Southwark is a member of held a training session on social media in 2016/17. This is an area which is ever changing with new software enabling the use of Social Media using face recognition technology. It is identified as an area for ongoing updating training needed for Social Work staff and even more crucially for up to date information and training to be available to adoptive families when they need this on a continual ongoing basis.

Work with birth families

The Adoption Service has a contract with South London Adoption Counselling and Consultation Service to provide independent counselling for birth parents. The take up of this service has been increasing over the last 2/3 years. During 2015/6 there were seven referrals of birth parents/family to the service: four were birth mothers, two were birth fathers and one was a birth Grandmother. Of those referred the two Birth fathers and two of the birth mothers engaged in counselling sessions. In 2016/17 there was an increase to 13 referrals for birth parents/ family to the service: 10 were birth mothers, 2 were birth fathers and one was a birth grandmother. Of those referred in this year 8 of the birth mothers; 2 birth fathers; and one birth grandmother engaged with counselling. It is thought this increase in birth family accessing support is directly linked to establishing PAUSE in Southwark who offer key support to birth mother's and often have proactively supported birth parents in accessing these sessions.

Mums supportive

In 2015 a support group for birth mothers who are separated from their children was set up. The group is run fortnightly in a community venue. A range of women attend the group, some of whom who have children who have been adopted, some subject to SGOs, and some whose children are within the care service. The group has around seven women who regularly attend and a cohort of around 11 who have attended some sessions. The group is a mixture of talking and activities that have included baking quiches, art and craft activities and has incorporated some Theraplay group techniques. The group facilitators have developed local community links with mental health and well-being services and the group development has been collaborative with the participating women. The group has recently celebrated its second-year anniversary and is strongly valued by the women who attend as a place where they have not felt judged and that has given them an opportunity to make friends. The group has benefited adoption as practitioners feel there is better offer of support for birth parents and there are cases where this support has meant birth parents are more able to maintain on-going contact via letterbox with their children or have been able to access birth parent counselling support.

Birth records counselling

The Council has a legal responsibility to provide a birth record counselling service to adult adoptees. Some of these requests are completed by the post permanence team social workers working directly with adult adoptees providing both counselling and a summary of the information on the file. Some of these requests in 2016/17 were undertaken by PAC on behalf of Southwark as part of a Service Level Agreement that was in place.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Adoption Service has a Quality Assurance Framework. This includes: effective adoption panel scrutiny; comprehensive adopter feedback; management oversight and review including audit activity; as well as learning from complaints and disruptions. During 2016-17 an Audit on Supervision and Management Oversight highlighted areas of improvement needed and an Action Plan was developed and recent audits and the scrutiny during the Ofsted inspection was indicative that management oversight is now consistently evident on children's and adopter records.

Adoption Panel (From January 2017 this moved to a combined Adoption and Fostering Panel)

The panel has undergone a significant change in the period October 2016 to March 2017. The previous Adoption Panel Chair stood down from his role in October 2016 after being the Independent Adoption Chair for a number of years. The Chair of the Fostering Panel since 2014 took over the role supporting the transition of the panel in becoming a joint Adoption and Fostering Panel which became effective in January 2017.

The rationale for this was to have a single panel with independent scrutiny of approval and matching for both foster carers and adopters. The joining of the panel functions creates administrative efficiencies and some financial savings. The strengths of this new panel approach becoming evident and going forward it will seek to ensure that children, adopters and foster carers have a consistent approach, and this is in regard to ensuring high standard of practice and robust and timely decision making. The overall aim is to deliver an integrated service to children requiring permanence through adoption and fostering, ensuring the care provided is of the highest quality and meets the needs of the children looked after in Southwark. There will be a quarterly review of the function of the joint panel to ensure it maintains a high standard in its service delivery.

Adoption Panels recommend prospective adopters for approval as adopters; matches of approved adopters with specific Southwark children; and the suitability of relinquished children for adoption. The final decision, in all of these cases, based on the panel's recommendation is made by the Agency Decision Maker, the Director of Children and Families. The panel is able to approve Early Permanence carers as both foster carers and adopters under both Adoption and Fostering Regulations,

Southwark's Adoption and Fostering Panel meets twice a month. There is also flexibility to organise additional Panels to ensure that panel dates do not ever delay permanence for children. In the lives of children days and weeks matter and there would be no hesitation to hold an extra Panel if this made a difference for an individual child being able to move to their adoptive family in the timescale that is right for them. In 2016-17 one additional panel was held.

All Adoption and Fostering panels are independently chaired. The chair writes a six-monthly report on the activity of the adoption service. The last report up to March 2017 identifies all of the PARs, CPRs and APRs in the year 2016/17 have been rated by the Panel as excellent or good. It is also acknowledged as significant improvement that all adopter assessments were completed within national minimum standards.

Adopter feedback

Adopter's views on the adoption service are gained as part of the assessment process but also routinely by questionnaire following approval, and when they have adopted their child or children.

Adopters work collaboratively with assessing Social Workers and they have an opportunity to write in and contribute their comments on the final PAR written by the assessing Social Worker to be presented to the Adoption Panel. In addition, at Panel adopters are asked by the Panel chair about their experience of being assessed and also post Panel have an opportunity to feedback on their experience of the Adoption and Fostering Panel.

In 2016/17 5 adoptive households returned feedback questionnaires following their approval as adoptive parents. All 5 described their experience of Southwark's Adoption Service from their first point of contact as being excellent. All of the adopters in their questionnaire said they did not feel there were any unnecessary delays caused by Southwark during the assessment process. Four out of five households described their experience of attending the Panel as being Excellent and one household described their Panel experience as good. In the survey they were asked to rate the service they received from Southwark from first enquiry to approval from 1 to 5 with 5 being the best and all 5 households rated their experience as 5 out of 5.

During the March 2017 Ofsted inspection of Children's Services, the Adoption Inspector met a group of Southwark adopters at different stages of their journey some pre- and some post children being placed and some who had recently adopted. In their feedback the adopters told the inspectors that they "highly rate the service that they receive from Southwark, informing the inspectors that '*they get things done*'. "

Complaints

Learning from complaints is a crucial aspect of the Quality Assurance Framework, which ensures continuous improvement in the adoption service. The service received one complaint in 2016-17 and this related to questions about the levels of financial support post adoption. The learning from this complaint was that it is essential that all support is clearly set out in an adoption support plan and that all parties have had time to consider this plan and have signed a copy. In looking at learning from this all support plans now are signed by all parties prior to the matching panel and then if there is a need for revision or additional support this should be added into the support plan with a re-signing to confirm the support.

REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS DURING 2016/17

Children go to live with their adoptive families quicker and without delay.

The A1 measure shows significant improvement in 2016-2017 and children are spending less time in care and are moving more quickly to their adoptive families. Tracking for every child is clear and as a Service it is very clear that there is commitment to achieving the best possible timescale for each child. The A2 measure on how long it takes from Placement Order to match is not improving as an average but this is well understood and there are particular outliers over 1000 days set out earlier in this report which have significantly impacted the A2 average.

Adopter recruitment: maintain a pipeline of adopter recruitment by assessing adopters that are reflective of service need.

There were 10 adoptive households approved in 2016-17 and all were assessed within the national government timeframes this contrasts to 2015-16 where only 4 families were assessed in government timeframes. The service improvement plan was effective in drastically improving the robust management of the timescales of adopter assessments so the pipeline works well. While assessment numbers have reduced the service are confident that the adopters approved are more likely to match more quickly with children.

Extend early permanence scheme to enable older children in care benefit from a potential dual approval carer. This will offer continuity of care for child and carers before adoption is achieved.

In 2016-17 the service had one adoptive family approved under the Early Permanence scheme as dual approval carers who were able to consider early permanence for a much wider age range of children. The recruitment co-ordinator is speaking to all prospective carers about the possibilities of caring for an older range of children and being dual approved to foster a child first and then have then the possibility to go on and adopt them. Discussions have happened with Sunshine House and Carelink on providing bespoke help and support to Dual Approved Carers. Some excellent foster carers who adopted an older child have also been consulted to be champions in recruitment to the scheme. The numbers of carers and children in a Dual Approval scheme are likely to be low but this is something that could expand the option of adoption to a wider pool of children and the at the Service is committed to continue to develop the early permanence scheme to option this possibility up to older children during 2017 -18.

Review and implement a refreshed adoption structure to respond to evolving service needs and regionalisation agenda.

In January 2017 the service structure was updated to reflect the reduction in the number of children for whom the plan was adoption. It was recognised that there was a need to strengthen the quality of Special Guardianship Assessments and one of the teams undertaking adoption assessments became the Special Guardianship Assessment Team. In line with having a joint Adoption and Fostering Panel the recruitment of adopters and foster carers was brought together under a Carer Recruitment manager, in line with the campaign on trying to encourage prospective carers to consider how they can help a Southwark child.

Maintain a permanent and skilled stable workforce – recruit permanent appointments to all locum, positions - Ensure all new team members are trained at Theraplay Level 1 with opportunities for staff to have supervision and become foundational level practitioners in using Theraplay techniques.

The Adoption Service is a fully permanent and highly skilled workforce and there was only one locum staff member during 2016/2017 who was covering maternity leave and has subsequently successfully applied for a role within the service following the retirement of an experienced social worker. All social work qualified staff are trained in Theraplay Level 1. Two social workers have received clinical supervision working to become foundation level practitioners. During 2016/17 an AYSE social worker successfully completed their assessed year in practice and undertook Theraplay Level 1 training. In the March 2017 Ofsted Inspection, the inspector wrote in their final report *“Children and adopters receive high-quality support from a stable, experienced and well-trained workforce, resulting in children benefiting from a permanent home. “*

Develop closer links with the lead in the Virtual School in Southwark and PAC to ensure all children placed for and who have been adopted have the best possible educational support.

During 2016/17 Southwark had a Service Level agreement with the Post Adoption Centre and offered additional support to adoptive families to ensure those that needed to have the best possible educational opportunities. The Adoption Service maintains a good relationship with the Virtual School and regularly consult with and get advice from the Education Advisors and the Virtual Head teacher. Southwark worked with PAC to help facilitate a PAN London event for adopters in February 2017.

The Adoption Service to be a key part in a campaign across children’s services to start life story work as early as possible to capture photographs and key memories for children in real time.

The Head of Service for Permanence chaired a steering group which champions for Life Story Work were identified across all of Children’s Services. The steering group organised training day on 1st November 2016 for both social workers and some foster carers and adopters facilitated by Richard Rose who is an expert in Therapeutic Life Story Work and an experienced social worker in the Care Service. This day was attended by over 50 people and received really positive feedback. The Adoption Service also developed templates for social workers working with children prior to them becoming looked after to write down key memories about the child. The focus of the group was that Life Story is not a one-off event or something that happens retrospectively it is about capturing and recording memories in real time. Workshops have been running facilitated by an experienced social worker from the Care Service and a Supervising Social Worker in the Fostering Service for foster carers on Life story work.

Life Story work is so vital for all looked after and adopted children, this campaign needs to continue and gain momentum in 2017/18 and needs to be a collaboration across Children’s Services working with families, adopters and foster carers. It is recognised that there is some very high-quality Life Story Work undertaken in Southwark but there needs to be ongoing development of this and also ongoing challenge to ensure it is always done in the best possible timeframe for the child. In the March 2017 Ofsted report it is noted that: *“Life story work is of high quality. Comprehensive and sensitive descriptions of the reasons for children entering care, histories of their birth families and their cultural identities through pictures and photographs provide helpful illustrations. The books also include details of foster families and children’s new families. Some adoptive parents spoke of how they regularly refer to the books with their children to help them to understand their pasts. Later life letters are clear, accurate and sensitively written”.*

DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR 2017 -2018

We will continue to ensure that children move to their adoptive families quicker and without delay. We will always strive to achieve the right timescale for each child understanding their needs and individual journeys and remaining ambitious to achieve adoption for all children where this is the most appropriate care plan. We will carefully measure Southwark Performance using the Adoption Scorecard.

We will maintain high quality adopter assessments being all undertaken within the national minimum standards. We will increase the pace of assessments being undertaken while maintaining the quality with the aim that in 2017-18 that the target of 15 adoptive households are approved.

We will develop the Life Story Work Works campaign to build upon the work undertaken in 2016-2017 and to have an ongoing dynamic approach that co-ordinates Life Story Work across Children's Services that works with social workers, birth family members and all carers in an ongoing and dynamic way.

We will further develop the Early Permanence Scheme to include approving adoptive carers who can meet the needs of older children initially under a fostering arrangement but with the approval to go on and adopt if that is the right care plan for the child. We will continue to consider early permanence for all children where adoption is a possibility. We will continue to lead practice across the South London Permanence Consortium and to increase the scope of this work if successful in application to the Practice Innovation Fund with Coram in 2017-2018.

We will improve the quality of our transitions to ensure children have the best possible transitions when moving from foster care to adoption. In 2017-2018 we are participating in a research study with the University of East Anglia looking at how introductions happen in practice and how children move from foster care to adoption. The study will look at materials to support the best transition and how the introductions can be done in the most child centered way at the pace of the child. In addition, the study aims to promote foster carers retaining ongoing contact with children post adoption as adopted children and adults have spoken of the benefits of these continuing relationships. We would seek to use the learning from this research and the materials to support children who are moving not only to adoption but for children moving between foster placements.

We will work proactively with regionalisation to ensure any changes to our services positively impact our children and adopters. We are committed to working to continually improving the offer for children, adopters and birth families. Southwark managers and practitioners want to be at the centre of discussions about regionalisation ensuring changes have a positive impact and that we are able to promote and expand the areas of good practice where Southwark have lead service development for SLAPC.