



Southend Adoption Service

ANNUAL REPORT 2016

Welcome from Southend Adoption Service

Introduction

I am pleased to present the Southend Adoption Service Annual Report for 2016. We have had another busy year. The service has continued to place a number of children with new families and has also been very successful in selling more of our adopters to raise income which can then be used to better support Southend children, moving to adoption. Our commitment to quality and the best outcomes for children remains our priority focus. The birth parent drop-in group supporting parents who have lost children to adoption has gone from strength to strength and has become valued by those who attend. We have continued to run our own post adoption training and overall post adoption support

Highlights

The Christmas party and summer post adoption events have been a great success and were enjoyed by all who attended. A second therapeutic residential weekend allowed us to re-engage with families of older children who are struggling with adolescence and adoption and was a fantastic success.

Looking forward

For 2017 we are committed to building on the success of 2016. We will continue to offer a quality service which is value for money with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for Southend Looked after Children.

We aim to:

- develop further post adoption support work
- develop further family intervention work
- develop further income generating schemes

The on-going work on Regional Adoption Agencies will greatly impact the way forward in the coming year.

Our Ethos

We strive to provide opportunities for children and young people to have secure futures and to find safe, high quality adoptive placements where this is required for children who cannot return to their birth families.

We work closely with our partner agencies and birth families to ensure that we achieve the best outcomes for all young people.

I am pleased to say that throughout 2016, placement stability in adoptive placements has again been maintained with no disruptions this year whilst timescales have continued to tumble allowing children to be in their new families at an earlier stage.

Southend Adoption Service

Purpose of this report

The provision, standard and operations of the Adoption service are governed by:

- The Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003 (Updated 2005 & 2013 & 2014)
- The Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (amendment) regulations 2011 and the
- Adoption minimum Standards 2011
- Care Planning, placement & case review 2014
- Education and Adoption Act 2016

National Minimum Standard 25.6 states that the Executive side of the Local Authority

- a) receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency
- b) monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users

The aim of this report is to provide the information required to enable the Executive side of the Council to fulfil its duties in this respect.

Overview

The past year has seen further developments in the adoption service, leading to increased income generation.

Jo Hines, Service Manager, has continued to encourage and support innovation and training, leading to staff being equipped to support adoptive families in Southend in a more proactive way.

With increased numbers of children being placed in Southend for adoption, the service has been asked to respond to more support requests than ever before. The challenge has been grasped by the team as they understand the need to support from the outset to prevent later difficulties. This has placed the service under significant time pressure.

Southend have continued to work closely with the Department for Education, looking at recruitment of adopters and Special Guardianship processes.

The past year has shown significant development of Regional Adoption Agencies and Southend have joined Essex, Luton, Hertfordshire, Suffolk and Adoption Plus to begin forming Adopt East Regional Adoption Agency. This will develop further over the coming year.

It continues to be a time of continual change for adoption services, whilst demand for services, particularly post adoption, sees a dramatic increase. We have seen a rise in the number of children being referred with adoption as a primary or parallel plan and more complicated court outcomes for children leading to significant additional support for adopters being required.

Statistics for past twelve months

(from 1.10.15 - 30.9.16)

- Numbers of adopters approved : 18 *(33 in 2015)*
- Numbers of children referred for adoption: 67 *(37 in 2015)*

- Number of children matched with new families: 36 (19 in 2015)
- Number of Adoption orders made: 25 (24 in 2015)

Stars 2016 Valuing Diversity winner Jo Hines

I am nominating Jo Hines for her professionalism, dedication and excellence shown in supporting my partner and I and our adopted children through all 4 of our adoption assessments over the past 10 years. Jo has undertaken has undertaken all of our assessments and has seen us placed with 3 beautiful children (now 4). We are a same sex couple and Jo has always treated us and our family with the utmost care, respect and professionalism. Jo is reliable and honest and very trustworthy. She is a real champion of disadvantaged and adopted/cia children.

Our 3 children and my partner and I have been trained superbly by her over the years in forming positive attachments with our children and in using therapy to help them to heal in our care.

What she does for me has been through the adoption

The Government in 2012 introduced an Adoption Scorecard to track timescales for children awaiting adoption. This scorecard tracks over a three year average. In scorecard published in March 2016 the average time between a child entering care and moving in with adopters was 505 (599 previous scorecard) days. The National Average for the same period was 593 days and for our statistical neighbours was 562 days. By the 1st October 2016, the three year average had dropped to 329 days.

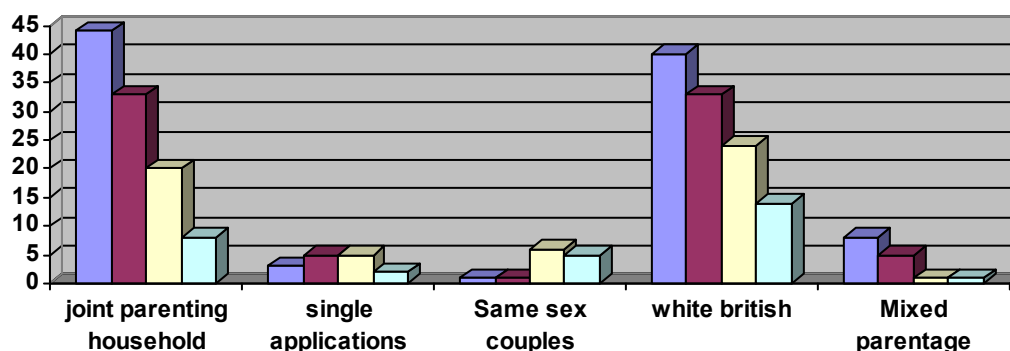
Of those children placed since April 2016 however, who will begin to be reported as part of future scorecards the average time between entering care and being placed for adoption has reduced from 329 to 324 days. This should therefore begin to show in the 2017 scorecard. This is a fantastic achievement by all involved and means that Southend children are being placed into their new families much quicker, preventing undue delay.

Recruitment; training and assessment

In the past twelve months we have received over 53 (103 in 2015) requests for adoption information. Up until 30th September 2016, 25 (35 in 2015) families attended information events. 15 (25 in 2015) Families have attended workshops in the past twelve months.

Over the past year there has been a national dip in the number of adoptive families coming forward, Southend have begun to see this trend hitting locally for the first time. In October 2016, Southend had 7 families in stage one and 3 in stage 2.

Of the households who have proceeded to workshops the following breakdown is found:



2013 - ■
 2014 - ■
 2015 - ■
 2016 - ■

Of the households approved by Southend, there are currently 11 (31 in 2015) households available on the Southend register.

Adoption Panel

In 2016 we ran 11 Adoption panels. The following statistics are available from the work of these panels:

(From 1.10.15- 30.9.16)

- PAR's (Prospective adopters report) presented (general approval): 18 *(33 in 2015)*.
- PAR's presented (for a specific child): 0 *(0 in 2015)*
- PAR's presented (Overseas adoption): 0 *(0 in 2015)*
- Children presented to ADM for Preferred option: 35 *(29 in 2015)*
- Children for matching with adopters: 36 *(19 in 2015)*
- Number of disruptions: 0 *(0 in 2015)*

Just wanted to voice my appreciation of the support your team offers. As a family we do need help and I believe that my two have been able to learn and grow with the teams support.

Thank you for your liaison with Prince Avenue, my hope is that this can really begin to benefit the children from a place of understanding.

Unluckily for you, we cannot afford to holiday every half term, so we will be there!

Linda Butcher

Adopter

25th October 2016

ES

past year. This

approval group,

for all approved adopters who have not yet been linked with a child. This allows us to offer ongoing training and to share profiles.

The Southend post adoption group continues to go from strength to strength and is very much adopter led with training and speakers as requested.

The post adoption group continues to allow us the opportunity to identify stresses within certain placements at an earlier stage and to pick up and undertake direct work with the family before breaking point has been reached.

Where preschool children are placed for adoption in Southend we encourage families to attend SPARKLES. SPARKLES is a group in which adopters are shown and encouraged to play with their own child using therapy techniques, a therapeutic approach that promotes the development of attachment relationships..

SPARKLES has added benefits as adopters who meet each other have often gone on to develop supportive relationships and networks.

The need for families to be supported post placement continues to be on the increase as families seek to re- parent children impacted by the trauma experienced in their early childhoods.

In addition to our on-going sparkles group and adopter training programme during this time period over 30 families have requested additional post adoption support many of whom continue to engage and access this now. In reality this means over 60 children are receiving on-going support. This has doubled over the past year with more children being brought into Southend and families seeing the impact of the support offered.

We have sought to optimise access to the government Adoption Support Fund Scheme having over 30 applications approved and accessing over £113,000. Of this funding additional services are purchased but a significant proportion funds the skilled work the Adoption Team itself is able to provide.

In addition to this 14 families are part of our preventative therapeutic programme which was launched at our residential in October and will continue to May 2017

Following on from the success of last year's Therapeutic Residential Project the Southend Adoption Team held another one on 14-16th October 2016. Our proposal was accepted and supported by the Adoption Support Fund. Recognising that most adoptive families will require additional support at different times throughout their child's own journey in this project the Adoption Team is seeking to be proactive and preventative before major crisis occur aiming to minimise the risk of any disruption which we recognise would be devastating to all.

This year's therapeutic residential project was ambitious as it grew in size with over 50 adults and children attending, but we also wanted to capture those families with younger children.

The weekend offered a range of therapeutic activities including 'The Just Right State' course, therapeutic drama workshops, creative play as well as a range of physical activities from adventure courses to fire building. For the families as a whole we had mindfulness workshops and a family disco which was engaging and fun. The wide ranges of activities available were aimed to develop confidence, self-esteem and capacity to connect and engage with others. Something we know is often a challenge for adopted children. For the parents we launched a NVR (non-violent resistance) support group, supported by Partnership projects.

The weekend was just the start of the project and the therapeutic activities will continue through to May 2017.

The weekend received a lot of positive feedback from both the parents and the children

Children commented:

- I loved the weekend because it was super fun and I made new friends
- I used to be scared of heights until I did the high ropes, I got to do things I have not done before
- I liked making a den and everyone was really friendly
- I loved it all, it's way better than normal weekends
- I want to come back again!

Parents Commented:

- It was reassuring to hear that other families experience the same issues and emotions
- the NVR course was very intuitive, I can't wait to learn more
- time with other adoptive families was just awesome
- I did not know what to expect but felt comfortable to share our journey, the highs and lows and picked up a lot of hints and tips – thank you
- I've exchanged tel numbers and feel my network will grow as a result
- I felt I could relax in this group

- A well planned weekend with the right amount of activities – thank you for the time and effort put in to ensure the weekend was fun and a success

The letterbox contact system continues to develop and we are currently supporting approximately 250 contact plans, in several cases this includes direct contact.

As young people are themselves approaching maturity we recognise that the need for them to consider how their own history integrates with their experience of adoption is more prominent. We seek to support adopted young adults who have been adopted. Before a young person reaches the age of 18, we review the information exchange and contact the adoptive parents. Following on from this we send a letter and leaflet directly to the young person, to offer them support. The numbers of young people reaching 18 is beginning to rapidly grow due to the increase in adoptive placements made over the past few years. We recognise that just because a young person is reaching the age of 18 they may not be at a point in their lives where they wish to trace their birth family or request access to their adoption files. We believe however that it is important that they know what services are available to them as young adults. In 2016 we have directly supported four individuals to access their adoption files and have facilitated contact between two adopted young adults and birth family members.

At Southend Adoption Service we recognise that when a child joins an adoptive family it is not only the immediate family that are impacted, but also their extended families and networks. We regularly hold information sharing evenings for this group, to raise their awareness of the challenges adoption can bring and to explore practical support they may in turn be able to offer. The groups are well attended and have already proven a great success in supporting placements where difficulties arise and allows us to tap into the extended support with training to give them the understanding to help. Where families have large support networks or where a child being placed brings additional complexities individual events for families are arranged.

We recognise it can be a challenging and difficult time for existing children within a family who are approved to adopt to wait for a child to be placed in their family. In July 2016 we ran a group for 6 children aged between 6-8 years. The group gave the children an opportunity to share their feelings, ask any questions, make new friends and generally have fun together. We also introduced Theraplay activities, which the children will be able to play with their new sibling, and help them to understand the importance of these simple games. The feedback from the children was very positive and is a group which the children have asked continue for both themselves and for new children in the same position. The children wanted this group to be called the “super Sibling Group”. This will continue to develop over the next 12 months.

Southend continues to be successful in recruiting adopters and often selling these through the national register. This is financially beneficial to Southend Council with over £250,000 being brought in in the past 12 months. It does

however have an impact on the level of post adoption support required. In the next year we hope to recruit a further member of staff to the team to support this work. This post should eventually be self-funding through the grants from the adoption support fund.

Birth Parent Support Group

We have through 2016 continued to run the group which directly supports birth families who have been affected by adoption. The Birth parent group meets on a monthly basis in a local community centre. We have found that the quantity and quality of letters received has continued to improve and has allowed some children to receive contact with birth families that they otherwise would have missed. The group seeks to offer birth parents a nurturing experience, eg they are offered warm drinks and toast and in turn they present as less defensive and more open to receiving support.

The group continues to grow slowly. We have come to recognise that this is viewed more as a drop in. We advertise the group in local community areas to ensure that as many families as possible can be supported. We have been able to support several young mums through a second pregnancy and have been able to continue to support several very vulnerable parents, post adoption. Over the past year we have successfully engaged with some birth parents who previously had no on-going contact with the Department, allowing their adopted children to receive information about their birth families and therefore to begin to really make sense of their backgrounds.

Denise Burgess, our letterbox co-ordinator continues to take a lead role in this group and is regularly contacted by some of the more isolated birth parents for advice and support.

Dear Aimee

We just wanted to say a MASSIVE thank you for all that you have done. You are so positive and organised. Thanks for always believing in us and keeping us going even when the chips were down.

We are head over heels in love with Mason. Thank you for finding him for us.

You are the best

Gary, Paul & Mason

April 2016

Schedule 2 & Birth Relative Initiated Contact

Possibly influenced by all the media interest and TV programmes like 'Who do You Think You Are' this is an area of work that continues to grow. BRIC (Birth Relative Initiated Contact) is where birth families express an interest in making contact with an adopted adult, whilst Schedule 2 is where an adopted adult requests their adoption records and often seek support in tracing their birth family.

In 2016 we at any one time continued to have approximately 35 cases open supporting individuals who are trying to trace information about their own adoption and 10 birth relatives seeking to trace an adopted adult. We have had the privilege of facilitating several reunions and continue to offer support to individuals for as long as they require as they seek to establish new relationships and make sense of their past.

Other work

During 2016, Southend have developed further joint projects with education regarding the "Just Right State". Training was undertaken with schools in 2015 so that a number of teachers across the Borough are now trained to run the programme. In addition NVR training has been run with a number of agencies in 2016 to support further the work that is undertaken across the Borough.

Several programmes were initiated in local schools where children both adopted, in foster care and some placed with their birth families joined together in the programme. Schools saw a real benefit in this for the children concerned. In 2016 we ran similar programmes through Marigold with the fostering service for foster carers and their foster children.

In 2016 we have developed further Mindfulness Meditation Training in which students learn about the importance of being in the present moment (the now), bringing about feelings of acceptance and not judging analysing experiences so much in our day to day life, and not always feeling the need to have answers, and instead just being in the moment. It is learning to feel connected with everything and balancing your emotions and body systems.

They learn breathing techniques that help quieten and still your mind, and then learn how to actually listen to your own body sensations by performing a body scan technique.

They learn daily exercises to practise each week to start to reap the benefits of a calmer, more still mind, a happier more contented mind, balanced feelings and emotions and have more quality time in their lives, more meaningful life and to be more in tune with their actual body sensations and tensions, and therefore learn techniques to relax muscles and release tension in both mind and body.

This course recognises that in order to manage the continuous challenge of being parents the parents themselves need to be valued and develop strategies and this is something we have made an opportunity for.

This course was run at the recent residential weekend for parents and the feedback from this was again very positive.

The Adoption future

In June 2015 the Government released a document entitled Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA). This paper introduced the idea of large Regional Adoption Agencies, running adoption services for a number of local authorities.

Over the past year there has been significant work undertaken to look at managing such a service. The Government has passed legislation to allow them to direct local authorities to join an RAA in the next few years where they are hesitant to do so.

Over the past year the work has been alongside, Essex, Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Luton and Adoption Plus voluntary adoption agency with a view to potentially creating an RAA called Adopt East. This has proven a complex process and one which although making significant process, still has a number of crucial decisions to be made about operating models and delivery models. Once this work is complete, any formal proposal would need to be presented to Cabinet for each of the local authorities for sign off.

The Government have set timescales for the RAA's to go live in March 2018, however at this stage no formal decisions have been made. This work will continue in the coming year with a view to formal proposals being presented in late spring/early summer 2017.

The work of the Adoption service continues to grow. This is a small team who achieve fantastic results and who undertake a huge amount of work to support families. It is evident from statistics nationally that court delays and decisions are impacting on the number of families coming forward to adopt, whilst the number of children being referred to the service has doubled in the past 12 months. Expectations from the courts are that timescales of care

proceedings reduce whilst more complex family assessments are undertaken. This will need to be monitored closely over the coming year as this has a major impact on the whole of children's services and their ability to continue to reduce timescales for children and the most positive outcomes for their future.

Dear Ann

We would like to thank you so very much for all your kind support, advice and understanding. This has been a very long journey for us and a testing time, but it has been worth it. We now have the little girl we always wanted and our family is

Our social worker is always just a call or a text away. She even planned to visit us on her wedding day! She has text me at gone 10 at night and at weekends! We now have children placed with us and this is partly due to the advocacy work she does for us. When she has been on holiday other members of the team have attended meetings with us. We have never felt alone! We have worked with other local authorities on our journey and none are a patch on the Southend team. We do