



Brighton and Hove
Children and Young People's
TRUST



Annual Adoption and Permanence Report

2008-2009

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1. Introduction

The report will provide detail of the adoption and permanence work undertaken within the Children and Young People's Trust [CYPT] from April 2008-March 2009, including information on adoption activity and compliance with the national adoption standards.

A child's welfare is of paramount consideration and the adoption and permanence activity of the CYPT is part of the critical pathway of work with vulnerable families. A key priority of the CYPT is to ensure children can be brought up safely with their birth parents or within their wider family network if at all possible. If that is not possible then children are entitled to grow up within a family that can provide a legally secure and stable family placement ideally through adoption or if that is not appropriate via another legal order that secures permanence or through a permanent foster placement.

The Fostering and Adoption service is a city wide service within the CYPT and contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in the city in line with the priorities outlined in the Children and Young People's Plan.

The work of Brighton and Hove City Council as an adoption agency is governed by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 [ACA 2002] which was fully implemented in December 2005.

A report from the Independent chair of Brighton and Hove's Adoption and Permanence panel is appended to this report.

2. Adoption and Permanence Service

The Adoption and Permanence Service Manager has continued to be Karen Devine for 2008/9. During this period the service continued to comprise the Adoption and Permanence team, the Family and Friends team, and the Concurrency team. There have subsequent developments to the Concurrency team which will be commented on later in this report.

The Practice Managers within the Adoption and Permanence service take lead responsibility for different aspects of the work, namely adoption support services, family finding, and the recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters, the work of the family and friends team and of the concurrency team. The team is made up of a number of experienced social work practitioners, social work resource officers and an adoption support teacher. The team provides a duty service for prospective adopters and team members take a lead role in providing other services such as birth records counselling, adoption support work and step-parent adoption. The Practice Manager who acts for the CYPT as the Adoption Support Services Advisor

manages staff that have a dedicated role in providing post adoption support including letterbox and support to direct contact arrangements.

The Adoption Agency Advisor plays a key role in ensuring the effective running of the Adoption and Permanence Panel, providing a quality assurance role in relation to reports being prepared for panel and for providing specialist advice to staff within the CYPT in relation to adoption and permanence work. The Fostering Agency Advisor has covered this role for much of 2008/9 whilst the post was recruited to. The new post holder is Michael Wilson who took up this post at the end of March 2009.

It is essential that there are close working links between the Fostering and Adoption service and the other area and city wide teams involved in working with children in care and their families. Quarterly meetings are held with the Fostering and Adoption and Area Team Managers, Children's Disability Team Manager and 16+ Support Team Manager, Agency Placement Manager, the Medical Advisor, and Consultant Nurse for Children in Care [CiC] to discuss practice issues in relation to fostering and adoption and services for children in care. The Head of Service is also involved in the CYPT Care Matters implementation group.

Staff within the Fostering and Adoption service as a specialist service are used widely by area teams for consultation on all aspects of practice relating to permanence planning or family and friends care. Training events are also provided for area staff with more responsibility falling on key managers within service to deliver this training within the new CYPT core skills training programme.

The Head of Service has also continued to chair a monthly pre-birth assessment panel which comprises key social work and health staff within the CYPT plus the midwifery manager and the family group conference co-ordinator. This panel maintains an over sight of all the pre-birth referrals of children at risk of care proceedings or a child protection plan at birth and endeavours to ensure that early pre-birth assessment takes place to minimise any delay in achieving permanence for vulnerable babies, and to reduce the numbers of children coming into care through the planning of appropriate multi professional support services. However the significant increase in numbers of children coming into care since December 2008 and the pressure on area social work teams in particular has led to a greatly reduced capacity for the social work teams to undertake timely pre birth assessments. It is hoped that this can be addressed through future strategic planning within the CYPT to develop an early permanence service to ensure that these very vulnerable babies receive a co-ordinated and priority service.

The Adoption Support Services Advisor, Consultant Nurse for Children in Care [CiC] and Head of Service also attended a monthly meeting of the specialist Tier 3 team within CAMHS that provided a service for fostered and adopted children and their families. The CAMHS service for fostered and adopted children was re-commissioned during 2008/9 and this team has been disbanded. Referrals for these children are now directed to the one central

referral point within CAMHS and are dealt with by the three area teams within CAMHS and can be dealt with by a range of different clinicians at CAMHS with an expectation that these referrals receive an assessment appointment within 4 weeks.

Brighton and Hove continues to be a member of the South East Adoption Consortium and the Service Manager attends the quarterly meetings of the Consortium Managers as well as representing Brighton and Hove at the British Agencies of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) quarterly meetings of the South East adoption agencies.

3. Ofsted Inspection

The Adoption service was inspected by Ofsted in January 2009. The service had been previously inspected by the Commission for Social Care Inspection in September 2004 and it is a requirement that adoption services are inspected on a 3 yearly cycle. The delay in the timing of this inspection reflected the fact that the responsibility for inspecting children's services moved to an expanded Ofsted from April 2007.

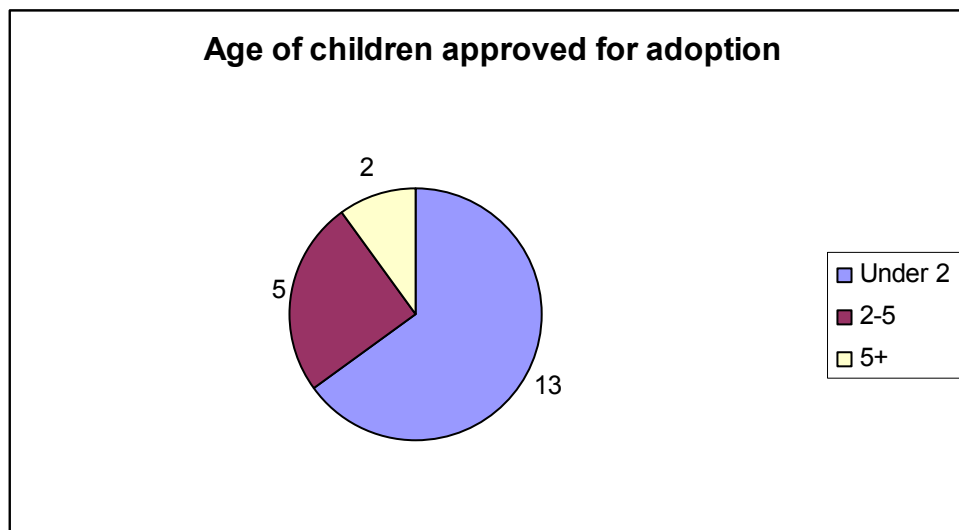
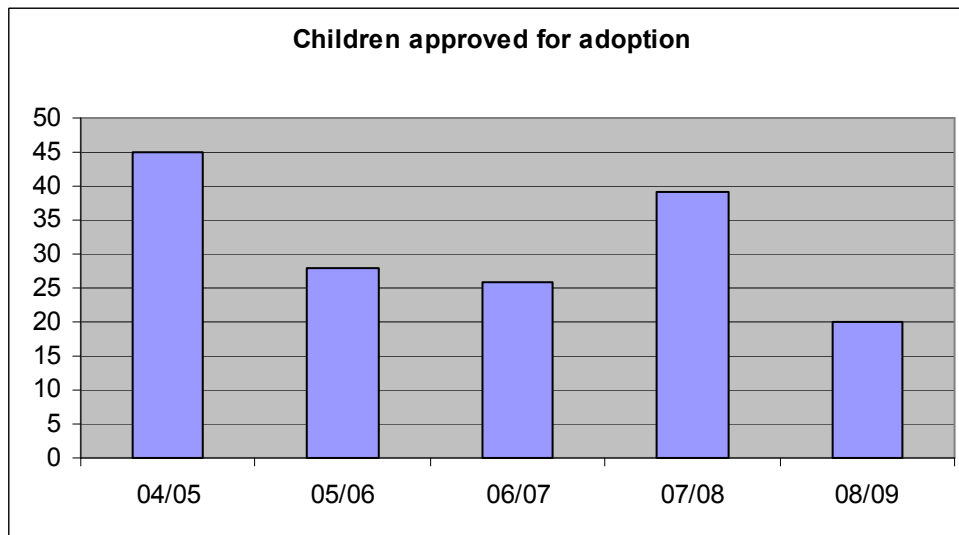
Considerable work was undertaken to prepare for the inspection in order to complete all the pre inspection documents and supply all the supporting evidence. Two inspectors were based in the service for one week alongside the Ofsted inspectors for the fostering service and had a very full programme of meeting managers and staff from the Adoption & Permanence service and managers from the area teams, the Medical Advisor, Agency Decision maker and lead elected member, adopters, birth parents and adopted adults. They attended support groups for adopters as well as visiting adoptive families in their own home and attending the Adoption & Permanence Panel. They also read a number of case files and policies and practice guidance.

The outcome of the inspection was very positive with the service being judged overall as 'good' with 'outstanding' for promotion of equality and diversity. The inspection report is very detailed and profiles the comprehensive range of work undertaken by the service making particular comment on a number of areas of excellent practice. The one statutory requirement and good practice recommendation from the inspection report related to the need for the social worker for the child to always prepare a later life letter and life story book for the child that explains the child's history and decision making about the plan for adoption. Further training and operational guidance is being provided for area social work staff on this issue. It is acknowledged that it is essential for adopted children and their new families to have life story books and later life letters with full information but this can be a time consuming and potentially complex piece of work if it is to be undertaken thoroughly. It is also a task that needs to be managed with sensitivity and some information about birth family can only be gathered after adoption has been agreed as the plan. It is clear that area Service Managers are very committed to ensuring this task is undertaken in a timely way but it can prove difficult for this task to be prioritised alongside the demands of child protection and other care proceedings work within very busy area teams.

4. Adoption Agency Activity 2008/9

Children approved for adoption

Twenty children were identified as needing to be placed for adoption in 2008/9. In addition concurrent care plans were endorsed at panel in respect of five children. This is a decrease in numbers of children that were subject to a plan for adoption in 07/08 [39 children] although the figures for 07/08 included a particularly high number of sibling groups. There were 2 additional children that Panel considered adoption plans for in 2008/9 in both cases the plan was not able to go ahead at that stage because of the need to consider more fully the potential of wider family members. That work was undertaken in respect of those children and plans for adoption have been agreed at Panel since April 2009.

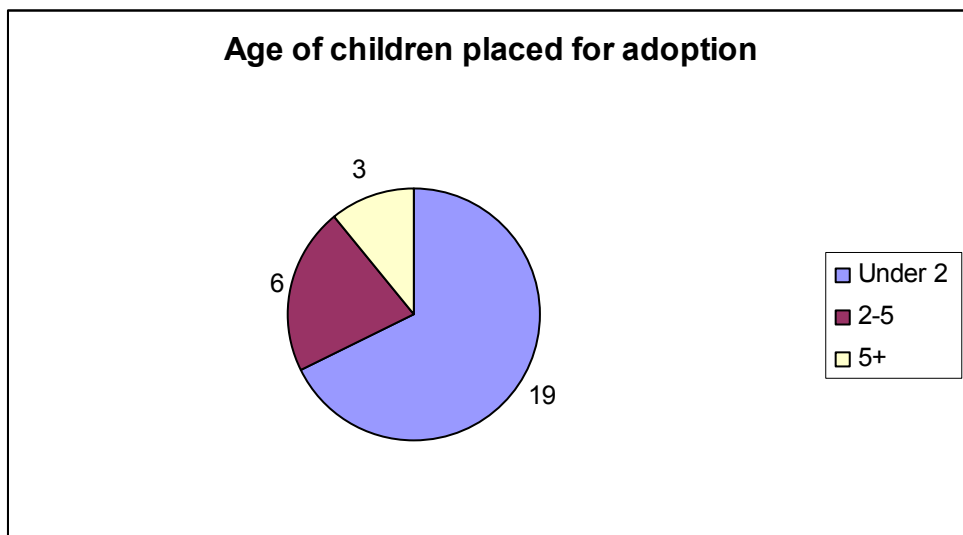
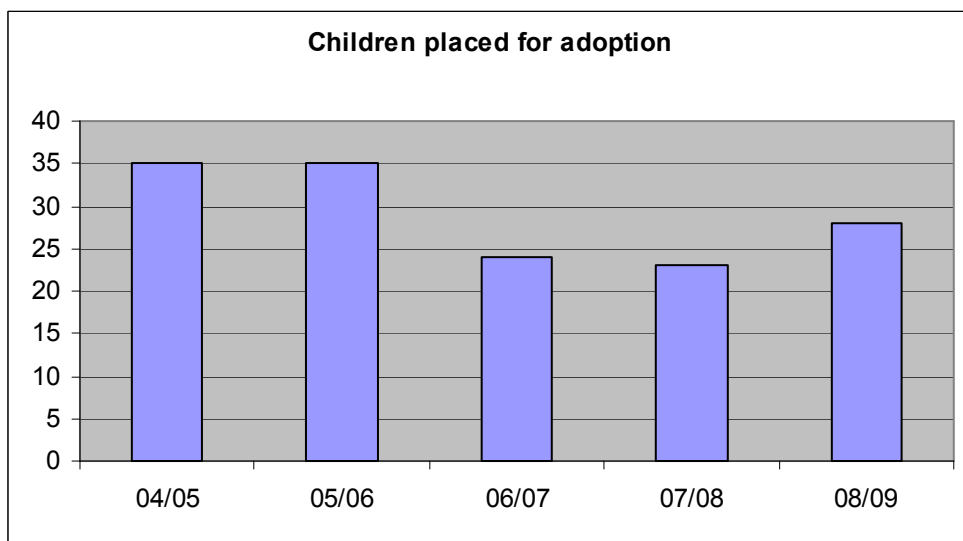


As of end March 2009 there were 14 children approved and waiting for an adoptive placement. Nine of these children have been waiting less than 6 months and are still on track to be placed within this target time. This reflects the fact that in 2007/8 there were a high proportion of children that came to

panel with a plan for adoption towards the end of the year. Of the 5 children that have been waiting longer than 6 months 4 are black or minority ethnic children and one is a child with a disability. This reflects the national shortage of appropriate adopters for black and minority ethnic children and the increased difficulty in finding adopters for children with a significant disability or for larger sibling groups.

Profile of Children placed for adoption

There were 28 children placed within prospective adopters during the year, 16 boys and 12 girls. This represents 9.9% of the population of children who at 31st March 2008 had been looked after for 6 months or more. [Denominator 284]



Twenty two of the children placed with adopters were White English, of the remaining 1 was White English/Chinese, 1 White English/Black Jamaican, 1 Black Nigerian, 1 White English/Black African/American and 2 Black Jamaican.

Fifteen of the children placed were with in house adopters, eight with consortium adopters and five with adopters from another adoption agency.

Seventeen children were single placements; there were 4 sibling groups of 2 children and 1 sibling group of 3 children. There were no children placed apart from their siblings where the care plan had been for them to be placed together.

There were 13 children in care adopted during the year and 6 children in care that went on to be subject to a Special Guardianship Order. This represents 6.7% of the population of children in care for 6 months or more. The lower number of adoption orders in 2008/9 reflect the lower number of adoptive matches made the previous year plus delays in some legal applications with birth parents being given leave to oppose the adoption plan. It is anticipated that as the number of adoptive matches have increased again in 2008/9 the numbers of adoption orders will rise again next year.

Profile of adopters

The number of prospective adopters approved during the year was 17 including 5 concurrent carers [carers approved as both foster carers and adopters]. This is a decrease from last year [20 new approvals] and represents a decision to continue to focus recruitment on adopters for older children, BME children, sibling groups and children with special needs as well as adopters living outside the city.

All the adopters approved in 2008/9 were White/British. The service has continued to profile the need for more BME adopters and it is encouraging that the recruitment events that have taken place over the last 2 years have included more BME prospective applicants. Assessments are currently underway in relation to 4 BME applicants.

At 31st March 2009 there were 12 approved adoptive families [including 5 concurrent carers] approved and still waiting to be matched with a suitable child or children.

It is of note that in 2008/9 there was an increase in the number of adoptive families approved that wished to be considered for a sibling group. A number of the approved adopters were in discussion about potential plans to consider a match either with a Brighton and Hove child or a child from another authority.

During 2008/9 there were 5 children from other local authorities were placed with Brighton and Hove adopters.

Step parent adoptions

There have been 14 step parent adoptions completed in 2008/9 with a further 7 in the process of assessment as of 31st March 2009. This represents a slight increase from last years figures [12 step parent adoptions completed].

5. National Adoption Standards Timescales

The adoption agency is required to monitor its performance against a range of timescales. The timescales relate to the decision to place a child for adoption, assessing and approving prospective adopters and the proposal to place a child with particular adopters.

Of the 28 children placed with prospective adopters 18 were placed within the required timescales of the decision being made that they should be placed for adoption. Of the 10 children that were not placed within 6 months from the approval of the plan for adoption 9 of these were children where it is difficult to identify a placement due to few available adopters [4 BME children, 2 sets of older siblings and 1 child with a disability]. The 10th child was placed within 7 months and the delay was due to having to place out of area and the additional time that can often be involved in making placements with adoption agencies at some distance from Brighton and Hove.

All agency decisions and notifications were made within the required timescale.

All of the 20 children identified as needing to be placed for adoption had a permanence plan agreed at the 4 month LAC review [some of which included adoption as part of a concurrent or twin track care plan] and 80% [16 children] were presented to panel within the 2 month timescale, 3 children were presented within 4 months and 1 children within 6 months. The delay in coming to panel often reflects the fact that adoption is part of parallel planning process and could not be presented to panel until the alternative care plan had been ruled out.

The agency met the timescales of all applicants in relation to the sending out of written information and inviting prospective adopters to an information session. Of the adopter assessments, 8 [47%] were completed within the required 8 month period. Of the remaining 4 took 9 months, 3 took 11 months 1 took 12 months and 1 took 13 months. The delay in progressing these assessments resulted either from specific life events within the prospective adopter household or decisions being made to halt the assessment for a period or the assessments taking longer to ensure that the applicants were fully prepared for the adoption task.

6. The Adoption Consortium

The South East Adoption Consortium comprises Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Kent, Bromley, Bexley and Medway. The consortium aims to maximise placement choice for children and to minimise delay in family finding across the consortium authorities by sharing prospective adopters.

The quarterly management meetings attended by the Service Manager are used to clarify and develop policy and practice issues across the consortium.

This year particular focus has been given to the introduction of the new format for prospective adopter assessment reports, preparation and feedback on inspection issues and recruitment policy and practice.

An Independent Review was undertaken of the Consortium during the year and various recommendations made, including the development of a consortium administrator post and consortium website to improve the sharing of details of approved prospective adopters and children waiting for adoption. These proposals have been considered for some time within the consortium but agreement to funding to date not been secured across all agencies so no progress has been made in either developing a consortium website or administrator.

There have been 3 Consortium Practitioners meetings during the year with a variety of topics being covered including Attachment in Adoption, Assessing Loss in Adoption, and Communication in Adoption. There have also been 2 Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) meetings during the year. These meetings considered issues around therapy for children, respite care for adoptive families and financial support. There have been staff changes across the consortium ASSA posts, with new staff in place it is hoped that the meetings will revert to quarterly as they are a useful mechanism for addressing variation in adoption support provision across the consortium.

7. Recruitment & Preparation

The Adoption and Permanence Service received 208 enquiries to the duty service throughout the year which is a slight increase from last year. Two information sessions attended by 115 people [53 households] were held throughout the year including another very successful information day that was held as part of National Adoption week in November 08. These events receive considerable support from Brighton & Hove's experienced adopters who attend to ensure that all prospective adopters have the opportunity for individual discussion not only with a member of staff but also with experienced adopters. Three preparation groups were held during the year attended by 22 households.

The recruitment strategy for the service is reviewed annually and is based on the profile of the children in care in Brighton & Hove that need to be placed for adoption and also takes account of the number of approved adopters waiting for a placement. Most enquiries are from adopters that are interested in adopting a child under 2 years. The recruitment strategy for 2008/9 details the fact that priority is given to BME applicants, prospective adopters from outside of the Brighton and Hove area, or applicants that are interested in sibling groups and children over 3 years. The decision to prioritise the need for adopters from outside of the city reflects the fact that there are already a number of locally based approved adopters and it sometimes a requirement as part of the child's matching needs to find a placement away from the local family network.

The service does endeavour to seize the opportunity to maintain a strong profile locally and nationally on adoption related issues. A social worker within the service contributed to a BAAF feature in their magazine Be My Parent which focused on gay and lesbian adopters. She profiled practice in Brighton & Hove in relation to recruitment, assessment and support of gay and lesbian adopters. This was followed up by a presentation by the Head of Service in May 09 at a BAAF conference on the same issue. Statistics on practice in Brighton and Hove indicated that the proportion of approved gay and lesbian adopters has been between 15-20% over the last 5 years which reflects the profile of the population locally.

The Recruitment and Publicity Officer for BME foster carers and adopters has continued to profile the work of the service. She has placed advertisements in a number of different publications and made contact with key local BME and faith groups and ensures the service has stalls at events like Black History Month and International Women's Day.

In March 2009 the Fostering & Adoption service launched their updated and refreshed website [www.adoptioninbrightonandhove.org.uk]. Priority will continue to be given to keeping the website up to date with comprehensive information for prospective and approved adopters reflecting the fact that most applicants now prefer to research information on line before making direct contact with an agency.

Inter country adoption

Since 2005 Brighton & Hove has had a contract with Parents and Children Together [PACT], a voluntary adoption agency, to undertake the preparation, assessment and approval of inter country adopters. PACT has considerable specialist experience in this area of work and provides a dedicated service to people from Brighton & Hove that wish to adopt from abroad.

During 2008/9 PACT sent out 16 information packs to prospective adopters and carried out 4 initial interviews. They received 2 applications and 2 adopter households were approved as inter country adopters.

8. Concurrency

The Concurrency team has been in place and part of the service since 1999 with the aim of promoting early permanence planning for young children who are either in or at risk of entry into the care system. The service has undertaken pioneering work in this field being the first local authority to establish such a dedicated team. The team recruits carers who are prepared to be foster carers and adopters. This enables a child, 0-2 years, to be placed with one set of carers throughout the assessment and court process. If the child cannot return to the birth family, the carers are then able to provide permanence to that child via adoption.

The team has worked proactively with birth parents during the pre-birth stage to undertake assessments to expedite planning for babies. During 2008/9 the

team undertook the lead role in 13 pre birth assessments and collaborated with area based staff on a number of other pre birth assessments which resulted in a concurrent care plan for 5 children being presented to and recommended by the Adoption & Permanence Panel. Only 2 of these 5 children were subsequently placed with concurrent carers as a result of the court agreeing the local authority care plan for concurrency. A further 2 of these 5 remained separated from their birth parents in foster care and rehabilitation work to birth family was not successful and a plan for adoption later agreed in court. A further child was placed concurrently during 2008/9 where the care plan for concurrency had been agreed in 2007/8. Only three concurrent placements were made during the year which is a significant drop in concurrency activity and has contributed to the review of the work of the team.

There has been careful consideration of the future of the concurrency team within Brighton and Hove. The team has traditionally worked very closely with area fieldwork colleagues particularly staff within the social work team at the Royal Alexander Children's Hospital that have lead responsibility for undertaking pre birth assessments in relation to vulnerable families where the unborn children are potentially at risk of a child protection plan or care proceedings at birth. The pre birth strategy group has been the forum for these referrals to be discussed and for decisions made about appropriate pre birth referrals for the concurrency team to take a lead on.

The reduction in the number of concurrent care plans being agreed at court and a decision made by a number of staff in the team to move on to other posts triggered the decision to review the way that the CYPT provides concurrent planning. There remains a commitment to ensuring that this placement option is still available for vulnerable babies as appropriate and this fits with DCSF support within Care Matters for concurrent planning as a key placement option for a small number of children in care. The Adoption and Permanence service will continue to recruit, assess and support concurrent carers. However the responsibility for the assessment work with the birth families for children placed concurrently will remain with the area teams. It is hoped that when the CYPT has had full opportunity to consider how to deliver an early permanence service concurrent planning will continue to be one of the care planning options available to ensure there is no drift in achieving permanence for the most vulnerable babies in the care system.

9. Adoption Support Services

Since the implementation of the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 there has been a legal duty on the local authority to provide adoption support services to both adoptive families, adopted children and birth families. This remains an area of considerable growth and pressure within the Service.

All staff within the Adoption and Permanence team are involved in some way with adoption support work and this experience in turn informs their practice in terms of preparing and assessing prospective adopters for the challenges that

might lie ahead. Adopters are asked to assist with preparation groups and recruitment events and their perspective is particularly valued by those about to embark on the adoption journey. Whenever possible staff will also informally link adopters with one another if they have issues in common. Often these links lead to longstanding and supportive relationships between families.

The Adoption Support Services Advisor is often the first port of call for adopters who may have enquiries about services available to their family. This may lead to an adoption support assessment or could be a one off call for advice or 'signposting' to other services.

The service is currently working intensively with over 50 adoptive families and many of the children have complex needs necessitating a multi agency approach. The adoption support teacher works on average with 15 adopted children that have particular support needs in school related to their attachment difficulties and the impact this has on their capacity to learn and manage the demands of the school environment. She works with an identified key worker in school for each of these children and additionally offers training and support through groups and within schools.

Post Adoption Centre

Brighton and Hove City Council continues to have a service level agreement with the Post Adoption Centre [PAC] to provide a helpline, monthly surgeries and time limited direct work with adopters, prospective adopters, adopted adults and birth families. The service was continued to be very well used during 2008/9.

Support groups

The service runs three support groups for adopters and a parent and toddler group. The service also links in with 2 other support groups that are now self running, they are the lesbian and gay carers and adopters group and the concurrent adopters group.

A newsletter is produced for adopters, which provides advice on a range of topics as well as signposting other relevant training events. The service has also continued to run two very successful social events for adoptive families each year which provides an excellent opportunity for families to network and for the children to spend time together. A new development in the year has been a group for older adopted children. This group was proposed by young people that took part in the work last year to evaluate their views about direct contact with their birth parents and has been a successful extension of adoption support services to young people.

The service also pays for the first year's membership to Adoption UK for newly approved adopters.

Post Adoption Contact

Almost all children now being placed for adoption retain some form of contact with their birth families and the Adoption & Children Act 2002 emphasises the importance of supporting such arrangements.

This area of work continues to be a significant pressure for the service and one which merits a high level of input as contact if managed well can be a key factor in the success of the placement and the emotional well being of the adopted child. It is also clear that arrangements for contact have to be kept under review and may need to change and adapt as the child gets older or if there are significant changes within the birth family network. Staff within the service are involved in providing a high level of consultation and support to area social work staff in considering the adoption support plans for children. This can frequently involve the preparation of statements and giving evidence at final hearings in relation to contact plans.

The Practice Managers in the service also provided a training event in the year for area practice and service managers and lawyers on research and experience of post adoption contact and staff within the service that had undertaken research with young people involved in direct contact arrangements gave a presentation to the local legal community and Guardians on their findings.

There are over 200 letterbox contact arrangements in place. The letter box coordinator provides counselling, advice and support to all those involved in this indirect contact between adopted children and their birth families. She also provides intensive support to a number of birth family members in order to maintain effective contact for the child. Providing this service enables birth parents to have some support with managing and adjusting to their lives without their birth children. The service works closely with colleagues in adults services including the learning disability and mental health services to raise the understanding of adoption issues in relation to parents of adopted children that may be accessing these services.

The service is also working with 40 plus adoptive families where direct contact arrangements with birth families are in place. Again if these arrangements are to work successfully for all the parties but particularly the child there needs to be good planning and preparation as well as support during and after the contact. Many of the children involved in direct contact may be having contact with a number of different birth family members including siblings and grandparents so the arrangements can be complex.

Work with birth families of adopted adults

The ACA 2002 brought with it an opportunity for the birth relatives of adopted adults to request an intermediary service, which would trace the adoptee and seek their views on contact. Only agencies that are specifically registered to carry out this work may do so and the Adoption and Permanence team

continue not to have sufficient resources to offer this service. Any birth relative who requests an intermediary service is provided with support and advice and given the details of intermediary services.

Although Brighton and Hove do not provide an intermediary service there is a legal obligation on the agency to provide information to Intermediary Agencies if Brighton and Hove City Council hold the adoption records. The service pays an annual subscription to NORCAP, a voluntary organisation which helps adults affected by adoption, this enables Brighton and Hove residents to obtain a reduction in the membership fee and access NORCAP's professional advice line.

Birth family members have a legal right to receive counselling regarding the proposal to place their child for adoption and to receive this service from a social work practitioner who is not involved in their child's care or the adoption services. Leaflets are produced about this service, which are provided to birth parents when adoption is agreed as a potential plan at the Children in Care review and also again when it is agreed at Panel. The worker running this Birth Parent Support and Information service endeavours to be proactive in following up families that have been referred to the service.

The take up of this service remains low as this to a large extent reflects the fact that birth families are often still in dispute with the local authority about the plans for adoption at the time they are referred. Birth families are provided with details of agencies other than the local authority who can offer support but experience suggests that some birth family members only feel able to take up this type of support sometimes years after the adoption has concluded.

Birth Records Counselling

The local authority has a legal responsibility to provide a birth records counselling service. There were 40 active birth records cases at end of March 2008 with a waiting time of between 3 – 6 months for this service. A senior social worker within the team also takes a lead role in providing a duty service in relation to enquiries from adopted adults. There has begun to be a change in the nature of this work as more young adults placed for adoption as a result of child protection concerns ask for access to their adoption and care records. This has significant implications for workloads as counselling these young people who have been abused or neglected and who may want some form of contact with their birth family is very skilled and sensitive work. As an adoption agency we are also required to provide information from adoption files for other local authorities offering birth records counselling or intermediary work with birth relatives.

Adoption Allowances

Expenditure on Adoption Allowances during 2008/9 was £617,812 which includes regular adoption allowance payments in relation to 80 children. There are also a number of one off payments made for example towards the costs of introductions and settling in expenses. There are a number of very complex

adoptive placements which require considerable ongoing support including at times funding of therapeutic services. It is likely that there will continue to be pressures on this budget with the higher numbers of children coming through with a plan for adoption and the significant special needs of some of the children that the service is currently family finding for.

9. Family and Friends Team

The work of the Family and Friends team has continued to expand in line with the priority within the CYPT to ensure services are directed at supporting children to remain out of the care system or to move from the care system to permanence within their wider family network if possible. The introduction of Special Guardianship at the end of 2005 to provide permanence for children where adoption was not appropriate, has also continued to be used in a number of family and friends foster placements where the carers are able to provide permanence to that child. Special Guardianship brings with it responsibilities to provide support services to the families in line with those provided to adoptive families.

During 2008/9 the team undertook 29 assessments for court and or for panel. The high increase in the numbers of children coming into the care system in the early part of 2009 has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of referrals to the team. The area teams conduct viability assessments or interim assessments after an emergency placement with a kinship carer and make a referral through to the team either when a positive viability assessment has been completed or when the initial assessment of a family and friends carer has received approval on an interim basis at panel.

There has been a significant rise in the use of independent social workers to undertake family and friend's assessments in the last year with this trend continuing through 2009. This does reflect the high volume of work in the area teams and significant increase in the children in care population plus the limited size of the family and friends team. It had always been the case that independent social workers were used if the potential placement with a kinship carer was at some distance from Brighton and Hove however they are now being used to assess many carers locally. Some of these decisions are court driven with requests for assessments to be conducted within very short timescales. Whilst it is important that there is no drift in the planning for children it is also important that sufficient time is given to the assessment of potential family and friends' carers for children as they may be making a permanent commitment to a child that they have a limited previous relationship with. Within the CYPT it will be necessary to monitor the use of independent social workers in respect of these assessments to ensure value for money issues including quality assurance mechanisms are considered when these assessments are commissioned.

The Family and Friends team work actively with area colleagues and undertake the supervision of Family and Friends foster carers and contribute

to the permanence planning in relation to plans for Special Guardianship, Residence Order or even on some occasions Adoption. Support needs can be high as these carers do not have the opportunity for the in depth preparation training and assessment provided to stranger carers. Family and friends carers are also more likely to be older and on a lower income and may need considerable support with for example managing contact issues and divided loyalties within the family in order to provide a placement for a child. In a significant number of situations additional financial support has had to be provided to support accommodation or other needs.

Once approved as foster carers family and friends carers have access to the same range of support services and training programmes as other carers. In addition the team provides specific training workshops plus a regular support group, advice service and newsletter. Once carers have gone on to Special Guardianship or Residence Order the team can remain involved providing some specific support as required or responding to particular requests for advice relating to for example housing, finance or the emotional and behavioural issues of the child in placement.

There remains a wide age span of children and young people being placed with family and friends carers including babies as well as older teenagers in care that have found placements for themselves within the wider family or friendship network.

Family and Friends care remains a complex area and one which has involved a high level of practice development. The service has revised all the assessment tools used by the area teams and the family and friends teams. Most of the assessments required involve children that are subject to care proceedings but there are also increasing numbers of requests for assessments of carers that may have a child placed with them as part of a voluntary agreement with the parents and the child may be deemed as either a child in care or a child in need and provided with services accordingly.

10. Adoption & Permanence Panel

It is the responsibility of the service to ensure the effective running of the Panels and the Agency Advisor manages the panel administration team and takes a lead in the recruitment of panel members. Panel contributes significantly to the positive work of the CYPT in planning for children and providing a key quality assurance role.

There has been a significant increase in the workload of panel over the last year. This in part reflects a change in practice for all adoption panels following a judicial review [re B] which determined that panel members should read all the expert reports in proceedings or a summary of such reports if available. This has increased significantly the workload of panel members. There has also been very high demand for panel time which relates to the high number of family and friends assessments which if a placement is made in an

emergency may need to return to panel on a number of occasions whilst the assessment is progressing.

There was a change in the independent chair of panel with Sarah Borthwick being appointed and taking up this role in January 2009. Gill Harris was the previous chair and had to leave Brighton and Hove in December 2008 as her tenure as chair came to an end. Gill Harris was an excellent chair of panel and contributed greatly to the very effective performance of panel which has been commented on very positively in both inspections of the service. The CYPT was very pleased to be able to appoint Sarah Borthwick as her replacement, she is not only a very experienced chair of panel but has national reputation within the adoption and fostering field as a trainer, consultant and author of a number of publications on aspects of family placement work. A report on the activity of the adoption and permanence panel is appended to this report.

11. Disruptions

During 08-09 there was one disruption meeting held in respect of a placement of a child with prospective adopters that ended within a few weeks of placement. That child returned to the foster carers and has now been placed with a further set of adopters. There have been no other disruptions of adoptive placements pre adoption hearing.

Responsibility for chairing disruption meetings is with the Independent Reviewing Officer's team [IROs] and in the past they have also chaired disruption meetings in relation to children that had been placed in long term fostering placements. The IRO team has been under considerable pressure given the rise in children subject to a child protection plan as well as the significant rise of children in care. It has therefore been decided as an interim measure that the IRO team will no longer chair disruption meetings so it is not possible to give a full report on disruption activity and any practice issues stemming from such disruptions.

12. Complaints

There has been one stage 1 complaint during the year made by an employer of an adoptive applicant who felt that his confidentiality had been potentially breached when contacted for a reference. There were no complaints received by the Adoption service in 2007/8. Complaints in relation to foster carers are reported on in the annual fostering report.

13. Strategic issues and forward plans

The Adoption and Permanence service like all parts of the CYPT that provide services to children in care have been affected by the significant rise in the

children in care population since December 2008. In the six months prior to December the numbers of children in care [excluding short breaks] were on average 374. However from Jan 2009 – June 2009 the average rose to 409 but with a significant upturn in May and June rising to a high of 444 in July. The impact for the service to date has been an increase in the numbers of children being referred to the service for permanent plans and a significant rise in the numbers of referrals to the family and friends team. It is also the case that when the area teams are under such significant pressure the service has a greater role to play in supporting area colleagues with practice issues.

Staff within the adoption and permanence service will be providing training to the area teams on permanence planning, life story work and child's permanence reports and disseminating research and experience on the role of contact post adoption within the next year.

The area of family and friends care remains a complex area of practice and considerable work has been undertaken in the year to revise and develop the formats for the assessment reports. Work will continue in 09/10 on the revision of operational instructions and the development of more guidance in this area of practice for social workers and training for area Practice Managers. These placements can often be made in an emergency and it is essential that full consideration is given to the needs of the child and capacity of the carers to meet those needs and provide a permanent and stable placement if those placements progress beyond the very short term. It will also be necessary within the CYPT to review the cost of the use of Independent Social workers for these assessments to ensure value for money is being achieved.

A significant feature of the work of the service is the preparation of and the ongoing support to adopters to meet the needs of the children that need to be placed for adoption. Particularly during the last year there has been an increasing number of babies and children to be placed for adoption that have complex needs including a diagnosis of or concerns that they may be at risk of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. This disorder is an umbrella term for conditions that relate to prenatal exposure to alcohol. There is increasing awareness about the very serious effects on the development of the baby through such exposure in the womb to alcohol and there are plans within the Trust to broaden awareness of this spectrum disorder.

The service will continue to review the recruitment strategy and ensure that it reflects the profile of children that need to be placed for adoption. With consortium colleagues the service will maintain a profile on the need to recruit more BME adopters and adopters for sibling groups and children with complex needs. There will continue to be a focus on the need to have sufficient numbers of adopters for children outside of Brighton & Hove. These priorities reflect the profile of children coming through for adoption and the current profile of approved adopters.

The service will work actively with colleagues from area teams and other professionals involved in pre birth work and early permanence planning to develop an early permanence strategy in relation to children in care for the CYPT. It is essential that work is focused on these most vulnerable babies to ensure that parents are given focused and timely support to enable them to care for their babies if at all possible but if that cannot be achieved within the appropriate timescales for babies then they need the opportunity for a stable and settled family life that can meet their needs into adulthood and beyond either within their wider family or with adoptive parents.

Sharon Donnelly
Head of Service, Fostering & Adoption
September 2009

Appendix 1

BRIGHTON & HOVE ADOPTION & PERMANENCE PANEL ANNUAL REPORT 2008 – 2009 (1 January – 31 March 2009)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report briefly summarises the new Independent Chair's experience of the panel's work and functioning over the last quarter of the year. It is the first report provided by the new Chair who took up the role in January 2009. This followed the departure of the previous Chair, Gill Harris in December 2008.
- 1.2 Gill Harris was an experienced and committed Chair of the panel and was held in high esteem by panel members and staff within the Trust.
- 1.3 The new Independent Chair is Sarah Borthwick who brings a range of experience and knowledge to her role on the Adoption and Permanence Panel. She is an experienced Chair of adoption and fostering panels for a number of Local Authorities. She worked for British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) in London for many years and was a County Adoption Manager for a Local Authority. Sarah has co-authored a number of publications for BAAF.

2. Composition of the Panel

- 2.1 There have been changes to the composition of the panel over the year and these are covered in the main report.
- 2.2 The panel membership as at 31.3.09 was:
 - Sarah Borthwick, Independent Chair
 - Dr. Sian Bennett, Medical Adviser and Vice Chair
 - Councillor Juliet McCaffery, Brighton & Hove elected member
 - Chris Thornton, independent member, foster carer
 - Denise Charlton, independent member, adopted person
 - Juni Parkhurst, independent member, adopted person, ex foster carer
 - Sharon Donnelly, Brighton & Hove council officer, fostering and adoption
 - Carl Campbell, Brighton & Hove council officer, childcare, fieldwork
 - Jacqueline Coe, Brighton & Hove council officer, education
 - Sophie Heiser, independent member, adopter
- 2.3 Brighton & Hove continues to pay a fee for independent members to attend. The amount paid may need to be reviewed over the next year.

2.4 The role of Legal Adviser to the panel has been provided during this period by Hilary Priestley, Sandra O'Brien and Natasha Watson.

2.5 The Agency Adviser to the panel has continued to be covered by Graham Whitaker, Fostering Agency Adviser. A permanent Agency Adviser has now been successfully appointed with the new postholder, Michael Wilson, starting in April 09.

2.6 Wendy Kenyon and Jess Freegard have shared the role of panel administrator over this last quarter.

3. Work of the Panel

3.1 The panel continues to meet on a two weekly basis. From January to March 2009, it met on 6 occasions. 5 of these meetings involved the panel making recommendations regarding children and families and all were full days.

3.2 The meeting of 28/01/09 was used as a full day's training for panel and staff on the assessment of infertility and loss in adoption. The training was provided by Maggie Rogers through the Post Adoption Centre and it was an opportunity for panel members and staff within the Adoption and Permanence Team to explore relevant issues together.

3.3 Please see the main report for full details of panel activity throughout the year. During this last quarter, the panel made **29** recommendations on a wide range of matters and advised that **6** Placement Orders should be sought. It deferred items on two occasions for further information to be provided.

3.5 The Agency Decision Maker endorsed all of the panel's recommendations during this period.

3.6 The panel can also be used to offer consultation and guidance in respect of problematic cases before a formal presentation. It was not asked to do this during the last quarter.

3.7 It is too early to make much comment on the significance of the above figures as the reporting period is very brief. Initial impressions of the Chair and panel members though are that the workload of the panel has been very demanding and complex over this quarter. It is important to note that case law (re B) now requires panel members to read expert reports relating to children either in full or agreed summaries. These are in addition to the reports provided by children's social workers. The Trust has been implementing these requirements over the past few months and clearly this has added to the reading and preparation time undertaken by panel members. It has therefore been a very busy period for all members and workers alike.

4. Functioning of the Panel

4.1 The format and process of the panel meetings remain largely as outlined in previous years' annual reports. The changes previously made in how the panel organizes the discussion of the paperwork and how it formally makes its recommendations have continued. Clearly, however, the appointment of a new Independent Chair has meant an adjustment for everyone including panel members, people attending the panel and the Chair. The previous Chair was in post for a number of years and inevitably a new Chair brings a different personal style.

4.2 It is an impressive and thoughtful panel to work with – the work is undertaken with rigour, seriousness and sensitivity. Panel business is conducted comprehensively and panel members are prepared to challenge and disagree if necessary. All panel members demonstrate a high level of commitment and they contribute to the process, giving very careful consideration to each matter and are respectful of everyone's views. It continues to be a competent and confident panel.

4.3 The attendance of applicants, prospective adopters and foster carers is well established. As stated in last year's report, panel remains very aware of how difficult it can be for them to walk into the panel meeting and therefore continues to make a considerable effort to ensure that they are welcomed and made to feel as relaxed as realistically possible in a formal meeting. Applicants, prospective adopters and foster carers also have information available to them in respect of panel members and the Agency Decision Maker in the waiting room. This is in the process of being updated. A booklet is sent to them about attending panel and discussions are held with their assessing social worker or supervising social worker to prepare them for attending panel. Since March 2009, they are also prepared in advance of coming into the meeting by the Chair who informs them of the areas that panel will be raising with them. The panel has also rearranged the seating within the room in an attempt to help people's participation.

4.4 When there has been information that the panel needed to discuss in confidence with the workers or where there were questions around the assessment or matching process itself rather than in relation to the applicants, prospective adopters or foster carers, then the panel has seen the workers alone.

4.5 All children and young people, where it is thought appropriate due to their age and the circumstances of the match, are able to attend panel if they wish. A booklet is available to them to explain the process as well as discussions with their social worker to prepare them for attending. The panel marks the occasion with a cake or chocolates for the child or young person to take home. This happened on one occasion during the last quarter and seemed to work well.

4.5 Feedback forms are given to all social workers, applicants, prospective adopters, foster carers and young people attending the panel to ensure that

the panel is aware of their experiences and views and any changes that need to be made to the way that panel operates. Panel looks at this feedback in general twice a year. However, specific feedback which requires action is presented to panel by the agency adviser when it is received.

4.6 The panel has continued to receive feedback forms from applicants, prospective adopters and foster carers.

4.7 The feedback has been positive over the last quarter about how the panel functions and panel process. As in last year's report, the main concerns expressed by applicants, prospective adopters and foster carers attending continues to be the number of people on panel and how overwhelming this can feel on walking into the room. However, they also indicate that they value being included as fully as possible in the panel process and many have commented that they felt welcomed, listened to and encouraged.

4.8 There were no written responses from social workers over the last quarter and this appears to have been the case over the year. From the previous year's report, informal feedback would suggest that this is as a result of social workers feeling satisfied with the panel process and the way they are treated when attending to present their cases.

4.9 The panel continues to have the opportunity to meet with the service manager and practice managers from the Adoption and Permanence team when appropriate to discuss issues in the service and to enable panel members to keep up to date with developments. Panel members were able to do this during the joint training event in January 2009. The panel also meets twice a year with the Agency Decision Maker. Panel members value this opportunity for discussion and consider it contributes to open and effective communication with the agency. The panel did not meet with the Agency Decision Maker in the last quarter.

4.10 The Chair continues to complete a feedback form for the Agency Decision Maker on every case presented to the panel. This arrangement continues to work well and be of value.

5. Panel Terms of Reference

5.1 The constitution and terms of reference for the panel continues to meet the requirements of the Adoption Regulations and of the Fostering Regulations and Minimum Fostering Standards.

6. Practice

6.1 In general the work presented to panel has been of a good standard over the last quarter of the year. However panel members have commented that, in their experience, the standard of reports provided about children can be variable on occasion. Now that a permanent Agency Adviser has been

appointed, the standard of reports can be better monitored but it will be important for the agency as a whole to ensure that high standards continue to be expected and staff appropriately supported in assessing and planning for permanence for children.

6.2 As in the previous year's report, the Family and Friends cases are challenging for panel both in respect of the nature of the cases and the paperwork. From experience in these three months, the information provided in these reports can be uneven but it has improved according to panel members. It is very difficult to achieve good information in 6 weeks and present it to panel as required by the Regulations. The Family Rights Group (FRG) report format which is used for the initial assessments has been amended by Brighton & Hove and the current format is clearer. Helpful guidelines are provided to workers.

6.3 Brighton and Hove have started using the new format for assessing prospective adopters published by BAAF. With BAAF's agreement, Brighton & Hove have customised the Prospective Adopter's Report (PAR) to ensure that rigorous assessments continue to be undertaken. It will be useful for panel members and the Permanence Team to look at how the new format is working over the next year. Panel members continue to be impressed by the quality and thoroughness of the reports provided.

6.4 As stated earlier in this report, panel members are now required to read all expert reports (either in full or agreed summaries) that relate to children and families. It has been rare that an agreed summary has been available and so panel members have tended to read full reports. This has added considerably to the workload for panel members.

6.5 In general, the quality of adoption and permanence work and care planning for children has remained good in the last quarter and there has been evidence of excellent practice in a number of cases.

7. Conclusion

7.1 In general the organisation and functioning of the panel works well in Brighton & Hove. It will continue to develop its practice and work over the next year.

7.2 The panel continues to play a very significant role in ensuring the provision of a quality adoption and permanence service to children.

Sarah Borthwick
Independent Chair, Brighton & Hove Adoption and Permanence Panel, June 2009