

WHAT WE DID - CHILDREN

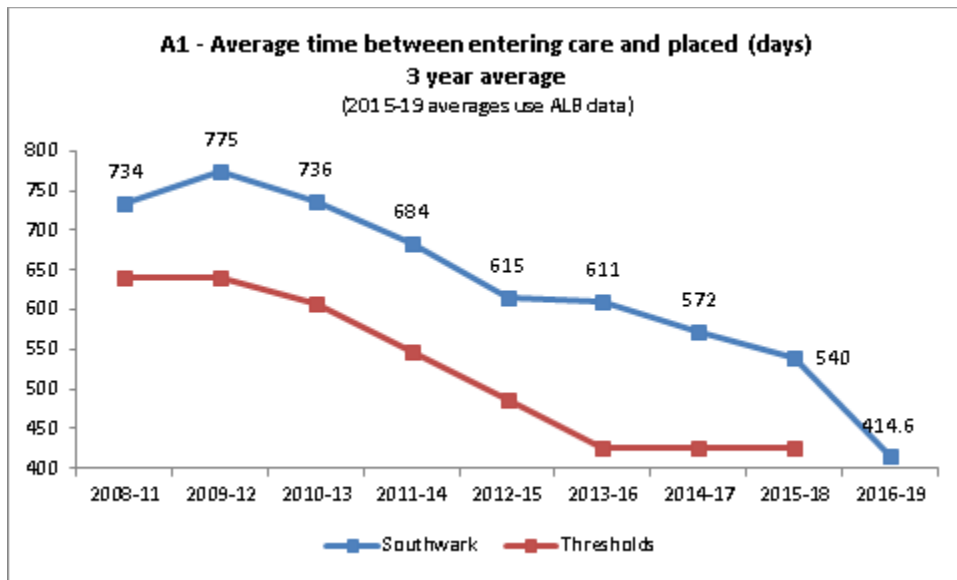
Activity Overview - children	18-19	17-18	16-17	15-16	14-15	13-14
Children with a Placement Order made (<i>plan for adoption agreed by Court</i>)	5	11	17	13	21	40
Children matched with adopters	4	12	14	21	32	29
Children with an Adoption Order granted	12	14	20	32	39	33

In 2018/19 12 children were adopted. The age range of children adopted was from 10 months to aged 17 years. 6 out of the 12 children adopted were from a BME background. The number of children adopted is reflective of the levels of Placement Orders in the previous two years. It is however stark that in 2018/19 there was an extremely low level of Placement Orders made with only 5 orders which is the lowest level within the last 6 years. There absolutely never should be targets for numbers of children for whom a Placement Order and plan of adoption should be sought as it is about the right permanence for each child being carefully considered within a fair legal process. The principals in the Children Act are very clear to promote children being cared for by their parents where this cannot be achieved looking to place with their friends and family.

In Southwark there has been an increase in the number of Friends and Family Placements and some increase in the use of Family Group Conferences and this could in part account for the reduction in children being adopted as positively more children are remaining with their families. The proportions of children aged 0-5 coming into care has decreased, 29% of children in care were aged 0 -9 in 2016/17 but in 2017/2018 this fell 5% to 24% and in 2018/19 remained at 24%. This has reduced the number of younger children requiring placements and therefore reduced the number of children for whom adoption would be likely to be considered however it does not account for the variation between 2017/18 and 2018/19. While our hypothesis is the reduction relates to more children being placed with family and friends and achieving permanence via a Special Guardian Order (SGO) we need to scrutinise this hypothesis. In the first quarter of 2019/20 a focussed audit is being undertaken on children aged under 5 subject to a Child Protection plan for over 12 months to consider is permanence being considered early enough and are we ensuring for young children we are always robustly pursuing permanence.

Adoption Timeliness for Children

The chart below shows continuing improvement since 2009 in the A1 figure which measures how many days it is from when a child becomes looked after to the date they move in with their prospective adoptive family. The average is now down to now 414, for the rolling period 2016-2019 is which is an improvement from 2017/2018 when the average for the period 2015-2018 was 472.

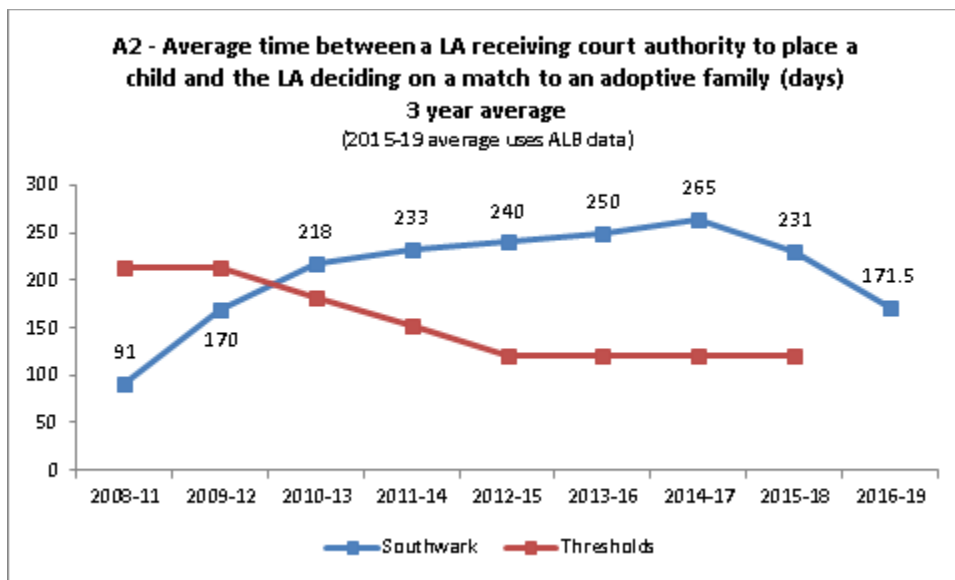


Southwark are successful in concluding care proceedings within 26 weeks. This year 2018/2019 for the first time this high profile Government target of 26 weeks has been met:

2018-19	Number of weeks
National	29
London	29
Southwark	26

Matching children with adopters

This performance area -A2 - measures the number of days between a Placement Order being made for a child to when they are matched with their prospective adoptive parents. The figure for the rolling period 2016-2019 is 171.5 which is a decrease from the last rolling period 2015-2018 when the figure was 231. Although the performance in this area does not meet the Government threshold of 91 days, this is indicative of the complexities of matching children where there is uncertainty around their health and developmental needs, and their age.



In 2018/19 there were 4 children matched with their prospective adoptive family at panel. This is a considerable decrease from 2017/18 when the number was 12. Of the 4 children matched, 2 were below the Government threshold of 91 days from Placement Order to match (A2). Of the two children that were above the threshold explanations for this were recorded in the monthly adoption activity report that is presented to the Permanence Taskforce, chaired by the Director of Children and Families. This report enables the service to be scrutinised and challenged through this group, and ensures a focus on continuing improvement and learning.

Children who are considered to be harder to place (those 3 and over, with additional needs and in sibling groups) will continue to comprise a significant proportion of those that the Adoption Service in Southwark needs to find families for. This remains 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 2018/2019 sought to utilise their own adoptive placements, and in parallel consider 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 in Southwark began in October 2014 and gave it this name to cover both 'Concurrency' and 'Foster to Adopt' placements. The service continues to be delivered on the expertise from Coram as well as multi-disciplinary support from Southwark CARELINK who are a key part of the ongoing steering group for the scheme.

We have now made 18 placements since 2014, these are not all Southwark children and some are with Southwark children with EP carers from other agencies. We have continued to support our Early Permanence placements and at end of March 2018 have four babies placed who we hope to have Adoption Orders in the next few months. These placements have been increasingly Inter-Agency with other boroughs placing children with our Early Permanence carers. We have also placed our children with Coram and Lewisham Early Permanence carers. We are using our Early Permanence Contract in these cases to ensure we are being paid as a Fostering Agency for the support we provide to these placements.

Southwark were awarded funding from the Practice Innovation Fund with Coram in 2017/2018 to develop early permanence across the South London Adoption and Permanence Consortium (SLAPC) and then wider to the rest of London. Southwark provide a monthly support group for Early Permanence carers across SLAPC – including those in Stage 2, approved and with a child in placement. Early Permanence carers have fed back that they appreciate the opportunity to meet with others in similar situations as they feel different from other adopters and foster carers. They also appreciate the therapeutic input from Carelink (Southwark CAMHS) who is funded to attend from the Practice Improvement Fund from 2018 until end of March 2019.

This year saw a decline in the numbers of approved Early Permanence carers in Southwark, from 5 in 2017-2018 to 3 in 2018-2019.

Southwark run a bi-monthly steering group for Early Permanence leads across the South London Consortium to share good practice and develop strong links including considering matches. Southwark and Coram ran staff training for East London in Jan 2019, North London in Feb 2019 and for South London in May 2019. This one day training is for social workers and managers on "Assessing and Supporting Dually Approved carers" – these training days have been well attended and we plan to run this again in November 2019 for staff across London as most of the South London Adoption and Permanence Consortium have now attended.

Southwark led an Early Permanence Conference across the South London Permanence Consortium at Goldsmiths University in March 2018. This was very successful and involved professionals across 8 Local Authorities as well as Voluntary Adoption Agencies. We ran a second training day in December 2018 in Southwark (including contact workers, social workers, managers and lawyers) to attend to raise awareness of the challenges and positives of these placements for children, adopters and staff involved. Also to help raise awareness about these placements and for professionals across the service to develop their understanding of what children Early Permanence may be suitable for and how to plan and support these placements as well as sharing a film featuring the experiences of Southwark early permanence carers.

With funding from the Regional Adoption Agency Quick Wins Project Southwark were able to develop a mentoring and leadership programme for leads from other Local Authorities to develop an action plan to develop early permanence within their Local Authority. So far this has included five social workers from Greenwich, Lambeth, Wandsworth and Merton adoption teams. The aim is to increase the leadership skill set of Early Permanence across South London.

Relinquished babies

The Southwark Adoption Service provides a service for birth parents that wish to voluntarily relinquish their babies for adoption and this includes Southwark offering funding for these parents to access a session of independent legal advice as well as counselling. These assessments require intensive support by social workers including highly skilled counselling. The Adoption Service supported 3 relinquished babies during 2018/19 who were placed with Southwark approved adopters; all three cases were interagency from other local authorities. There were no Southwark children relinquished in 2018/19.

Children waiting for adoption

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
44	48	45	18	7	9	9	7

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, as well as Safeguarding and Family Support Services, using an established 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 permanent stable 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 than the impact could be skewing timescales so that averages increase and this will reflect on the Adoption Scorecard.

At the end of 2018/19 there were 7 children waiting for adoption with Placement Orders who had not been matched with an adoptive family. This continues to be a historically low number but it still represents a great challenge to our services to ensure children suitable for adoption get that opportunity as soon as possible.

The Adoption Service continues to extensively use all means possible to find adopters for children including Link Maker, national and local 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. In 2018/19 several staff in the adoption service undertook the new training Beyond together or apart - Planning for, assessing and placing sibling groups and these staff are looking at developing a training and support programme for social workers in the Safeguarding and Family Support Service to ensure we are undertaking the best possible assessment on sibling relationships to inform all placement planning.

In 2018/2019 there have been 12 children adopted, all of them single children, however one child was placed with an adoptive family who had already adopted her older brother so will grow up with a full sibling.

WHAT WE DID – ADOPTERS

Recruitment of adopters

Activity Overview - adopters	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/26	2014/15	2013/14
Adopters approved	12	9	10	21	25	29
Percentage approved within Government Minimum Timescales	100	100	100	21	16	n/k
Adoption inquiries	116	233	319	264	262	341
Adoption breakdowns prior to Adoption Order	0	1	0	0	2	0

The number of adopter households approved in 2018/19 was 12 which was an increase from 9 in the previous year. There were 13 full assessments completed but one household withdrew following the assessment being completed due to family reasons. Recruitment continued to be 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. However despite this focus with tools such as Linkmaker adopters approved by Southwark were increasingly searching widely for the best possible match and the majority of placements were Inter-Agency and not with Southwark children waiting.

11 households were couples and there was one single applicant in this year. The adopters were from a range of backgrounds. There were 4 black families: 2 were Black African, 1 was Black British / Black Other, 1 family was a mixed household of Black African and White Irish. 7 families were from White British, Irish, European or White Other with backgrounds. There were 3 same sex couples and 1 single Gay male. There were no single female applicants and no same sex Lesbian families. There were no families with disabilities or from a Transgender origin. 3 out of 12 households were approved under the Early Permanence Scheme as both foster carers and adopters.

There has been a huge decline in the numbers of enquires, to 116 the previous year there were 233. October 2018 [National Adoption week] saw the lowest with 3 enquires and November 2018 to March showing signs of minimal increase. Direct conversations were undertaken with adoptive families during July – Aug 2018, most informed that they were unaware of the shortage of adopters. There has however been an increase in interest in Adoption from white european same sex couple and heterosexual couples.

The adopter assessment team have developed tailored Early Permanence training for practitioners in the south of London, they are pioneering specific training for adopters who wish to consider transracial placements and siblings, and Southwark continue to work in partnership with Coram and Southwark CAMHS delivering and developing crucial, expertise planning, and clinical support and advice to Early Permanence families.

Adopter assessment timeliness

In 2018/2019 100% of adoptive households were assessed within the National Minimum Standards of six months. This performance has now been maintained for three years and is embedded through the Service ensuring:

- 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

The aim over the next 12 months will be to continue to maintain all assessments being completed to an excellent standard within the required timescale whilst developing pace within the collective structure of Adopt London South. This will be practically challenging but highly desirable during the process of the merging of the 9 local authority's adoption services within Adopt London South. The aim target for 2018/2019 was 15 adopter assessments; this was not achieved and one family needed to pull out at the very last stages of the assessment.

Approval to matched performance

The pace of matching adopters approved in 2018/19 to children has dipped with only one family being matched within a month and this match was internal. Eight of the families were matched in 8 months. The reasons for those not matched within 3 months is the length of time taken for local authorities to prepare their children for panel, all 8 were interagency matches. 3 households are still waiting, one is a single male and another is an Early Permanence family who have waiting since February 2019.

In addition to work with families approved in 2018/19 the Adoption Assessment team worked with some approved adopters approved in previous years including some who were waiting a long time for a match. Adopters who tend to wait longer are those with children (birth or adopted) already in their family where the matching is critical not just with the parents but to the whole family. In 2018/2019 Southwark supported 12 adoptive families to be matched with children outside of Southwark with other Local Authorities. Out of these 12 matches 3 of these 4 of those were with local authorities in south London within the South London Adoption and Permanence Consortium. Two households were matched with sibling groups and in both cases these were sibling groups of two. Three adoptive families approved by Southwark were matched with Southwark children. In total prior to the children being adopted over the course of 2018/2019 Southwark Adoption Service provided 31 families with ongoing support and supervision.

Adoption Support (Private applications and International Applications)

The number of private applications supported by the adoption service in 2018/2019 was 9.

Adoption disruptions

There were no adoption disruptions during 2018-19 for Southwark children.

This stability of placements is likely to be due to a number of factors. The Achieving Permanence Team is tracking children during proceedings so have a greater depth of knowledge about the child's needs which positively informs careful matching. Introductions planning, informed by the University of East Anglia Moving to Adoption Project is now more child centred and paced allowing a more gradual transition for children into their adoptive families. Children and families have more time to learn about each other and feel secure about the transition before the final moving day. The Achieving Permanence Team has access to CARELINK CAMHS at group supervisions to discuss the therapeutic needs of children and families during the tracking process and transition. This better informs the therapeutic support within the adoption support plan and there is a real understanding of the need to fund early therapeutic support from social workers and senior managers. There have also been fewer adoptions this year which has a statistical impact.

There have been seven adoption placements which have disrupted prior to the Adoption Order being made since 2006 a period of 12 years. Four of these have been since 2014. Of the four, three were Southwark approved adopters and one was approved by a voluntary agency. There have been independent reviews done of each of these disruptions, and learning events with managers and panel members to triangulate the improvements needed in the service as a response.

Three were older children (aged 6 or over) the younger child (aged 2) was a family placement. Two of the Southwark approved adopters were single females, who had never been parents before. They both had girls placed with them for adoption; one aged five and one aged seven. Both girls had experienced a considerable amount of neglect and emotional abuse within their birth families before being taken into care. They had also been with their foster carers for over two years before being placed for adoption.

The other older child, a boy was the elder of two siblings placed together with a couple. He had unfortunately taken on a parental role with his younger sibling when they lived with their birth mother, and on placement with the prospective adopters was not able to accept the changed dynamic.

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 statutory support and others requiring an ongoing package of support and most requiring some time limited support at critical points.

Adoption support plans are bespoke and 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.

On 31st March 2019 there were 150 financial support packages for adoptive families. The Adoption Service are creative in utilising support packages for adopters to enable more children to be adopted and to ensure the finances of prospective adopters is not a barrier to a child achieving permanence. 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) and New Family Social 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. The Adoption Service run a group to provide help, advice and support to adopters waiting across the South London Consortium. The service has 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.

The Adoption Service has set up a support group for all early permanence carers in south London. 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. This group aims and outcomes will be affiliated in Adopt London South.

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 and Permanence Consortium and training events run by the adopter led group 'We are Family (WAF). As with the previous years the "Great behaviour breakdown parenting course" continues to be a huge favourite with adopters, together Saturday workshops. 2018- 2019 has increased its attendance at every Saturday workshop.

We have reviewed and revised our transracial placements workshop "Exploring Identity and Difference in Transracial Placements" and this is now co run by two transracially placed adult adoptees and a social work practitioner. The collaboration creates a reflective space for families wishing to consider a transracial placement, or those who are already a transracial family unit. The transracial workshops are open to adopters in the within the Adopt London South. Other the topics for the Saturday workshops have included:

- "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"

The Adoption Service runs preparation training for adoption in partnership with Lambeth and Wandsworth and these groups run regularly at weekends and are facilitated by social worker and managers across the consortium.

The parenting course the 'Great Behaviour Breakdown' continues to receive fantastic feedback from adoptive parents and Special Guardians who have attended the course with some describing the impact of this course as 'life changing'. Based on feedback from adoptive families we have added a 4th day to the 'Great Behaviour Breakdown' course to enable the participants to meet with the facilitators and group members later to discuss how they are using the techniques used and further embed what they have learnt and how is working on a day to day basis. The Adoption Service has been able to recoup some of the costs of running this course and paying the facilitators via applications to the Adoption Support Fund.

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. In total since the fund came into existence Southwark have made claims for a total of £429,711.48.

On 31st March 2019 there were 58 financial support packages for adopters. The Adoption Service are creative in utilising support packages for adopters to enable more children to be adopted and to ensure the finances of prospective adopters is not a barrier to a child achieving permanence. It remains the case that the majority of adoptions are made without an ongoing package of financial support.

There has been an increase in the number of applications approved. The overall application for children subject to SGO's has also significantly increased over this period. We have been successful in obtaining funds for three group interventions and two Mindful Yoga & Strengthening Families Programme for Adults & Children and X1 Group Application for Therapeutic Dance Program.

Post adoption contact

The Adoption Service managed approximately 140 letterbox contacts during 2018/19 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 and Permanence Consortium held a training session on social media in 2016/17 and these have been refreshed and repeated in 2018/19. 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. In July 2018 a workshop for staff and for adopters was hosted in Southwark facilitated by Julie Young at the University of East Anglia on Contact after Adoption - Planning and supporting contact for children in adoption: Implications of research for practice.

Work with birth families

The Adoption Service had a contract with South London Adoption Counselling and Consultation Service to provide independent counselling for birth parents. This service ceased operating in 2019. Currently we are engaging individual counselling packages whilst agreement is considered with another provider which will be taken forward by Adopt London South. The number of referrals to counselling altogether in 2018/2019 was 25.

Mums supportive

Southwark's birth mother's support group 'Mums Supportive' which launched in 2015 continued during 2017/18 to offer support and a safe space for women who have been separated from their children as a result of care proceedings. In 2019 the numbers declined to 2 or 3 making the group aspects of the service untenable. The group low numbers are seen in a positive light as many of the parents took up employment moving away from being able to come to the group. In discussion with other local authorities the drop in numbers has also been their experience. Southwark Pause and other parent groups were approached to provide feedback. The feedback was tremendously helpful and we will use this information to reform birth parents support service within the Regional Adoption Service

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.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Adoption Service has a Quality Assurance Framework. This includes: effective adoption panel scrutiny; adopter feedback; management oversight and review including audit activity; as well as learning from complaints, learning from and sharing good practice and looking at learning on all cases where children are not matched within 91 days. In 2018/2019 an audit of life story work was undertaken for the last 15 children adopted. The results were that all of the life story work had been started, with 8 out of 15 life story books still being in draft form with adopters, and 7 having been finalised. This led to closer tracking to ensure Life Story Books were completed in a more timely fashion rather than remaining in draft.

Adoption Panel and Fostering Panel

The Panel has been fully integrated as an Adoption and Fostering Panel since January 2017. The rationale for the joint Panel has been to ensure excellent standards across Adoption and Fostering. The joining of the panel functions creates administrative efficiencies and some financial savings. The strengths of this new panel approach have become increasingly evident. 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 are quarterly reviews of the function of the joint panel to ensure it maintains a high standard in its service delivery and these are chaired by the Head of Permanence and the Director for Children and Families is invited to attend twice annually.

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 Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Care or Director for 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.

There have been changes in panel membership since the last annual report. The Panel Chair and two independent panel members have resigned. The Panel chair and a panel member to take up new permanent roles that prevented their continued Panel membership, and the third panel member to take up a panel position closer to home. This led to the appointment of a new panel chair in June 2018 and the opportunity to recruit three independent and one agency panel members. Further recruitment has recently taken place that has seen the appointment of 3 male Panel members, yet to take up their positions. New Panel Members have been welcomed by longstanding Members and the changes have served to further strengthen the Panel by creating a diverse central list of suitably qualified and experienced members that reflect the communities in Southwark.

Once the new Regional Adoption Agency – Adopt London South is established in October 2019 the Southwark panel will no longer hear adopter approvals or adoption matches of looked after children with their prospective adoptive panels. These functions will pass to a centralised panel for the region.

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 2018/9 feedback was received from 6 out of 12 adopters after they had been approved. Of these 3 out of six rated the service from first contact to approval as 5 out of 5 and 3 rated it as 4 out of 5.

One adopter commented that he was particularly happy with his assessing social worker and the adopter recruitment manager.

Complaints

Learning from complaints is a crucial aspect of our Quality Assurance Framework, which ensures continuous improvement in the Adoption Service. During 2018/19 the service received two complaints about the Adoption Service. One complaint related to a perceived lack of support from the service after an interagency placement, lack of counselling for the adoptive family and lack of contact with the team when a SW was on leave. Learning in this case involved the team reviewing the case in their group supervision, reviewing the counselling available and the service provided to families. The other complaint was regarding the cessation of an adoption assessment with a couple, which was not upheld.

REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT PLANS 2018 /2019

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 permanence via adoption for all children where this is the most appropriate care plan. We will carefully measure Southwark Performance using the Adoption Scorecard.

The timescales for the Adoption scorecard measures have continued to decrease, with A1 – the number of days from when a child enters care to when they are placed with their adoptive family - reducing from 472 to 414 and A2 - the number of days from when a placement order is made in respect of a child to them being matched with their prospective adopters reducing to 171 from 231

We will maintain high quality adopter assessments being all undertaken within the national minimum standards and increase our pool of adopters available for children. We will increase the pace of assessments being undertaken while maintaining the quality with the aim that in 2018 – 2019 we increase the number of adoptive households that are approved which will contribute to increasing the Sufficiency of families available for children.

Southwark have been successful in this area, with 12 adopter households being assessed and approved, an increase of 3 from the previous year but not reaching the target of 15 due to less adopter enquiries and one full assessment being completed but the couple withdrawing prior to panel.

We will further develop and embed theLife Story Work Works 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. In 2018 -2019 a key area of learning and audit will be practitioners and managers looking together at current life story work for children and using this as a learning space on what we are doing well currently and what needs further development.

Audits were undertaken of Life Story work completed for children adopted and those in long term foster placements. Social Workers in the Achieving Permanence Team worked with a designer and colleagues in the Care Service to design a template that can be made bespoke for children who are looked after or adopted. The Clinical Service, Fostering Service and Adoption Service all run training to embed the importance of Life Story work which can be accessed by Social Workers, Foster Carers and by Adopters.

We will have a focus on Contact Plans after Adoption holding a Conference in Southwark in July 2018 presenting the outcomes of academic research from the University of East Anglia in discussion with the lived experiences of adoptive families and of practitioners. This conference will launch a look at how we are making decisions about post adoption contact arrangements and an opportunity to think about future developments and what we can do differently.

The Conference took place in July 2018 and was well attended by staff and adoptive families who welcomed the research information to inform their own decision making and the support that they and their children need in respect of contact. The clear message was that contact is not a one size fits all formulaic decision but for each child needs to be thought about carefully in light of their needs and relationships. It also showed how crucial Life Story work and the involvement of birth families in writing letters was for children who are adopted.

We will work proactively with regionalisation to ensure any proposed changes to our services positively impact outcomes for our children, adopters and birth families. 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 and learn from best practice in other areas to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

The RAA consultation process during 2018/2019 has been extensive drawing on the views of Local Authorities, the London Executive Board, families affected by adoption, VAA, Regional and London wide RAA's , Steering Group Consultations with practitioners and other interested parties. We are unique in that the RAA will continue to, shape, bed and deliver practice with lived input from adopter, birth parents and children

Development Plans for 2019/2020

Southwark is entering an exciting new phase of hosting and being a part of Adopt London South. In the period to 1st October 2019 the focus will be retaining the work of robust family finding and undertaking high quality adopter assessments to timescale. Future development will be set out in the Business Plan for Adopt London South which will be robustly reviewed by the Board of 8 Directors and Assistant Directors that have oversight and governance of the Regional Adoption Agency.