

A large light blue circle containing the text 'Adoption Partnership' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. A small white heart icon is positioned above the letter 'o' in 'Adoption'. Below 'Adoption Partnership', the words 'South East' are written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

**Adoption
Partnership**
South East

A smaller light blue circle containing the text 'By your side' in a white, sans-serif font. The words are stacked vertically: 'By' on the top line, 'your' on the second line, and 'side' on the third line.

**By
your
side**

ADOPTION PARTNERSHIP

Annual Report 2021

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1 – INTRODUCTION

In 2015 the Government set out its vision and commitment to deliver a regional adoption system where adoption agencies would come together to deliver adoption services on a larger scale. Adoption Partnership South East (APSE) is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) comprising of the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council, and it launched on 1st November 2020 and delivers adoption services on behalf of the three local authorities. There are now 31 RAAs established across the country.

The regional adoption agency is operated under the terms of a Partnership Agreement, which confirms the legal and governance arrangements; the budget; staffing and funding contributions for the three local authorities.

Legislation & Regulations

The work of the RAA is governed by:

- Education and Adoption Act 2016
- Care Planning, placement and Case and fostering services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
- Care Planning Regulations 2010
- Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011)
- Local Authority Regulations 2005
- Adoption and Children Act 2002
- Care Standards Act 2000

2. PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

The requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 underpin the principles and values of our service:

Principles & Core Values

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family which can meet their needs during childhood and beyond and where possible this should be within their own family
- The Child's welfare, safety and needs will be at the centre of the adoption process
- The Child's wishes and feelings will be considered at all stages
- Delays in adoption can have a severe impact on the health and development of children and should be avoided wherever possible
- The child's ethnic origin, cultural background, religion, language, and sexuality will be fully recognised, positively valued, and promoted when decisions are made
- The needs of disabled children will be fully recognised and considered when decisions are made
- The role of adoptive parents in offering a permanent family to a child who cannot live with their birth family will be valued and respected
- Adoption has lifelong implications for all involved and requires lifelong commitment from many organisations, professionals and individuals who must work together to deliver to meet the needs of the services
- Birth parents and birth families are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. They will be treated fairly, openly and offered a support service.

Equal Opportunities

The adoption service abides by equal opportunities legislation and the policies of each Partner. The service works positively and respectfully with all service users and partner agencies regardless of race, colour, religion, language, culture, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or age.

Every attempt will be made to secure an adoptive family which meets a child's emotional and developmental needs considering their ethnicity, religion, language, culture, gender, and disability considering the need to avoid undue delay.

3. THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE AGENCY

The agency is committed to fulfilling the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Children and Families Act 2014 by:

1. Ensuring the provision of a high-quality adoption service which guarantees the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children or young people who are looked after and who need adoptive placements
2. Ensuring that all those whose lives have been affected by adoption are helped to identify and receive appropriate services
3. Working in partnership with adoptive families and other agencies ensuring the service is based on statutory requirements and good practice within the principles of value for money for the agency

Objectives of the agency

1. To recruit, assess and provide adopters that meet the needs of the children to be placed for adoption within the timescales laid down by National Adoption Standards
2. To provide information on the process to applicants interested in becoming adopters and on the children requiring adoption
3. To ensure that adopters receive appropriate preparation, training, support, and advice to enable them to offer the best possible standards of parenting, safety and protection for children or young people in their care
4. To minimise delay in family finding, always paying attention to the needs of the child
5. To provide information on the services available to all those affected by adoption recognising that as adoption has lifelong implications for all those involved, their needs will change over time
6. To provide a range of adoption support services to birth relatives, adopted adults, adopters, and their children in partnership with other agencies
7. To provide information on the service that is available to those wishing to adopt from abroad
8. To ensure that any decisions are transparent and fair
9. That concerns about the service are addressed and that information about the complaint's procedure is made available

10. That the organisation regularly reviews the services it provides, consults with, and learns from, those in receipt of their services through comments, compliments, and complaints.

Impact of COVID on Service Delivery

Maintaining a good service and developing it further during the first year of the RAA's existence, has been a priority. Staff can take credit for managing to make the transition into an RAA and achieving good outcomes for children during this period of great change and a pandemic. Management and staff are positive and work together well to overcome challenges but also celebrate success.

Several adjustments were needed due to Covid, some of which have been very successful, and will be maintained, whilst others will not. Staff and parents have embraced the roll out of improved technology, and it has enabled social workers to undertake assessments and provide support to families remotely, despite the pandemic. The use of technology has also enabled people based in different parts of the RAA region, to meet safely.

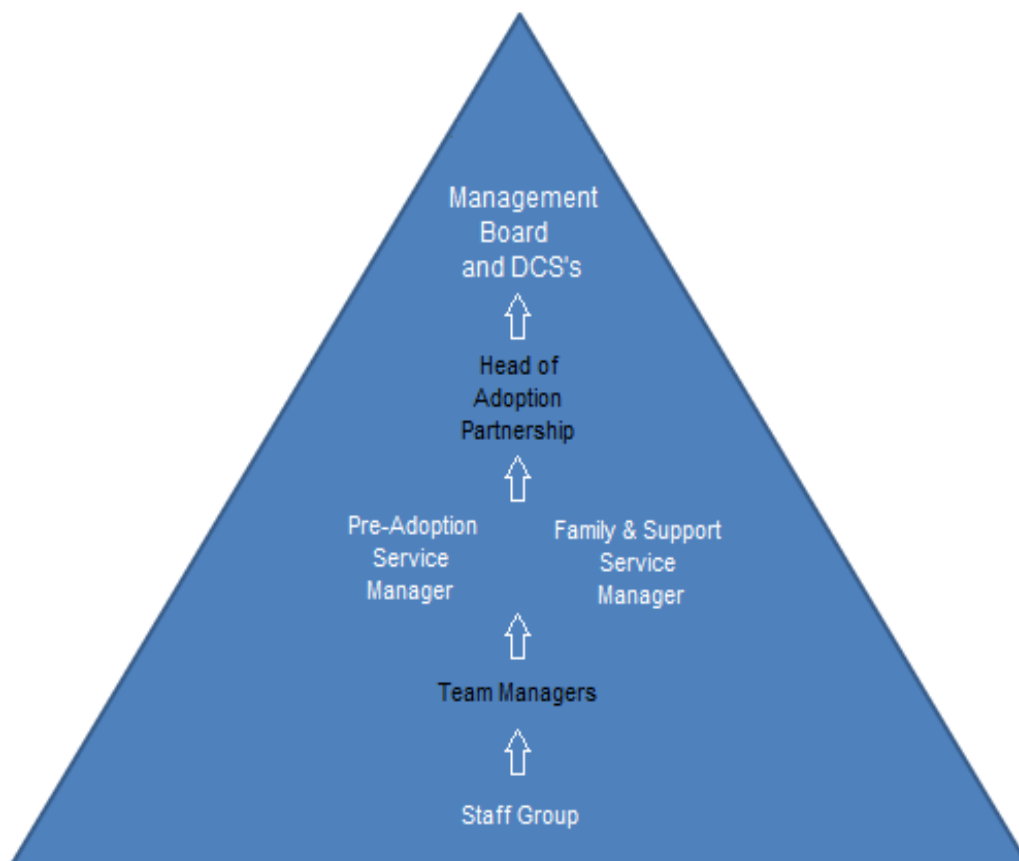
Social worker visits to families have returned to in person visits and the teams are physically meeting on at least a monthly basis.

There has been a delay in the timeliness of children's care proceedings and adoption hearings due to the pandemic and this is reflected in the data section.

Current practices are reviewed regularly to ensure we can plan strategically to deliver a quality service and respond to changes as and when they are required.

4. GOVERNANCE & SERVICE STRUCTURE

- The Head of Service reports quarterly to a Partnership Management Board, which is comprised of Director of Children's Services and Senior Officers from each partner local authority with representation drawn from the wider professional network. The Chair is rotated on an annual basis and for the period 1st November 2020 to 31st October 2021, the Chair of the Board was Director, Integrated Children's Services (Social Work), Children, Young People and Education Services (KCC), and she handed this over to Director of People (Children & Adults), Medway for the following twelve months.
- An Operational Managers group has met monthly, which includes the Head of APSE, Service Managers (APSE), Service Managers for Children in Care teams from Bexley, Kent & Medway, lead Finance Officer and lead Performance Officer for each partner local authority.
- KCC's Internal audit – undertaken January 2021 focused on the Governance of the RAA. The conclusion of the audit found overall an opinion of substantial internal control, governance and management of risk are sound overall.



Service Structure

Adoption Partnership South East is managed by a Head of Service, two Service Managers, one of whom is responsible for the pre-adoption order work streams and one who is responsible for overseeing family finding and adoption support.

There are nine teams within the Service structured as follows: (Structure chart attached appendix 1)

- One Initial Enquiries Team
- One Panel Team
- One Early Permanence team
- Two Recruitment, Assessment and Support teams
- One Family Finding team
- Three Adoption Support teams
- Each Team is supported by Business Support Officers who are line managed centrally by their respective local authorities.

Service Delivery

The RAA provides detailed information in its Statement of Purpose (SOP) (appendix 2). This explains our values and principles, the services we provide and the way we provide them. The information provided meets the requirement of National Minimum Standards for Adoption, and the related regulations (Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Misc. Amendments) Regulations 2003). It is available on the APSE website: [Adoption Partnership South East website](#).

Those enquiring about becoming an adopter or adoptive parents seeking support enter the Service by contacting the Initial Enquiries Team, or enquirers can access information via the website.

A recruitment strategy is in place and is reviewed regularly (appendix 3)

Adoption Panel Team

A Panel Team supports the Agency's approval process for adopters and the Local Authority Partners when pursuing adoption as the care plan for children. The team has a quality assurance role and support the four adoption panels that cover the region.

Weekly adoption panels are held virtually, and each panel has a designated independent Chair and Vice Chair and is supported by a Panel Advisor (Senior Social Worker) from within the Panel Team.

The panels are comprised of a range of representatives, including:

- People affected by adoption (adult adoptees and adopters)
- Local Authority Members
- Independent Panel Chair
- Independent/Vice Chair
- Adoption Social Workers
- Children's Social Workers
- Medical Advisers

The Agency has been conscious that the panel membership has not been diverse enough; largely white British, with two members from ethnic minorities (other than the Medical Advisors) and has now recruited new members to the panel to address this. Whilst we have more females than male panel members, we have male members on every panel, and two of our three new members currently being recruited are male. All three new members are from ethnic minorities, and we are seeking a single adopter to join the panel. There is representation from the LGBTQ community sitting on panel.

Early Permanence

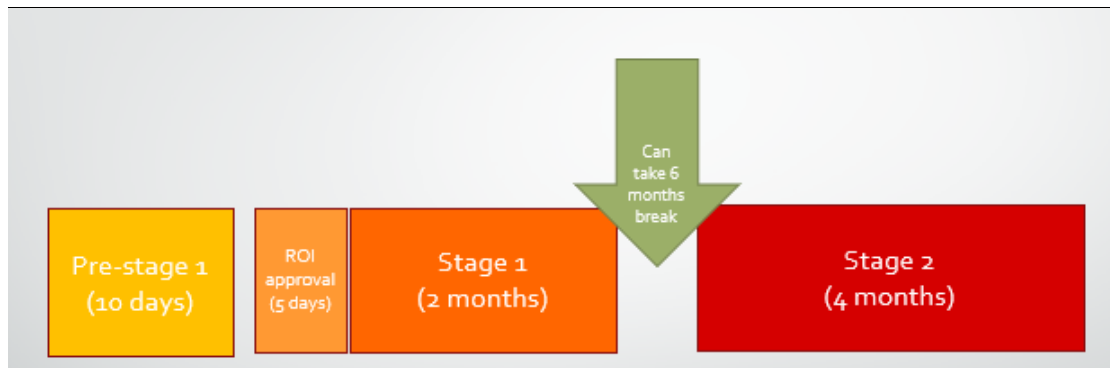
Adoption Partnership South East has an Early Permanence scheme which provides early permanence foster placements to young children who have a potential adoption plan and are either subject to care proceedings or have been relinquished by their parents at birth. These placements will go onto become an adoptive placement via matching and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) Decision, should the court agree the adoption plan and grant a placement order, or the parents have signed adoption consent for a relinquished child.

The adoption service has a dedicated team; Early Permanence team which include permanency planning social workers, who track, and support locality children's teams care planning in identifying children who might need an early permanence placement. The team also has recruitment and assessment social workers who recruit, assess, train, and support early permanence carers. These carers are approved adopters who are also assessed and trained to be approved to foster a specific child as part of the Early Permanence scheme.

Recruitment, Assessment and Support Team (RAS)

There are two Recruitment, Assessment and Support Teams in APSE and staff within these teams undertake the recruitment, assessment, training, and support of potential adopters, wishing to adopt children in care, and are known as 'Agency Adopters'.

The adopter assessment process is a two-stage approach, prescribed by government regulations.



*ROI: Registration of Interest

These teams also undertake assessments of extended members of a family wishing to adopt, i.e., step parents and these are known as 'non-agency' adopters.

Family Finding

The Regional Adoption Agency has a dedicated Family Finding Team which consists of one Team Manager and Senior Practitioners/Social Workers. A family finding social worker is allocated to a child when the local authority identifies that adoption should be the care plan. The family finding social worker works closely with the child's social worker to identify their needs and proactively seek to find adopters who can meet them. This includes liaising with the internal recruitment & assessment team and if necessary, with external adoption agencies.

The family finding team is child focused and seeks to ensure children's adoption plans are progressed in a timely way.

The agency has taken on the full responsibility for completing the Life Story Book for children who are placed for adoption, and these are created through a collaboration between family finding social workers, adopters' adoption social workers, children's social workers and with the adopters to ensure they are equipped and feel comfortable and confident with the book, so it can be used to support their child with their life story.

Adoption Support

Adoption Partnership South East has a comprehensive adoption support service for those affected by adoption.

The RAA will ensure that adopters have access to local support networks and specialist organisations, through a variety of subscriptions to other agencies, including Coram BAAF, National Association for Therapeutic Parenting (NATP), New Family Social, and We Are Family. We have a mailing list with whom we share information and publicise events and other resources as well as using social media to share information with adoptive parents and others.

The agency has two specialist adoption social work teams and one therapeutic team, comprising of clinicians who are qualified in a range of clinical interventions. The agency will also 'spot purchase' external provisions when the internal clinical team are not able to provide the service needed.

The adoption support service provides adoption support services in line with the "Adoption Passport" according to individual circumstances.

Access to a support and advice line service

To seek support parents can request support easily by contacting the RAA's Initial Enquiries Team and they will be offered a support & advice line call with a social worker in the adoption support service within 5 working days. This is a scheduled call in which they can discuss their concerns and the appropriate follow up action can be identified. Sometime this results in the issue being resolved on the call, or signposting to another service, or agreement that an adoption support assessment is required, which will be completed by a social worker in the adoption support team.

Service for adoptive families

- Access to an assessment of need, resulting in a support package based on the family's identified needs, including consideration of making an application to the Adoption Support Fund.
- Access to support groups
- Access to a learning and development programme and workshops
- Access to therapeutic support groups
- Access to Theraplay trained workers
- Access to support with education via Virtual Schools in each local authority
- Assistance and review of contact arrangements between adopters and birth relatives

Service for adopted children & young people

- Social groups and activities, delivered by Virtual School Kent's Participation & Engagement Team
- Offering training and advice for schools to help teachers understand adopted children's needs
- Working with children in their adoptive families around understanding their life stories

Service for those affected by adoption

The RAA commissions independent services from Barnardo's to support those affected by adoption. The Service is a bespoke service to families eligible to receive

support from Adoption Partnership South East. The Service is called Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Service known as CAFIS. Services are provided to four groups of people affected by adoption:

- i. Service for birth parents
- ii. Support for birth relatives
- iii. Access to information and intermediary services
- iv. Contact Service

5. THE CHILD'S JOURNEY

The Department for Education (DfE) have recently published data showing information on children looked after in England, including numbers of children looked after who were adopted. The data is taken from the annual data collection which is provided by local authorities in England:

- In 2021, the number of Children Looked After (CLA) by local authorities in England rose to its highest level at 80,850, up 1% on last year and continuing the rise seen in recent years.
- 2,879 were adopted between April 2020 – March 2021
- The number of CLA who were adopted fell by 18% in 2021, continuing a fall from a peak in 2015. The large decrease this year is likely driven by the impact on court proceedings during the pandemic, where cases progressed more slowly or were paused.
- On average, it takes 2 years and 2 months for a child to be adopted and this time has been increasing, up from 1 year and 11 months in 2018. In 2021, the average time between a child entering care and being placed for adoption was 1 year and 4 months, it then takes a further 10 months for an adoption order to be granted and the adoption to be completed.
- The average age of a child at adoption has risen by 3 months to 3 years and 3 months, back to the same level as in 2018.

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2021>

Adoption Partnership South East Data:

The table below shows the number of children within the Regional Adoption Agency who had an adoption plan during the last three years. The data captured from 2019-2021 has been submitted to DfE and published, whereas the data from November 2020 – October 2021, has not yet been published, but shows activity since the RAA was launched. This is known as 'service data'.

Indicator	Authority	2019-2020	2020-2021	Nov 20 - Oct 21
Agency decision makers best interest decisions	Bexley	>5*	7	11
	Kent	92	79	53
	Medway	34	37	20

Placement Orders	Bexley	>5*	7	12
	Kent	64	54	44
	Medway	20	27	23
Matches approved	Bexley	>5*	6	8
	Kent	60	64	53
	Medway	23	23	35
Children placed	Bexley	>5*	6	8
	Kent	61	64	53
	Medway	23	21	36
Adoption Order granted	Bexley	>5*	7	11
	Kent	63	42	36
	Medway	19	14	21

* >Data suppressed due to low number

Agency Decision Maker Best Interest Decisions

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is usually a Director of Children's Services or an Assistant Director who agrees that adoption would be in a child's best interest and should be presented to a court as the local authority's care plan.

In 2020/2021 there was an increase, in the number of adoption plans agreed by the Agency Decision Maker for Bexley children compared to the previous year; from >5* to 7, and a further increase of 4 children, to 11 from November 2020 - October 2021. Kent agreed the plan for adoption for 79 Kent children, 14% less than in the same period in previous year (92) and a further decrease of 26 between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway saw a 9% increase, from 34 children to 37 in 2020/2021, followed by a decrease to 20 from November 2020 - October 2021.

Placement Orders

A Placement Order is the legal order granted when a court agrees that adoption should be the care plan for a child. There were 7 Placement Orders granted for Bexley children in 2020/2021 compared to >5* compared to the previous year and this increased to 12 children from November 2020 to October 2021. 54 Placement Orders were granted for Kent children in 2020/2021 which was 10 fewer (16%) than

in 2019/2020 and this further to 44 for the period November 2020 - October 2021. Medway saw a 35% increase in Placement Orders granted, from 20 to 27 in 2020/2021, which slipped down to 23 for the period November 2020 – October 2021.

Matches Approved

Between 01 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, Bexley saw an increase from >5* to 6 children matched with adopters in 2020/21 and this increased further to 8 children between November 2020 – October 2021. 64 Kent children were matched with an adoptive family, during this period, an increase of 7% more children than in the previous year when there were 60 children matched. This decreased to 53 children between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway had the same number of matches approved, 23, in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 but a significant increase of 52% to 35 children between November 2020 - October 2021.

Children Placed for Adoption

Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, 6 Bexley children were placed for adoption compared to >5* in 2019/20, with an increase to 8 children during November 2020 - October 2021. 64 Kent children were placed with an adoptive family, in 2020/2021, 5% more children than in the previous year (61 children), reducing to 53 between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway had 2 fewer children placed for adoption in 2020/21 (21) when compared to the previous year, but this increased to 36 between November 2020 to October 2021.

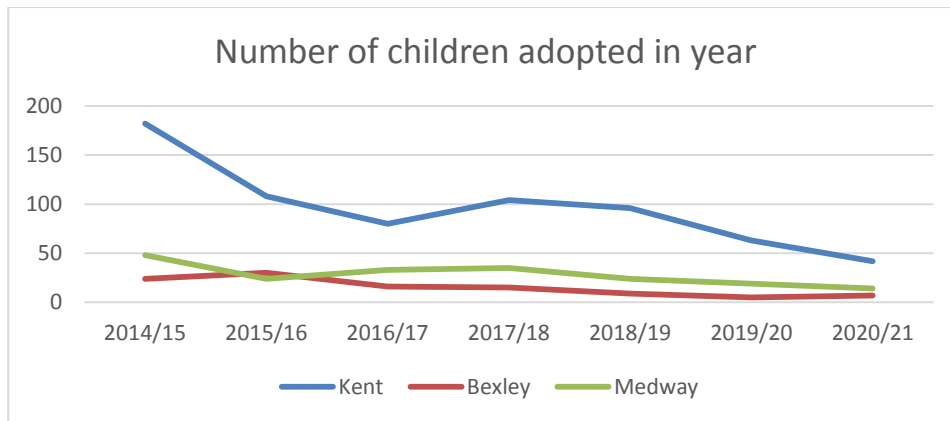
Sibling placements - Within the group of 97 children placed, 29 were part of a sibling group: Bexley: 3 siblings (1 group of 3), Kent 10 siblings (5 pairs), Medway 16 siblings (8 pairs).

Children Waiting

As of 30th November 2021, there are 31 children within the RAA who have a Placement Order, who are not yet placed with an adoptive family.

Of this group, 13 children are booked on to adoption panel for a match, and 8 have a potential link. There is active family finding taking place for the remaining 8 children.

Adoption Orders Granted



Bexley saw a slight increase to 7 Adoption Orders granted for children in 2020/2021 compared to previous year's figure published >5*, and this increased to 11 between November 2020 - October 2021.

42 Adoption Orders were granted for Kent children during 2020/2021, which reduced to 36 between November 2020 – October 2021.

Medway also encountered a reduction, in Adoption Orders granted in 2020/2021 to 14, compared to 19 in 2019/2020, but saw an increase to 21 adoption orders granted between November 2020 – October 2021.

Timescale indicator	Authority	2019/20	2020/21	From target 2020/21 (days)	Nov 20 - Oct 21
Placement order to matching decision, children matched in a year	Bexley	55	59	-62	67 average days in year, (50 average for those where a PO granted after Nov)
	Kent	74	144	+23	131 average days in year, (70 average for those where a PO granted after Nov)
	Medway	181	262	+141	167 average days in year, (112 average for those where a PO granted after Nov)
Placement order to matching decision, children adopted in year	Bexley	66	52	-69	55
	Kent	95.6	80	-41	98.9
	Medway	218	237	+116	228
Became in care to placed for adoption, children placed in year	Bexley	241	412	-14	409
	Kent	309.4	452	+26	455
	Medway	463	459	+33	420
Became in care to placed for adoption, children adopted in year	Bexley	287	412	-14	443
	Kent	336.7	316	-110	406
	Medway	502	519	+93	435

Placement Order to Matching Decision

The target time from the local authority receiving court authority (Placement Order) to place a child for adoption to the approval of a match with an adoptive family is 121 days, 4 months, for children adopted. Adoption leadership board data shows that nationally the timescale was 206 days in 2020-2021.

For children who have been adopted, the data shows that in 2020-2021 Bexley's saw a decrease in the average number of days it took to match children from 66 in 2019/2020 to 52 days in 2020/2021, increasing slightly to 55 during November 2020 – October 2021. Kent also saw a decrease in the average number of days from 95.6 in 2019/2020 to 80 days in 2020/2021, followed by an increase to 98.9 days between November 2020 – October 2021. Medway's saw an increase from an average of 218 days in 2019/2020 to 237 days in 2020/2021, and a reduction to 228 for children adopted in the last twelve months.

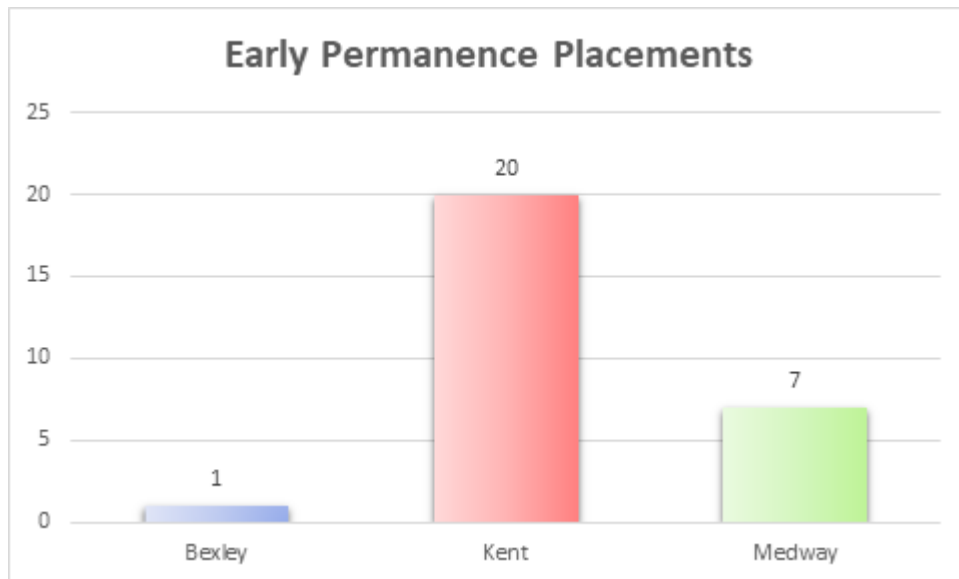
When seeking to review more recent or current performance, the table above shows an improvement in the timeliness between a Placement Order being granted and a match agreed with adopters between November 2020 – October 2021. In respect of Bexley children, it took on average 59 days for children to be matched in year in 2021/2021, whereas this reduced to an average of 50 days for those whose Placement Order was granted between November 2020 – October 2021. Kent children also saw an improvement from an average of 144 days for those matched in year in 2020/2021 to an average of 70 days for those whose Placement Order was granted between November 2020 - October 2021. Medway saw the biggest improvement with children whose Placement Order was granted between November 2020 – October 2021, being matched on average in 112 days, as opposed to an average of 262 days in 2020/2021.

[Became in Care to Placed for Adoption](#)

The current DfE threshold for children becoming in care to placement is 426 days, 14 months, for children adopted in year. Regarding this measurement, the timeliness for Bexley's children increased in 2020/2021 to 412 days, compared to 287, the previous year, with a slight increase to 443 days during November 2020 – October 2021. Kent's timeliness decreased by 6% to 316 days in 2020-2021 but saw an increase to 406 for November 2020 – October 2021, whereas Medway's duration increased slightly to 519 in 2020/2021, compared to 502 days in 2019/2020, and decreased to an average of 435 days between November 2020 – October 2021.

Adoption leadership board data shows that nationally there was a 34 day increase in timescale for this measure to 494 days in 2020-2021.

[Early Permanence](#)



Between Nov 2020 – October 2021 28 children have been placed in an Early Permanence placement (1 Bexley child, 20 Kent children and 7 Medway children). Two of these children placed have not remained with their early permanence carers, one child was returned to the parents and one child placed in a different placement due to difficulties within the placement.

Adoption Partnership South East have exceeded the aim to place 20% of the children placed for adoption in an Early Permanence placement. The service has a focus on Early Permanence due to the benefits of these placements to the children. The placements avoid additional foster placement moves for children and give the opportunity for children to attach to the carers and received consistent and secure care whilst decisions are made. The Early Permanence team ensure potential carers are assessed, trained, and supported robustly, due to the scheme requiring the carers to take to risk of uncertainty regarding whether the child will remain with them. There is an additional training within the recruitment and assessment of the carers and monthly support groups for carers whilst they foster a child.

Disruptions

Between November 2020 – October 2021, three children experienced an adoption disruption. This refers to children who were placed within prospective adopters but returned to foster care and were not adopted by those adopters. A disruption meeting was held for all three children, chaired by an independent person, in line with procedures.

6. THE ADOPTER JOURNEY – ADOPTION DATA

Adopter activity	Nov 20 – Oct 21
Enquiries in year	257 Households
Stage 1 starts in year	79
Stage 2 starts in year	77
Stage 2 ends in year	83
Adoptive families matched in year	82
Adoptive families with placements in year	82

Average timescales for newly approved adopters in the 2-stage adopter recruitment process, excluding fast tracks

Timescale	Target	Nov 20 -Oct 21
Enquiry to Stage 1 Start (days)	N/A	65
Stage 1 Start to Stage 1 End (days)	61	139
Stage 2 Starts to Stage 2 End (days)	121	125

The target duration for stage 1, pre-assessment, is 2 months, 61 days.

Between November 2020- September 2021 figures indicate that Adoption Partnership South East was outside this timescale with an average of 139 days.

However, stage 1 is adopter led, during this stage the agency undertakes statutory checks and references. The prospective adopters also complete their own home learning and attend a 3-day preparation course.

On reviewing the applications which exceeded 61 days there were specific themes identified which caused these delays:

- Applicants having difficulties getting appointments with their general practitioner for the adult health assessment to be completed. Due to the

pressure caused by the pandemic general practitioners have been under these delays are understandable.

- Applicants having a change in personal circumstances, such as job change, a bereavement or health issue. The increase of these changes of circumstances is likely to have been increased due to the pandemic.
- In some of the cases there had been change of manager and or social worker due to the transition into the Regional Adoption Agency. These changes caused some delay in the progression of cases, especially with the bringing together and aligning practice.
- Regular tracking of assessment cases has been implemented by the managers in the service to ensure these timescales improve.

Priority is given to assessing prospective adopters who can provide homes for our children who have more complex needs i.e., have a known disability, hereditary/genetic illness in the birth family, and slightly older children, plus some siblings. This is part of our sufficiency strategy to reduce the time children are waiting for adoptive families and to ensure we are approving families that match the needs of Bexley, Kent, and Medway children with adoption plans.

This is translated in to practice by identifying in Stage One, prospective adopters who are considered as potentially a good match for a child/child that requires an adoptive placement, and, in such circumstances, the assessment of the prospective adopter(s) will be fast tracked. This does not always result in the match with the child progressing, as information exchanged during the assessment, may result in a different view being reached, but it has resulted in some very good outcomes for children and adopters.

The target duration for Stage Two, assessment, is 4 months, 121 days. Adoption Partnership South East took on average 125 days to complete stage 2 assessments between November 2020 – October 2021, which is 3 days over the target timescale.

During this period 83 households were approved as adopters, which has ensured sufficiency of adopters for Bexley, Kent, and Medway children. In total 97 children were placed with adopters during 1st November 2020 – 31st October 2021 and all but four of these children were placed within the Regional Adoption Agency. One of the four children placed outside of the region, joined a sibling who had already been adopted.

Adopter Gap – sufficiency

As of 30th November 2020- The RAA has 36 'approved and waiting adopters' who are not linked with a child, of these, 14 of these are currently being considered for children.

7. ADOPTION SUPPORT DATA

As of 31st October 2021, APSE was supporting over 500 adopted children and their families either directly or indirectly.

The data below shows the number of families who contacted the Initial Enquiries Team for support and were offered a support and advice line appointment between November 2020 – October 2021:

LA	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	TOTAL
Bexley	3	1	3	0	1	2	2	2	0	1	1	4	20
Kent	12	12	12	10	20	18	24	13	23	14	17	12	187
Medway	0	5	1	3	7	2	6	0	1	1	1	1	28
TOTAL	15	18	16	13	28	22	32	15	24	16	19	17	235

Data Source: Performance and Information, Adoption Partnership South East

Adoption support assessments (households) carried out between November 2020 – October 2021:

Local Authority	Number of adoption support assessments
Bexley	17
Kent	135
Medway	19
TOTAL	171

Adoption Support Fund

Type of application	Number of applications
Internal provision	59
External provision	170
TOTAL	229

Data from February 2021 when RAA ASF portal went live

8. VOICE OF THE CHILD – PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT

The RAA commissions the Participation & Engagement Team within KCC's Virtual School, to provide a service to all adopted children and young people across the region. This was in place for Kent's adopted children and young people prior to the RAA being formed. It has since been rolled out and the team is working hard to encourage new membership. A separate report outlining the range of participation and engagement taking place is attached (appendix 4).

The report includes detailed information on the following:

- i. Young Person's Council
- ii. Participation Activity Days and Virtual Sessions
- iii. Participation Events
- iv. Further Activities to promote the Voice of the Child in School

Feedback on the virtual activities has included:

"Thank you, I liked making the bears and doggies with the other children. When we were talking and laughing at the same time it was like being back with my friends, it was so much fun!"

"Thank you for hosting yet another amazing morning's workshop. The aquarium tour was a really good experience... We've learnt a lot from the comfort of our sofa! VSK yet again, you have offered something so great for our children which we'd never normally get a chance to do."

Feedback on face-to-face activities has included:

Lots of positive feedback was received from young people and parents:

"Please pass our thanks on to everyone involved. The children and Mummy had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It has given us the opportunity to open the conversation about adoption in a very relaxed way which is normally a highly emotive subject for xxx. The one area we really felt he needed support was to realise his situation is special but he's by no means unique. When he realised all the children were adopted he had a smiley lightbulb moment. He now feels he's part of a special club rather than 'different'."

"What a lovely group of young people, the effort they put into the activity days is amazing, their effort is outstanding along with the excitement and smiles they bring along spreads through the children, they have done an amazing job and VSK could not be VSK without them all."

Feedback from children and parents on the summer picnic included:

'The best thing about today was, slime making, having a balloon model made, swing ball, space hoppers and having space to run round'

'Seeing everybody face to face and catching up'

'We loved everything, Captain Fantastic party entertainer, making slime and making other friends who are adopted too'

9. ADOPTER VOICE

An Adopter Advisory Board - meets quarterly and membership is drawn from a range of adoptive parents from across the region. The purpose of the Board is to provide a stakeholder perspective to the RAA and to act as a conduit between those living the adoption journey and policy and decision makers within the RAA. Membership of the Board is drawn from a wide range of adopters to best reflect the broadest experiences within adoption, including adopters who had children placed some years ago and are parenting older children, to recently approved adopters. The Board consists of same sex adopters, single adopters, sibling group adopters and adopters of children with complex needs etc. A member of the Adopter Advisory Board sits on the Partnership Board to represent the voice of adoptive families.

Social Gatherings - There are twice yearly social events organised to facilitate adoptive families coming together. There is an annual summer picnic which saw 33 families, 56 children attend. A Christmas party, which could not be held last year due to the pandemic, but there is one planned in December 2021 and already over 200 families booked to attend.

Compliments

There are several forums for receiving feedback outlined below and some comments which are used to inform and improve practice and service delivery.

- Adopters' views at the time they attend the adoption panel for approval and a match
- The views of others who attend the adoption panel including social workers from Kent and other adoption agencies if placing the child via inter-agency route
- Adopters' views after they have adopted - an 'after adoption' feedback form is sent to each family after the adoption order is granted
- Panel members attending panel training
- Adopters attending the preparation training
- Adopters attending the Post Adoption Support Team Learning & Development training.

Examples of feedback received by the Adoption service:

"After calling you, we called round a few more agencies (you were our first), but none of them compared to you. Your warmth and genuine interest in us as a couple spoke volumes. The thanks is really all from us." Adoption enquiry.

"Thank you for all you have done for our child and the family, you have helped us get through the most difficult part of our lives and we all appreciate everything you have done for us. You will always be part of that journey and thought of with love. We will never forget you." Approved adopter.

"You have really helped fill in so many gaps of what I feel has been missing for us over the years getting to understand our child's needs more. Having that time to properly sit, talk and unpick aspects of her thoughts, feelings and behaviours has helped all of us as home work better together. We are incredibly grateful for everything you have done, and your help has far exceeded any expectation of the support I thought we might have received." Adoptive parent.

Complaints

The Partnership has agreed that Kent County Council will be the lead partner on all complaints which relate either wholly or in part to the Adoption Partnership South East. Most of the concerns or issues raised in relation to the service provided by the Regional Adoption Agency are resolved through a problem-solving approach within the service and the service aims to respond quickly and with sensitivity.

Between 1st November 2020 – 31st October 2021, six complaints were received. All were dealt with at Stage 1:

- Two related to the adoption process
- Two related to support provided
- Two related to issues post adoption

10. NATIONAL WORKSTREAM

There are now 31 RAAs across the country, with only 5 local authorities not yet in the programme, and the expectation is that 3 of them to be in a 'live' RAA in January.

Recent publications that impact on our work include the Case for Change Review, the National Adoption Strategy: achieving excellence everywhere and the APPG for Adoption and Permanence, Strengthening Families. The key messages from the research focus on the recruitment of adopters, improving care planning, and the need to provide comprehensive and timely adoption support.

The Head of Adoption Partnership South East is engaged in the national forum of RAA Leaders and involved in several work streams with a view to delivering on the priority areas identified. One such area is to develop an Outcome Measurement Tool to measure the effectiveness of the Adoption support Fund (ASF). A pilot will take place in January 2022 and APSE will be a part of this.

A recently published report by the DfE on the Evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies (October 2020) [Evaluation of regional adoption agencies second report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92422/evaluation-of-regional-adoption-agencies-second-report.pdf) noted some early signs of improvements in relation to the impact of RAA's since the first evaluation was undertaken in 2018. The qualitative and quantitative data reflects some of the findings within our own RAA. These include, the RAA being less reliant on inter-agency placements, and placing more children within our area, and greater consideration of routes to early permanence, such as fostering to adoption. The report identified that RAA's are taking a more strategic approach to marketing, developing inclusive websites to boost efforts to increase adopter diversity, which is important for adopter engagement. The evaluation recognised a drive to more strategic approach to commissioning adoption support, resulting in improved early intervention and universal offers.

11. CONCLUSION

This report reflects the commitment and hard work of staff within Adoption Partnership South East. The move to a Regional Adoption Agency during a pandemic presented challenges, but staff rose to those challenges. The service is child focused and strives to provide a timely, qualitative, and responsive service to achieve good outcomes for children and families. Hearing and responding to the voice of the child and the voice of adoptive parents is important to us and during the coming twelve months there are plans in place to develop and improve these further.

The service recognises the value of working together, both internally, and with the professional network within each of the partner local authorities and other organisations.

A significant amount of preparation took place before the launch of the RAA on 1st November 2020 which has proven to have been extremely helpful. The legal agreement provides clarity, and the service is supported by a robust governance framework, which is constructively challenging and supportive.

The service has successfully transitioned from three local authority adoption services in to one regional adoption service and is entering its next phase of consolidation and further development with enthusiasm and a commitment to children and their families.

Sarah Skinner

Head of Adoption Partnership South East

November 2021

12. APPENDIX

[Appendix 1 – RAA Structure Chart](#)

[Appendix 2 – Statement of Purpose](#)

[Appendix 3 – Recruitment Strategy](#)

[Appendix 4 – VSK Participation Team Annual Report](#)