

# **Southend Adoption Service**

## **19/20**



### **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 & 2017)
- The Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (amendment ) regulations 2011 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017
- Adoption minimum Standards 2011
- Care Planning, placement & case review 2014
- Adoption Reform Update 2018
- Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment regulations 2020

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.

### **Introduction**

The service has continued to place a number of children with new families and has also been successful in selling adopters to mitigate against the costs of some required placements to meet the specific needs of individual children requiring adoption from Southend.

Our commitment to quality and the best outcomes for children remains our priority focus. The SPARKLES parent and preschool group has gone from strength to strength and has become embedded in what we do, at times having over 20 children attending at any one time. We have continued to run our own post adoption training and support group and birth parent drop-in, both growing and developing.

Covid 19 has had an impact on the service in recent months as the Service has needed to respond to nationwide pandemic. The coronavirus amendments to the regulations has supported us in keeping the service moving forwards at times when access to certain procedures have been restricted.

### **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 recognise adoption is challenging as the children placed have all invariably experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma and we therefore promote our families to stay in touch and access support from the outset of placements, developing adopters insight and capacity to manage the challenges they face.

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 2019/20, placement stability in adoptive placements has been maintained with no disruptions this year whilst timescales have continued to reduce allowing children to be in their new families at an earlier stage.

## **Highlights**

The Christmas party and summer post adoption events have been a great success and were enjoyed by all who attended.

Developing a partnership with Cornerstone in the continued use of Virtual Reality Trauma and Attachment Training which has gone far beyond the service itself.

Adopters said

*‘ everybody should experience this, has made me more me more determined than ever to adopt’*

*‘ I never thought unborn babies would be impacted, to think some babies must be born sad is tragic’*

## **Regionalisation**

There continues to be a drive by the DfE to establish Regional Adoption Agencies, to widen adoption recruitment; improve support for adopters and to place more children with adoptive families within shorter timescales. This has been driven by both the DfE in conjunction with the Adoption Leadership Board, a national board with a remit to drive significant improvements in the national adoption system of England. Southend are members of the Eastern Region Adoption Board. The Regional Adoption Board brings together Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies and adopters, with the purpose of creating more opportunities for children within the region, to have timely access to secure permanent homes and to provide children with the best possible life chances.

In addition, Southend have continued over the past year to work closely with Essex, Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Luton, Bedford Borough, Norfolk and Thurrock and Adoption plus and Barnardo's (Voluntary adoption agencies) and Adopter Voice to form a Regional Adoption Alliance (Adopt East). It is envisaged that this will create a larger pool of approved adopters with whom to match children and drive performance and outcomes for children. The DfE has given approval for Adopt East to go live as an RAA, and despite the actual launch being put on hold due to the COVID – 19 crisis this was achieved in October 2020 and Adopt East is now up and running.



## **Children placed for adoption**

In 2019/20 a total of 23 Southend children were adopted, the same as 2018/19 but a decrease from the 38 children adopted in 2017/18. It is noted the amount of children referred for parallel planning increased to 56 in 19/20 an increase of 8 from 2018/19

when 48 children were referred. This decrease was partly due to a number of Adoptions being carried over to 2020/21 as a result of court adjournments.

In addition, 8 children were made the subject of special guardianship orders, where the parallel plan was adoption.

It is noted that due to the successful support of Social Care, 13 children were able to progress reunification plans with their birth parents.

Number of looked after children who ceased to be looked after who were adopted:

	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20
Southend	25	28	38	23	23

Of the 23 children in Southend in 2019/20, 14 were girls and 9 were boys. An age breakdown is included below of the children's age at the time of the adoption order being granted (this will be different from the age when the children were placed with their adopters).

Children's age when the adoption order was granted in 2019/20:

Age in years	Number of children
Under 1	2
1-2	10
2-3	4
3+	7

Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 20 we have placed a further 13 children using carefully risk assessed transitions to ensure permanency decisions have not been delayed. Of these, 6 are boys and 7 girls and range from 0- 6yrs in age.

There have been significant delays in the conclusion of some care proceedings partly due to Covid-19 and since April 7 adoption orders have been finalised.

Children's age when adoption order granted since April 20

Age in years	Number of children
Under 1	1
1-2	3
2-3	3
3+	1

As of Nov 20, there are 9 children placed with their adoptive families but the adoption orders have not been granted. 7 children have a formal plan for adoption with placements order granted and a further 16 children have an ADM recommendation for

adoption but are still in court proceedings. 3 children are placed via foster to adopt placements which have yet to be finalised via the Adoption Panel. For these children they have had the opportunity to be settled within their permanent families and avoided further transitions to emotionally navigate and time in Local Authority Care

In addition, a further 8 children were made the subject of special guardianship orders, where the parallel plan was adoption.

### One family said

'We're so grateful for you Anna, you have absolutely been the right person for our whole family and we are so glad to be able to stay within the Southend fold as we trust you and the wider team so much. Thank you for making today happen'

### **Adoption scorecard**

The adoption scorecard aims to show how swiftly children are placed for adoption in each local authority. The local authorities' performance is measured against key indicators which are applied to the number of children who have been adopted over a period of three years. As the numbers of children adopted each year in Southend remains relatively small, one child's journey through the system can have a large impact on the average figures for a number of years.

The average time between a child entering care and moving in with an adoptive family has continued to decrease in Southend from an average of 309 (2015-18) to 280 in the latest scorecard. This is well below the national average of 376 days and shows a continuous downward trend. It is expected that average timescales may begin to rise in 2020/21 due to national court delays from adjourned appeals and delays in court dates for final hearings.

Whilst we will continue to work to reduce the average time between a child entering care and moving in with an adoptive family, our approach will always be to take the necessary time to find the right families for our children.

Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (3 year average):

	Adoption Scorecard 2014/17	Adoption scorecard 2015/18	Adoption scorecard 2016/19
Southend	313 days	309 days	280 days
Southend's ranked position	1 <sup>st</sup> of 149	3 <sup>rd</sup> of 149	N/A
England Average	520 days	486 days	376 days

Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (3 year average)

	Adoption Scorecard Outturn 2014/17	Adoption scorecard Outturn 2015/18	Adoption scorecard Outturn 2016/19
Southend	107 days	107 days	95 days
Southend's ranked position	4 <sup>th</sup> of 149	8 <sup>th</sup> of 149	N/A
England Average	220	201	178

### **Impact:**

Southend continues to do significantly better than the national average in the time taken to match a child to an adoptive family once a court decision is received with an average of 95 days against a national average of 178 days. This shows a continued high performance from the previous scorecard.

This ensures that where children in Southend require permanency through adoption, they are not delayed allowing them to move into their permanent families in a timely manner.

As Adoption Agencies are Regionalised new Adoption Scorecard will report according to RAA's

One family said

*I've been meaning to send you an email to say thank you for all your time and support. It's been a really positive experience and your hard work and dedication has made it all feel so effortless. We have been lucky to have you as our social worker, you really were a perfect fit for us and have been brilliant to work and spend time with! Thank you so much!*

### **Recruiting Adopters**

18 adoptive families were recruited in 2019/20 against 20 in 18/19 and 10 in 2017/18. By the 31 March 2019 there were 6 families approved but not yet matched or linked with children.

Since April 2020 a further 19 families have been approved to adopt. Currently 8 families are approved but not yet linked with children. For some this has been an active choice due to uncertainty afforded as a result of Covid-19.

All other families currently being supported by the adoption team have either had children placed with them or are linked to children and are waiting for the placement to be approved at panel.

Recruiting the right adopters for children remains a challenge for all local authorities and the situation in Southend is no different.

Considerable work has been undertaken to attract prospective adopters to Southend. Monthly information events are held during the evenings / weekends to reach a wider section of the community. Drop-in sessions are also held for members of the public to attend to learn more about the adoption process. We have adopters who support with these events and share their experiences of adopting through Southend. Raising the profile of the team is also achieved through the use of social media and targeted advertising all of which has proven successful.

Due to Covid -19 the team have sought to be creative in terms of continuing to run virtual information sharing opportunities but despite a National Recruitment Campaign 'You Can Adopt' running we have seen a drop in enquiries in recent months leading the cancellation of Adoption Preparation Groups in October for the first time in the last decade.

As well as completing Adoption Preparation Workshops as part of the assessment process all prospective adopters attend a core set of Continued Adoption Training (CAT groups) which enables us to equip our adopters with additional insight and knowledge that helps prepares them for the task ahead.

As Adopt East we are exploring new ways to target recruitment to meet the needs of the children who wait the longest and ensure the best recruitment across the region of prospective adopters. Our profiles of children have been aligned to produce an Adopt East approach and use good quality photographs a digital media. Adopt East utilises Link Maker in a space dedicated to the RAA.

Responses to requests for information about children are made in timely way and the team are creative in the way that the matching process is managed to be most effective for individual children.

A matching co-ordinator appointed for Adopt East has focused work across the region for the matching of children. Regular Adopt East profiling events and Family Finding Craft Days are held throughout the year. Although these have been impacted by Covid -19 virtual profiling events are being piloted across the RAA

## **Adoption Support**

Adoption is a major event in the life of a child and it has lifelong implications for all of the parties involved. The adoption team recognises that all parties may need a variety of support at different stages of the adoption journey.

When you adopt with Southend you are given the clear message that it is expected you will need additional support and a range of services are provided.

The adoption service provides support to adoptive parents, their children and birth family members to enable them to remain in touch after an adoption order is granted. There is a clear message that contact should be promoted wherever it is safe to do so. The letterbox co-ordinator supports a regular indirect exchange of information between birth families and adopters. The team also provides support to help to maintain direct contact arrangements for adopted children and their birth relatives where this is in the child's interests.



We have a developed Peer Mentor Scheme in Southend which all new applicants are invited to utilise throughout their adoption journey. Ofsted highlighted the Adoption Community that has been established in Southend.

Financial reviews are provided to families in regard to adoption allowance/support payments provided by the service, and adoptive families' needs are assessed when there is a change in circumstances.

Ongoing therapeutic support is provided for adoptive families before and after the adoption order has been granted and the team will intervene whenever necessary to prevent the disruption of an adoption.

The service offers support to adopted adults to access their records and works as part of intermediary services with birth families and adopted adults.

The adoption team have a range of skills that enable them to support families which include Theraplay, DDP, Therapeutic Life Story Work, NVR (non-violent resistance) and Sensory Attachment Intervention.

Adoption support is generally provided within the team and therefore is undertaken by staff who have already developed a strong relationship with the adoptive families; the service is diverse in the services offered and support is developed on an individual basis to meet the very individual needs of each child and their family.



### Impact:

Support for post adoption is currently mostly delivered in house by a highly trained team. Services are brought in and funded through the adoption support fund where needed. Given the size of Southend, decisions for support are able to progress in a timely manner and decisions made into services to be provided without any delay. This we believe impacts the fact, Southend has had no adoption disruptions for over 10 years.

Southend adoption team run a monthly STAG (Support Training and Guidance) group for both families approved and not yet linked with a child and families who have children placed. This allows the team to offer ongoing training.

The STAG group continues to go from strength to strength and is very much supported by our adoption community itself.

Where preschool children are placed for adoption in Southend families are encouraged to attend SPARKLES. SPARKLES is a group in which adopters are shown and encouraged to play with their own child using Theraplay techniques; a therapeutic approach that promotes the development of attachment relationships. SPARKLES has added benefits for adopters who have often gone on to develop supportive relationships and networks.



One adopter has given her feedback on attending SPARKLES

*'My daughter and I have been attending Sparkles for over a year and will continue to for as long as possible. It is such a good group for young adopted children. My daughter has great fun, she gets to see her friends, play, and do different activities, and I have the opportunity to speak to fellow adoptive parents which is a great support. We both have a vital bond and trust building experience. She also asks to do the tasks when we are at home which shows that it is fun as well as therapeutic. As a parent it helps me learn techniques which help us bond while playing, more so in the early days of adoption but even now it continues to be a benefit. It's also helpful to be able to speak to a Social Worker for advice or reassurance.'*

The post adoption support provision affords the team the opportunity to identify stresses within certain placements at an earlier stage and to pick up and undertake direct work with the family before a placement disrupts.

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 Southend's on-going Sparkles group and adopter training programme during 19/20 over 40 families requested additional post adoption support many of whom continue to engage and access this service. In reality this means over 60 children have received on-going support. This has continued to increase with more children being brought into Southend and families seeing the impact of the support offered.

Following therapeutic life story one adopter described the experience as excellent

*'my son and I are in a much better place; he is showing affection for me for the first time ever which is lovely'*

The Southend adoption team have continued to optimise access to the government Adoption Support Fund Scheme accessing over £29K in 2019/20 despite further restrictions on the availability within the fund. Of this funding additional services are purchased but a significant proportion funds the skilled work the Adoption Team itself is able to provide.



In recognising that most adoptive families will require additional support at different times throughout their child's own journey the Adoption Team is seeking to be proactive and preventative before major crisis occur aiming to minimise the risk of any disruption.

Since April 2020 the team have again sought to be creative in the post adoption support is offered. Certain activities had to be stopped due to social distancing rules.

The ASF offered additional funding for virtual support which many of our families have engaged with. However, it has been recognised that the social isolation experienced by families has led to increase in requests for support which we have responded to.

While Sparkles had to be stopped for a while, we have been able to re start this with a clear risk assessment in place as the need for the support became the primary concern.

STAG groups have become a virtual support group and a virtual NVR parenting programme was offered. We continue to seek the views from out adopters regarding the support needed to ensure our families do not feel alone in such challenging times.

As young people are themselves approaching maturity it is recognised that the need for them to consider how their own history integrates with their experience of adoption is more prominent.

Southend adoption team seek to support adopted young adults who have been adopted. Before a young person reaches the age of 18, there is a review of the information exchange and direct contact made with the adoptive parents and young person. 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. It is recognised 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. The team believe however that it is important that they know what services are available to them as young adults. Our young adults up to 21 years are offered further support to continue to have a service through the Information Exchange if they choose.

Southend Adoption Service recognises 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. The team regularly hold information sharing evenings for this group, to raise their awareness of the challenge's adoption can bring and to explore practical support they may in turn be able to offer.

The groups are well attended and continue to prove a great success in supporting placements where difficulties arise and allows the team 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.

Feedback from friends and family :-

*Good advice given to us- thank you*

*Gave us ideas how to help*

*We know the adopters won't be alone, and have support*

*We now have a better understanding of the process*

*We are reassured to contact the social workers if we are concerned*

*We know the new parents and child will need space at the beginning*



Southend adoption service recognises 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 the team started a group for six 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. Theraplay activities were introduced, 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 to continue for both themselves and for new children in the same position.

The children wanted this group to be called the “Super Sibling Group”. In 2019/20 this group did not run due to not having enough children to attend; however with a number of new families now in Southend with siblings, this will be re-introduced during 2020/21.

Southend continues to be successful in recruiting adopters and often being able to utilise these placements for children nationally forming a positive funding stream for Southend. This is financially beneficial to Southend Council with over £63,000 income generated in 2019/20.

This income helps to offset expenditure for placements which in 2019/20 was £238,000. It does however have an impact on the level of post adoption support required.

Income	302,000.00
Expenditure	-238,850.00
Net total	63,150.00

## **Birth Parent Support Group**

Through 2019/20, Southend adoption team continued to run a birth parent drop in which directly supports birth families that have been affected by adoption and Special Guardian Orders. The Birth parent drop in continues to meet on a monthly basis in a

local community centre. Evidence has shown 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, e.g. they are offered warm drinks and toast and in turn they present as less defensive and more open to receiving support.

The group is advertised in local community areas to ensure that as many families as possible can be supported. The team have supported several young mums through a second pregnancy and have been able to continue to support several very vulnerable parents, post adoption.

They have worked closely with the Marigold Rise project for several of these vulnerable young mums. During 2019/20 the team again 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. This service remains small but is well embedded in practice and understood across the community.

Unfortunately, due to Covid 19 we have not been able to run the drop in due to the venue being shut and social distancing rules. The team have continued to support birth parents remotely and at times met with birth parents at the Civic in a risk assessed way.

In 2019/20 the team continued to support Mindfulness Meditation Training. This course recognises that in order to manage the continuous challenge of being parents the parents themselves need to be valued and develop strategies. In addition, there has been a robust post adoption training agenda looking at parenting techniques and strategies; sharing difficult information; health and social media issues. There has been a clear plan set up for 2020/21 based on the needs and wishes of our adoptive families.

The team have continued the project with Cornerstone regarding the use of virtual reality. Cornerstone is a Social Enterprise set up by adoptive parents to support adoptive families who began to develop this project in 2017. The initial focus was to find a way to support prospective adopters and foster carers to achieve a greater understanding of the actual reality that children known to social may have previously experienced, more than intellectual understanding. The adoption team from Southend were involved in this from the start with the opportunity to meet with the film crews and influence how the films were initially developed.

The VR films have been filmed in 360 to give the full immersive experience which allows parents and carers to understand the impact of trauma and attachment from the child's perspective. In turn this can elicit a greater degree of insight and empathy. Through the immersive films individuals can open up worlds never seen before; that of a child in the care system. What they have been through, how this affected them and, more importantly, how the parent, adopter, foster carer, social worker and teacher can see things from the child's perspective.



The VR films engage with a different part of the brain to the cognitive rational side most function in which means the experience taps in the emotional and physiological parts as well.

The adoption service while taking the lead have expanded this project in terms of training for social workers, recruiting foster carers / adopters, supporting schools to gain greater understanding of the roots of presenting behaviours, supporting young people to gain insight into their own history, preventing placement disruption.

During 2019/20, the VR training has continued to develop its reach across all departments and external agencies. In addition, it is now fully embedded as a part of adoption and fostering initial training and within the SGO training for potential special guardians.

The virtual school have fully engaged in this project to ensure the VR experience was taken into a number of Southend schools during 2019/20 to train staff across all aspects of school life.

One Head Teacher stated -*'It was incredible / awful – I get why all staff need to see this'*

*' it makes it clear why some children behave as they do'*

For prospective adopters who have no actual experience of trauma it brings the reality to life and promotes the discussions re helpful strategies and approaches to managing presenting behaviour, as what we know is the way we were parented ourselves is often not effective with children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences.

*'Its very different from my childhood, I guess I just never knew'*

*' this will help me to think about and respond in a PACEful way'*

The VR brings PACE (The DDP approach) to life and this is reinforced in other training offered.

*'I now realise how hard it would be to trust any parents after being neglected'*

What it achieves is it helps families to refocus on the child and think beyond how they are feeling, even though their own experience needs to be accepted and validated

Professionals said

- Its refocused my energy to where it should be
- I felt it in my body and realised how desensitised I've become to the families I work with

## **Looking forward**

For 2020/21 we will continue to provide a quality service which is value for money with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for Southend Looked after Children.

We aim to:

- Recruit, assess and support people through all aspects of the adoption process
- Work closely within our RAA to develop stronger aligned practice across the region
- Develop further post adoption support
- Develop further family intervention work
- Learn and embrace the creative practice achieved as a result of Covid 19 while seeking to ensure the needs of the children requiring permanency through adoption are met.



Jo Hines

Interim Head of Service

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