

Adoption Partnership South East

Adoption Panel Chair Report

1st November 2020 – 31st April 2021

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1. Introduction

This report covers the work of Adoption Partnership four adoption panels for the first 6 months since going live; from 1st November 2020 until 30th April 2021.

The report is adhering to NMS17.2 “that adoption panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to the panel”

Adoption Partnership south east, is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) working across Bexley, Kent and Medway. Adoption Partnership has four panels which currently take place virtually using Microsoft teams, this offers flexibility to applicants and ensures that children’s matches are heard in a timely way. The Adoption Panels consider and make recommendations regarding, new approvals for prospective adopters for Adoption Partnership, the match of a child from Bexley, Kent or Medway with an adopter, approval of an adoption plan for a relinquished baby and deregistration of approved adopters. All panel adopter approval recommendations are ratified by the Head of Adoption Partnership, Sarah Skinner. Children’s matches and relinquished baby recommendations are ratified by the relevant Local authority Assistant Director.

The Panels are chaired by experienced professionals and the independent members of each Panel include a range of people with personal and professional experience of adoption (for example an adoptive parent, health care professional and foster carers). The four Adoption Partnership panels’ are formed from the previous Bexley, Kent and Medway panels. The Panel also benefit from having social workers from Bexley, Kent and Medway sitting on them. All members are subject to an enhanced DBS check.



The panel team has a new team manager; Katy Bennett following the retirement of Sue Peacock. Katy brings a breadth of adoption experience, specifically regarding the child's adoption process. The panel team is part of the pre-adoption order service within Adoption Partnership, which is managed by the Service Manager Amy Coombs.

Appendix A includes a full list of all Panel members and their roles.

2. Membership of Panel and Membership changes (Appendix A)

Each panel includes an Independent Panel Chair, Vice Chair, Medical Adviser, Panel Advisor, Independent panel member, Social Work representative and Panel Administrator.

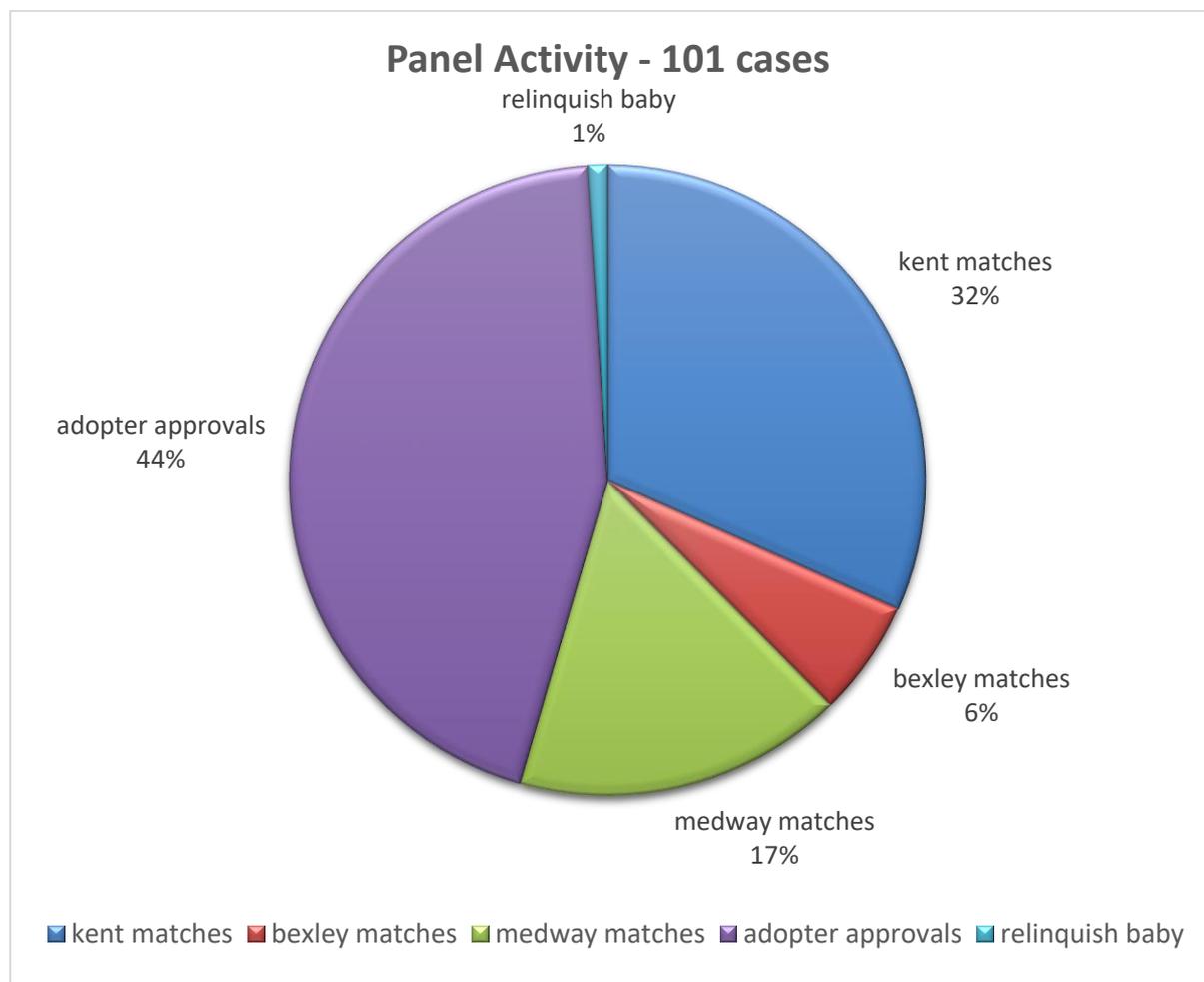
Appraisal of panel members will be carried out on an annual basis, with meetings chaired by the Panel Chair and supported by either the panel team manager or one of the panel advisors. This incorporates feedback on their performance, strengths, and areas for development.

The formation of the Adoption Partnership panels has combined the skills and knowledge from the original Bexley, Kent and Medway panels, which has led to an experienced, varied and skilled panel membership. All panels offer a high commitment from members and quality discussions, informed by a knowledge base drawn from members of wide-ranging experience. This includes professional social work, foster care itself and experience of children's services.

Medical Advisers from across Bexley, Kent and Medway sit on our panel on a rotational basis.

3. Breakdown of types of cases heard by panel

In total 113 cases were heard at Panel from November 20 – April 21



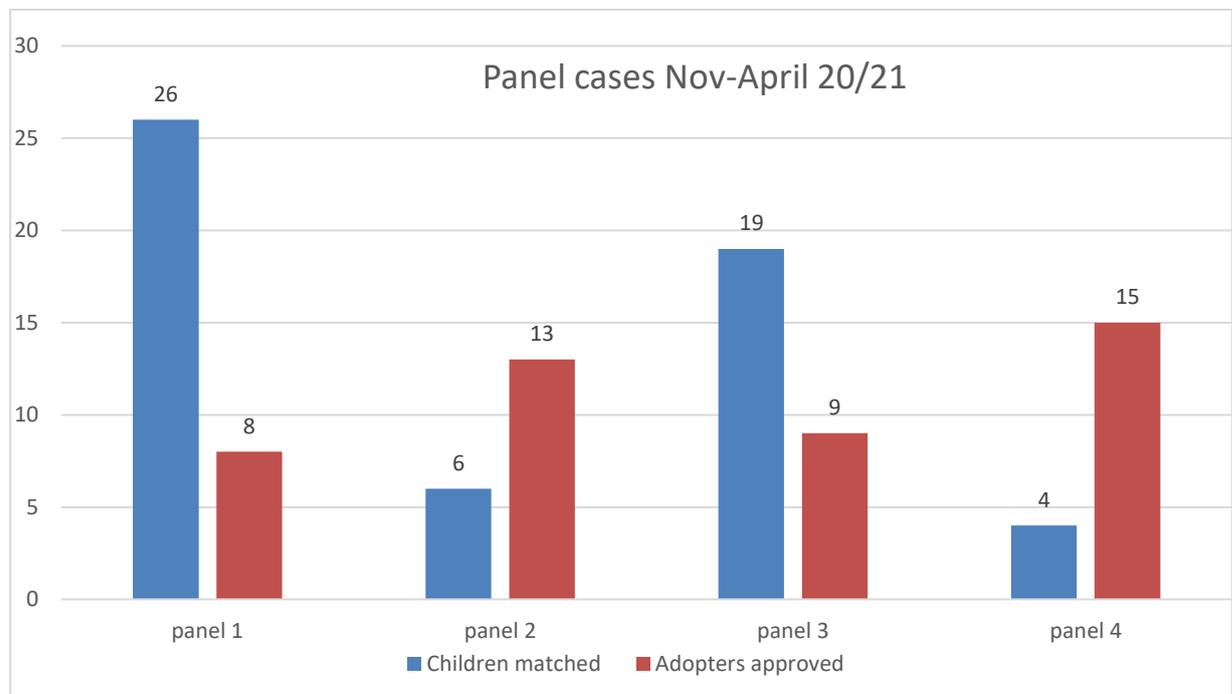
Adopter Approvals	45
De-registration	0
Adoption Matches	55

Relinquished babies	1
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Children matched with another RAA/VAA in the year

TOTAL = 1 (Medway child)

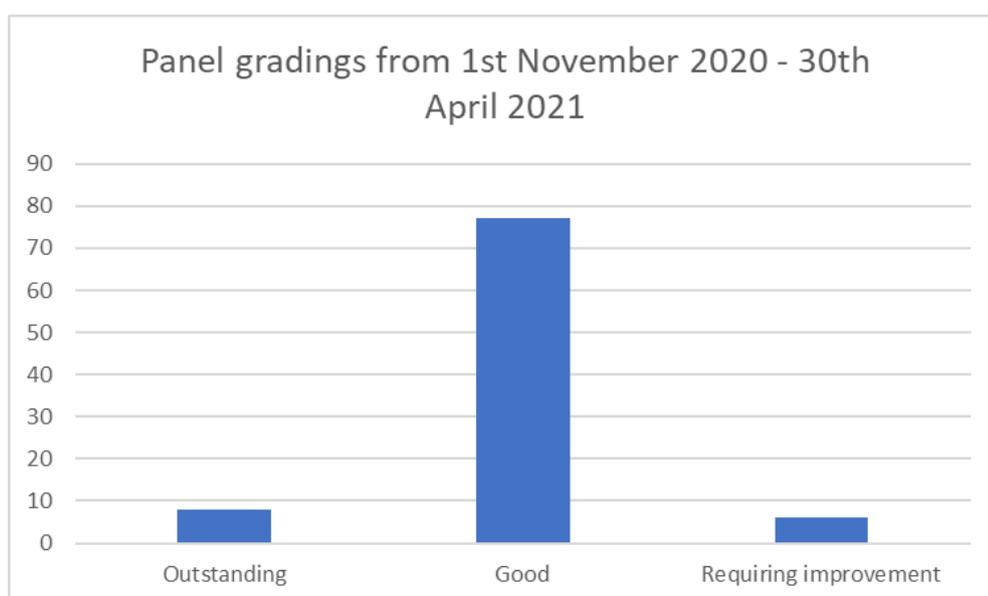
Cases heard by each panel



4. Quality Assurance of reports presented to panel

Part of panels remit is to monitor the quality of the paperwork in relation to prospective adopters' reports and this found to be generally good. All the Adoption Panels grade the quality of the paperwork presented for both approval and matches.

Below shows the gradings given to panel paperwork between November 20 and April 21.



5. Panel Training

Training is provided for the adoption panel members and is well attended.

The first Adoption Partnership panel training took place on the 20th November 2020.

This training included presentations on the following subjects:

- Update on the panels
- Mentoring scheme
- The role of the medical advisor
- An exercise to consider consistent practice across the four panels

6. Disruptions

Of the 55 children matched for adoption, one child's placement resulted in a disruption pre-adoption order. The disruptions meeting held in accordance with statutory guidance and concluded that there were a number of challenges which led to the disruption. The minutes of the disruption meeting will be shared with the relevant panel and discussed and the learning will be taken forward. The child has now been linked with adopters and the match is booked on panel.

7. Panel Chair Comments

Panel 1 – Chair Cathy Yates

Since the inception of the RAA, Panel 1 has been very busy, with a high level of matches. The panel in my view has bonded very well and works well as a team. I am lucky to have a highly skilled and experienced Vice Chair on panel 1 and we work well together. Panel membership has chopped and changed a little over the last 6



months, particularly with different medical advisors and social work members but this has not detracted from the coherence of the panel, and levels of trust and confidence between panel members has built up quickly.

Virtual panels continue to work well overall, but do have their challenges, particularly when panel advisors and minute takers change between cases and this can cause some delays. However, panel members do understand the rationale behind this, but were disappointed to learn at the time of writing that the Agency does not intend to reinstate physical panels under 2022, despite the proposed lifting of restrictions from the Government. Virtual panels have been very well managed by the Agency and it is to the Agency's credit that they have managed to keep the business going throughout the pandemic to such a high standard. However, most people agree that 'something is lost' in a virtual panel!

The support from the Agency to panel is well received and panel members have been well supported in the changeover to Microsoft Teams for the distribution of panel papers.

Sadly, one resignation has been received from Panel 1. This was a surprise both to myself as Chair and to the Agency. Unfortunately, despite following this up, no reason has been received for this resignation.

In conclusion, Panel 1 has been busy and had some challenging cases presented to it. The Panel has dealt with these with confidence and professionalism and with good support from the Panel Advisors and the administration team.

Panel 2 – Chair Fran Moffat

Since the inception of the Adoption Partnership in November we have learned to work well as a panel. I was previously chair of the Bexley panel so it has been helpful to have an experienced vice-chair John McDonald-Baker, well versed in the established



Kent practices and procedures at panel. Bonding with other panel members virtually without having been able to meet face to face has been an extra challenge for me, but I believe that we have worked well together. I was not able to chair the February panel as unfortunately it was discovered too late that my DBS check was out of date. We have also had quite a sudden resignation from an independent panel member, which I believe was for personal reasons.

We have not been as busy as panel 1, possibly because they have already taken up extra cases from the end of the month. The future practice of sharing out cases between panels will improve this balance. We have had more matches than approvals, and the standard of paperwork has generally been good with a few exceptional PARs. The PAR does lend itself to repetition and at times we have commented on this. Some reports from foster carers have really brought the child to life, but at other times we have felt that some foster carers need extra training on how to complete the form.

We have been well supported by our panel adviser, and by the administrators, but most of us have had real challenges on occasions in accessing papers. This was particularly the case after the IT system was changed, and we were the first panel to have to manage this change. I found that I was not able to access the edit function on my ipad, but the administrative team did all they could to help me with this, and the AP has also now supported me in buying a lap top which has made the whole process much easier.

Panel members come well prepared to panel, having read the papers thoroughly, and with prepared questions to ask the applicants or social workers. Members are welcoming in their manner to applicants, and we have not yet had a situation where it has been awkward discussing the recommendation with the applicants present. It would be helpful to receive feedback and comments from applicants and social workers about how they have found panel.

We have had a brief discussion about whether we would prefer to have face to face panels. There have been advantages to virtual panels, especially in terms of eliminating travel time. However we agree that we do lose out some of the visual clues from adopters.

In summary, panel 2 has worked well and professionally together, with good support from social workers and the administrative team. We look forward to an opportunity to meet each other face to face.

Panel 3 - Chair Sandra Neilan

For the period of time covered by the report Panel 3 has maintained a stable membership and represents a range of diversity and experience. Efficiency has increased with the appointment of a skilled Vice Chair, Louise Hawley, who is well able to chair one or two cases when panels are busy, which they have been for a lot of the time this year, thereby ensuring consistency.

Medical Advisers rotate, as do Panel Advisors and Minute Takers. Whilst not always easy this has been contained, within the workings of Panel.

Reports provided for Panel have, in general, been of a good standard, but at times it is felt that analysis could be improved, particularly in regard to the financial statements provided. Results of medical tests are often received at the last minute.

Matching Meeting Minutes are, in general, good and provide Panel with much information of value.

Foster carers' reports are generally helpful but could provide more information for Panel to have a better understanding of the current wellbeing and development of the child, when considering a match.

Panel is concerned that applicants and workers have the opportunity to provide feedback regarding their experience at Panel. It is understood that methods are being considered to ensure that a higher percentage is received.



Panel does feel that the technology for virtual panels, for all members has not always been fit for purpose. However, given the circumstances, over this current time Panel 3 has continued to work with commitment and diligence.

Panel 4 – Chair Lloyd Glover

Panel 4 has been busy, with most months having approximately 4 to 5 cases. We have 2 members from Bexley & the rest from Kent. This is my first panel as permanent chair and I have a Vice Chair who was from Bexley. Although a lot of us haven't worked together before, I feel that the panel as a whole have bonded really well. Iona, my vice chair & I have quickly developed a good professional relationship & I already feel that I can trust & easily respect all of my panel members. We have had a couple of difficult cases to negotiate but I feel that we did them professionally, following procedure & guidelines whilst keeping the feelings of the applicants & the needs of any children involved as paramount to our decisions. We already work well together as a team & I value the input from panel members.



8. Summary by Amy Coombs, Service Manager.

The Panels have had a lot to contend with over the first 6 months of the RAA going live and Bexley, Medway and Kent coming together as Adoption Partnership south east. The RAA launched during the Covid pandemic and therefore panels needed to be held virtually, this creates challenges both technology wise and forming together as new panel members. The technology has been an issue in regards to connectivity and access, however the panel administration and panel advisors have been able to ensure that any issues have been quickly resolved to enable all the cases have been heard. Regarding panel membership coming together to form new panels, this has worked well due to the panel chairs and vice chairs support to their panel members. The panel team have also allocated each panel a specific panel advisor, which has helped with communication across the panels and meant that issues are dealt with efficiently.

Coming together as an RAA has meant a high number of matches being presented to panels and the children have benefitted by having a choice of panel due to there being four panels a month. The RAA has also had a high number of adopter approvals which have all been heard effectively with none resulting in a deferral. Panels have had capacity to hear all the cases and no panel has exceeded 6 cases with 5 being the average number of cases being heard at each panel and some panels only hearing 2 cases on occasions.

The panel membership has remained consistent with only one independent member resigning. Social worker panel members are on a rota and 2/3 social workers are linked to each panel. This works well as it gives us a variety of social worker membership and by them only needing to sit every other month on panel supports them to carry out this role alongside their busy workload. Similarly, the medical advisors across Bexley, Kent and Medway are on a rota for panels.



Overall paperwork is submitted in a timely way to panels, however as mentioned by the panel chairs, there have been issues with medical information reaching panel in a timely way which has led to some cases needing to be delayed. These issues are in part due to challenges surrounding Covid and also a review in practice around when blood borne virus testing is needed. These delays are not ideal in terms of the child's timescales, however have been necessary to ensure that there is good practice in all the match decisions made.

The panels support the RAA with its development through their quality and assurance role. It is positive that the majority of the paperwork has been graded good by the panels and learning from those that require improvement is acted upon. Feedback given in regards to paperwork is taken on board by the relevant teams and also discussed by the managers.

It is noted that some panel members are keen to return to 'face to face' panels, this will be under review, however careful planning, liaisons with other RAA and review of practice will need to take place in regard to this to identify the right way forward.

Panel continues to strive to have a diverse membership which is representative of our adopter families and children. It is noted that currently panel membership lack ethnic diversity, single adopter representation and adults who themselves were adopted. Panels are also keen to improve their practice and be provided with feedback from applicants and professionals attending panel. This feedback has not been consistently received and the panel team need to review how this feedback can be provided to ensure panel's development is influenced by service user feedback.



9. Recommendations

- Increased representation of more diverse ethnic, racial and cultural background membership.
- Increased representation of single adopters.
- Identify new panel members who have been adopted.
- Review virtual panels in 2022.
- Service user feedback to be sought and provided for all those attending panel.

Appendix A

Panel membership

Barbara Redsell – Social work member
Cathy Yates - Independent panel chair
Dawn Bigwood – Independent member
Dr Abhijit Das – Medical advisor
Dr Aboud Eltom – Medical advisor
Dr Faiq Tukmachi – Medical advisor
Dr Khadija Himid – Medical advisor
Dr Mahein Hussain – Medical advisor
Dr Minoti Datta – Medical advisor
Dr Moneesha Bhargarva – Medical advisor
Dr Nadisha Suriaaratchie – Medical advisor
Dr Peter Morrell – Medical advisor
Ellie Hunter – Social work member
Eloise Creed – Social work member
Eva Lindsay – Independent vice chair
Fran Moffatt – Independent panel chair
Iona Stephens – Independent vice chair
Jackie Kohler – Social work member
James Buckland – Independent member
John McDonald-Baker – Independent vice chair
Julia Fagg – Social work member
Karen Lawry – Independent member
Katie Boyce – Social work member
Lisa Colyer – Social work member
Kris Bahadur – Independent member
Lloyd Glover – Independent panel chair
Louise Hawley – Independent vice chair
Martin Johnson – Independent member
Penny Cadman – Social work member
Rhiannon Webb – Social work member
Richard Diment – Bexley councillor
Rosie Coulson – Social work member
Sandra Neilan – Independent panel chair
Theresa Gardiner – Social work member
Wendy Purdy – Medway councillor