



Annual Adoption and Permanence Report

2010-2011

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1. Introduction

The report will provide detail of the adoption and permanence work undertaken within Children & Families from April 2010-March 2011, including information on adoption activity and compliance with the national adoption standards. The Fostering and Adoption service contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people in the city in line with the priorities outlined in the Brighton & Hove City Council's Children and Young People's Plan 2009-12 that was agreed with partners and with children and young people themselves through their consultative forums.

A child's welfare is of paramount consideration and the adoption and permanence activity is part of the critical pathway of work with vulnerable families. A key priority of the work within Children & Families 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 such as special guardianship or through a permanent foster placement.

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 full revision of the statutory adoption guidance was issued by the Department for Education in February 2011. Statutory guidance does not have the full force of statute but should be complied with unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons which justify a variation. There was also a further amendment to adoption regulations that came into force from April 2011 which dealt with the regulations governing the constitution of adoption panels. New adoption National Minimum Standards were also published at the end of March 2011 and together with the adoption regulations form the basis of the regulatory framework which governs the conduct of adoption agencies.

There has been considerable national focus on adoption activity as the government has raised concerns about the reduction nationally in children in care being placed for adoption. Since 1999 the number of children adopted from care has increased substantially but these figures have fallen slightly in the last 2 years; in 2009-10 the numbers of children placed for adoption in England fell from 2,700 to 2,300. However the picture is different locally with a sustained increase in adoption activity over the last two years which in part reflects the increased numbers of children in the care system in Brighton & Hove and the profile of our children in care with high numbers of younger children under 5 in care locally. The number of children in care has been relatively stable over the last 12 months, ranging from 468 in May 2010 to 490 in December 2010. However the number of children looked after at 31st March 2010 increased by 17.7% locally from the number at 31 March 2009 compared to a 6% increase nationally. The rate of children looked after per 10,000 children aged under 18 is 99 per 10,000 at March 2010, higher than

the national average (58 per 10,000) and the average for our statistical neighbours (70.2 per 10,000).

A separate 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 comprises the adoption and permanence team and the family and friends team and has retained a very stable and experienced management team.

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. Two part time practice managers have responsibility for the work of the family and friends team. The teams are made up of a number of experienced social work practitioners, social work resource officers and an adoption support teacher. The teams provide a duty service for prospective adopters and for adoptive families and birth parents, kinship carers with special guardianship or residence orders that are not currently receiving a service from the teams. 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 authority as the Adoption Support Services Advisor manages staff that have a dedicated role in providing post adoption support including letterbox and 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 Children & Families in relation to adoption and permanence work.

Staff within the service provide consultation on all aspects of practice relating to permanence planning or family and friends care to the fieldwork social work teams. The services take a lead role in developing policy and practice and ensuring social work staff within Children & Families are kept up to date on key changes to the legal and regulatory framework as well as providing updates on aspects of research work in this area. Occasional training events are also provided for fieldwork social workers and managers and staff also deliver training in relation to adoption and permanence planning issues within the Children & Families core skills training programme.

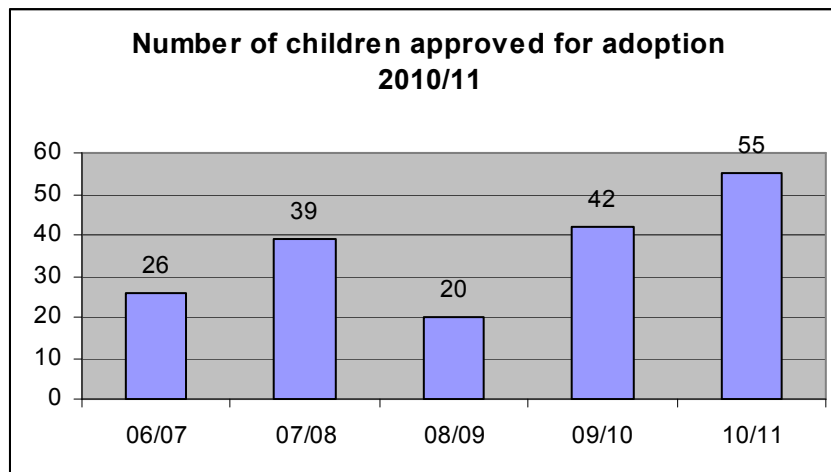
Brighton and Hove continues to be a member of the South East Adoption Consortium and the Service Manager attends the quarterly meetings of the Consortium Managers as well representing Brighton and Hove at the British Agencies of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) quarterly meetings of the South East adoption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

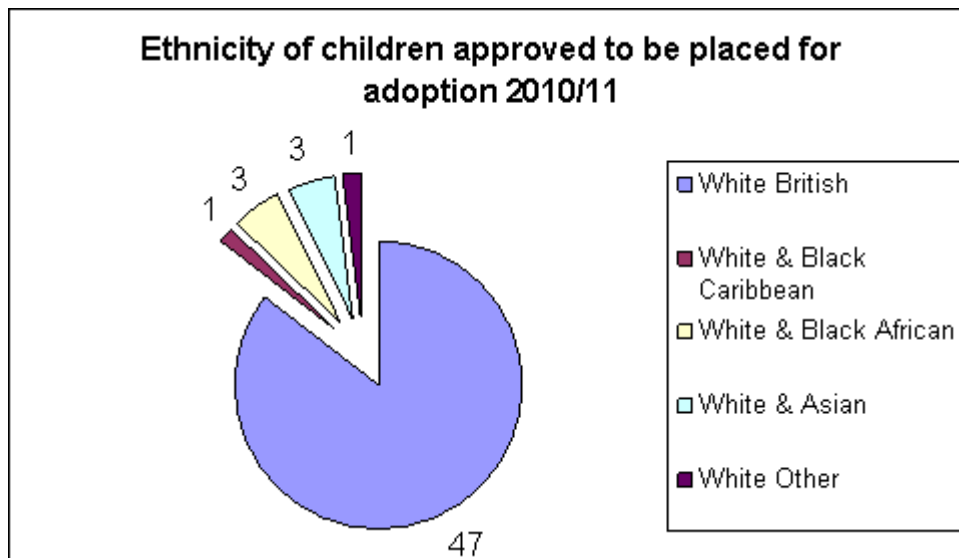
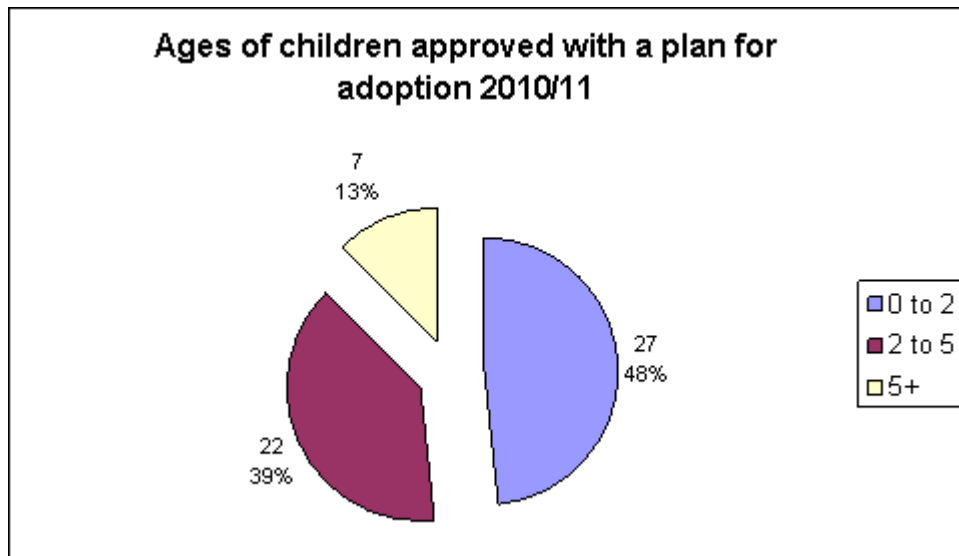
The Adoption service was last inspected along with the Fostering Service by Ofsted in January 2009. The outcome of both of those inspections was very positive with the service being judged overall as 'good' for adoption and 'outstanding' for fostering. It is not anticipated that the service will be inspected again until 2012 as it is a requirement that adoption and fostering services are inspected on a 3 yearly cycle. Aspects of the work of the service were considered as part of the Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in March 2011. Inspectors met with staff from within the service but also groups of foster carers, adopters and family and friends carers. Positive comments were made about the work of the service within the inspection report as a result of these meetings and focus groups.

3. Adoption Agency Activity 2010/11

Children approved for adoption

There were 55 children identified as needing to be placed for adoption in 2010/11. This is a further significant increase from the figures for 2009/10. Panel also considers plans for permanence for children under 9 years through permanent fostering and there were 5 children within the year that were approved at panel with a plan for permanent fostering. Children over 9 years with a plan for permanent fostering have their plans and any subsequent decisions related to permanent fostering placements endorsed via the Children in Care review process. All of the children with a plan for permanent fostering approved via the Panel process were over 5 years and decisions about plans for permanent fostering for children of this age rather than adoption usually reflect their specific special needs or the fact that they are part of a sibling group with older children and the plan is to place the children together.





This cohort of children with plans for adoption in 2010/11 include 4 sibling groups of 2 children, 3 sibling groups of 3 children and 1 sibling group of 4 children. As a general principle the potential for siblings to be placed together is always actively considered. Social workers undertake an assessment of the sibling relationship which is informed by views of other key people involved with the children to determine the care plan for siblings within adoptive placements. The graphs above also give a breakdown in terms of age and ethnicity profile of children with plans for adoption approved within 2010/11.

As of end March 2011 there were 43 children with a plan for adoption approved at panel that were still waiting to be placed with an adoptive family [34 of those children had plans for adoption approved in 2010/11]. Of these 43 children, 6 were still subject to outstanding court proceedings as the plan had been agreed at panel but a Placement Order had not yet been made. It is not possible to advertise these children or expedite placement plans until a Placement Order has been made and this can sometimes be 2 months or

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more following the panel decision. Of the remaining 37 children, 11 children have been linked with prospective adopters with matches booked into panel from April – June 2011, a further 4 children are in placements with carers that are being assessed to provide permanence either through adoption or permanent fostering. There were 22 children that the Adoption & Permanence team were actively family finding for that had not yet been linked to a prospective adoptive family. The reasons for the delay related primarily to the profile of the children; the need to place siblings together, the age of the children or their particular special needs or complexity.

It also has to be acknowledged that the increasing volume of children with plans for adoption is putting considerable strain on all parts of the system including the capacity of the Fostering & Adoption service to allocate a family finding social worker in a timely way, the pressures on panel availability and the need to convene additional panels. There has also been considerable pressure on the Adoption Medical Advisor as there is a requirement that all children have a pre adoption medical prior to their plan for adoption being considered at Panel. The Medical Advisor also meets with prospective adopters prior to panel when a match is being considered to provide adopters with the opportunity to discuss any aspect of the child's development or medical history.

Although the numbers of children in care have now appeared to stabilise the numbers of children with plans for adoption are still rising in part this reflecting the time between children entering the care system and their plan for permanence being determined but also the continued high numbers of children under 5 in the care system. During the first quarter of 2011/12 there have been a further 23 children with plans for adoption approved.

Profile of Children placed for adoption

There were 31 children, 17 boys and 14 girls, matched with adopters during 2010/11 with 26 adopters. The 26 adopters comprised 17 Brighton & Hove approved adopters, 4 adopters from within the South East Adoption Consortium and 5 from other adoption agencies including 2 from a Voluntary adoption agency. Of the 17 Brighton & Hove adopters 6 were formerly the child's foster carers including 2 carers that were approved as concurrent carers. Concurrent carers are approved as foster carers and adoptive parents and children are placed with them on a fostering basis whilst rehabilitation work is undertaken with the birth family. If rehabilitation is not achieved and adoption becomes the plan then the child does not have to move again and the match with their carers would come to panel for approval in the normal way. Of the 31 children placed for adoption there were 5 sibling groups of two.

The lead Practice Manager for family finding for children has responsibility for convening permanence planning meetings or consultation sessions to consider in detail the needs of the child, the preparation work that needs to be undertaken to support that child for a move and the family finding strategy.

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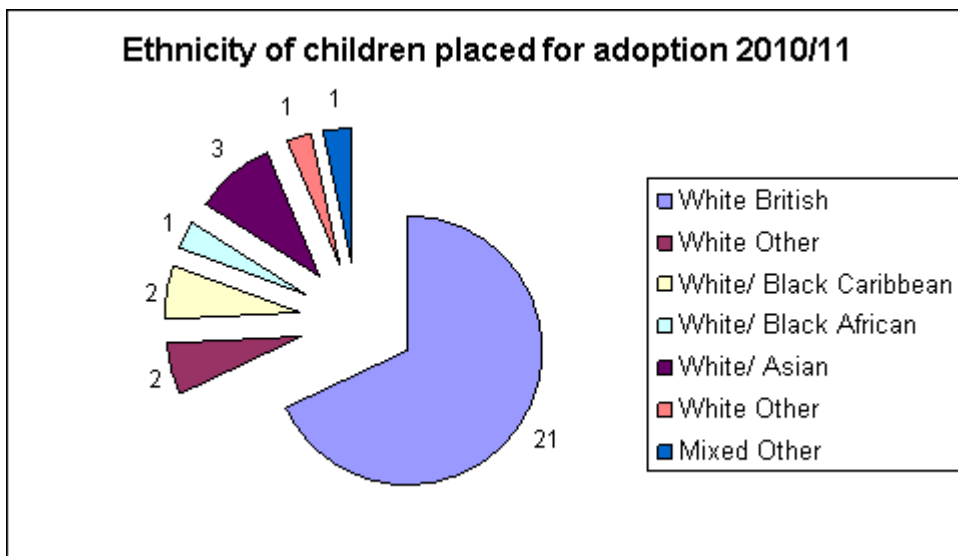
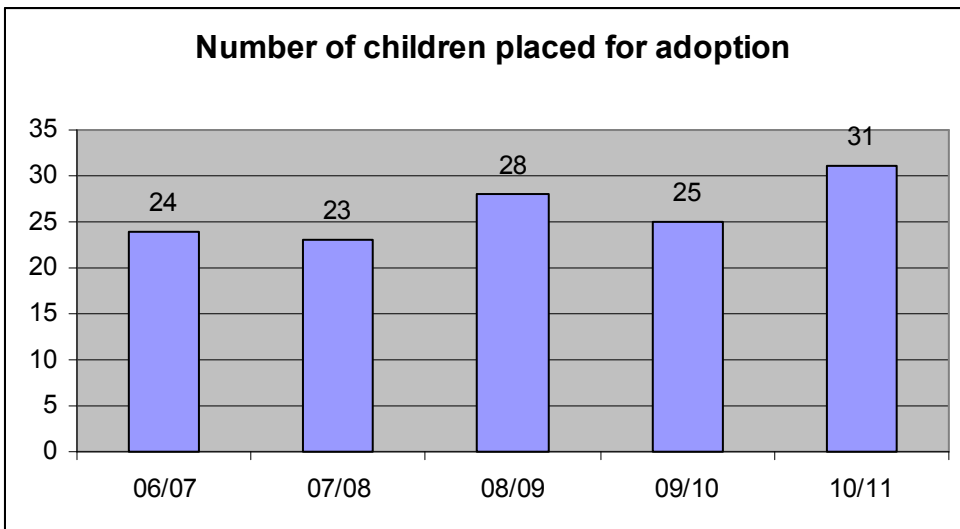
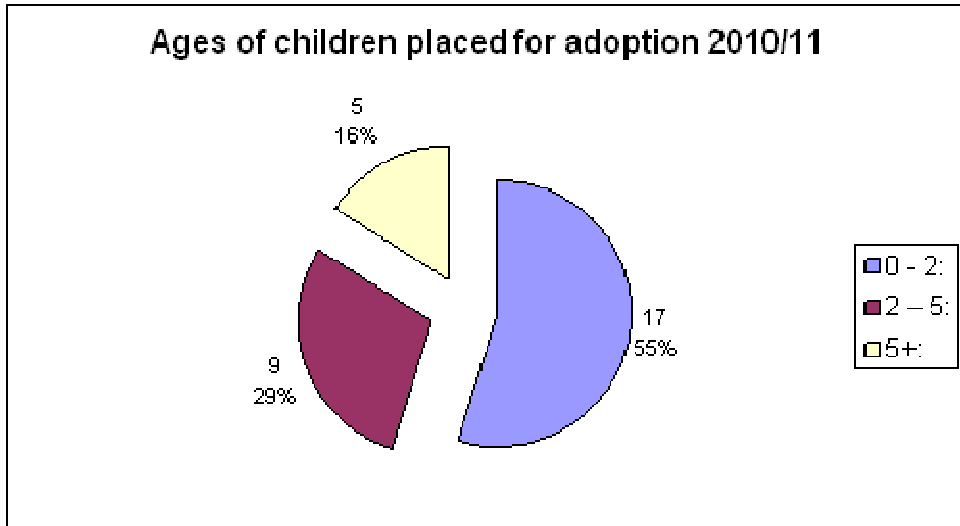
She maintains an oversight of all the children that need placements and the potential for them to be placed with adopters from Brighton & Hove that are either approved or are nearing the end of their assessment process.

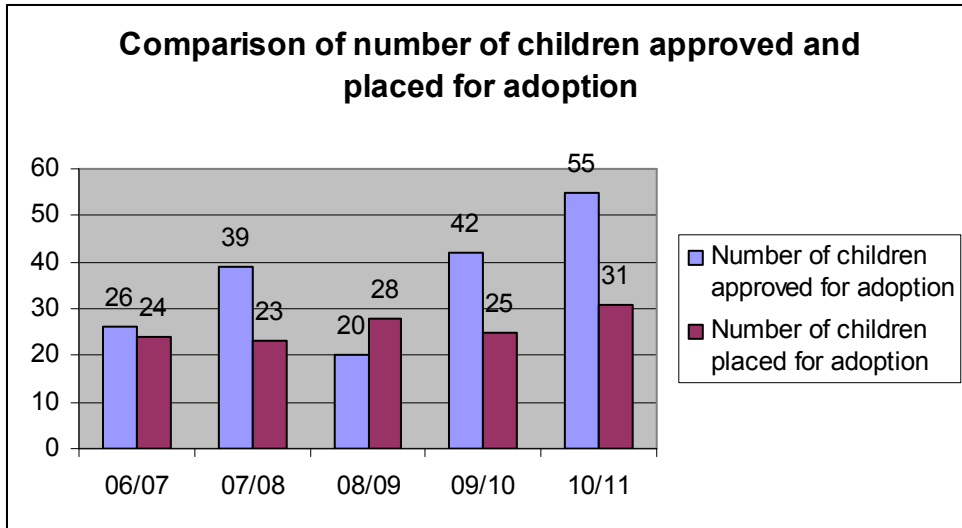
Social workers from within the team are allocated to take the lead role in expediting the family finding process. It is the responsibility of the social worker for the child to ensure that there is early notification to the Adoption & Permanence team of children with a potential plan for adoption. This early notification helps inform the recruitment activity and enables early discussion about the detail of the plan for the child and their background information and matching needs. It is not possible to start the detailed family finding work until a Placement Order has been granted and most Placement Orders are made at the time of the conclusion of care proceedings.

It is to the team's credit that they have managed to successfully place an increasing number of children with adoptive families during 2010/11 but the increasing volume of family finding work has impacted on the capacity to allocate a family finding social worker to all children with a plan for adoption prior to Placement Order. Family finding particularly for slightly older children, children that are part of sibling groups or children with significant complex needs often as a result of their history of experience of neglect or trauma can take much longer to family find for.

Considerable work is undertaken when considering a potential match to ensure the prospective family have full information about the child and their background, have met with key people involved with the child including carers, teachers, therapists prior to any decision being made to proceed to take the match to panel. The search for prospective adopters may have to extend beyond the consortium to other local authorities and agencies and includes profiling children with the National Adoption Register. Some children are repeatedly featured in adoption publications before a suitable match can be identified. There are also a small number of children that because of their age and profile may either have a dual plan for adoption and permanent fostering or may have their plan for adoption changed to permanent fostering as the potential for achieving permanence through fostering is greater.

The age profile of the children placed for adoption is reflected in the graph below which shows that there remain a high number of children under 2 with a plan for adoption.

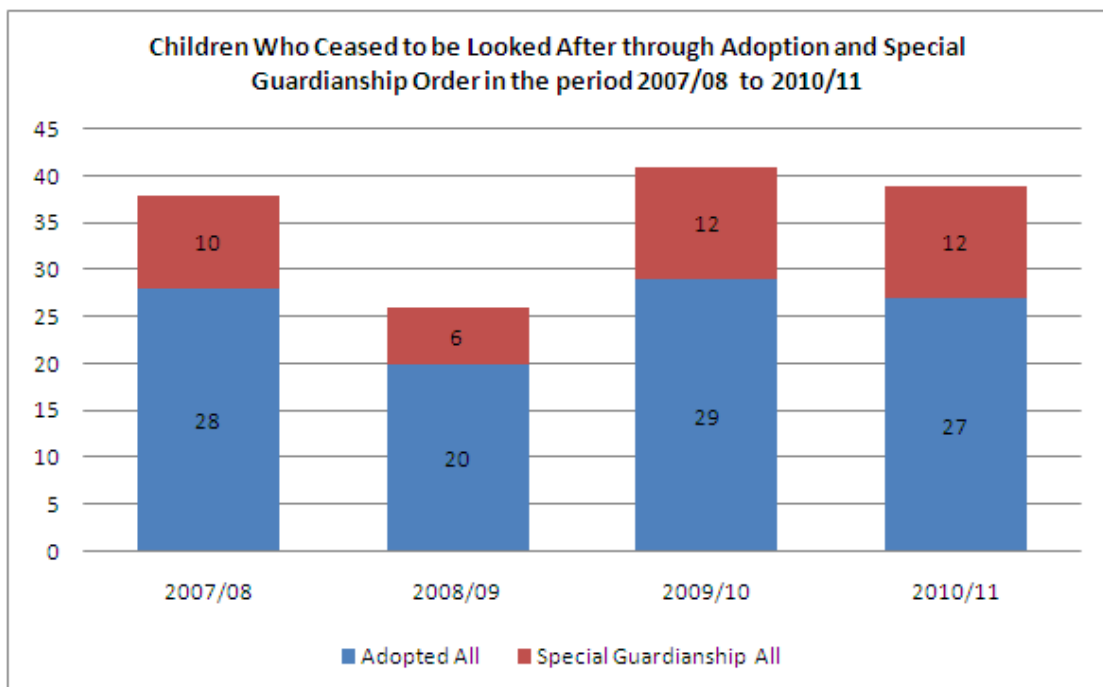




There continues to be a high number of children with plans for adoption that have been profoundly affected by their exposure to alcohol or drugs in utero and there is now a great deal more known about Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Further training has been provided to staff and carers on this issue in 2010/11 including a 2 day conference organised on early permanence planning which included specific input from the specialist substance misuse midwife and the consultant neonatologist.

Children adopted

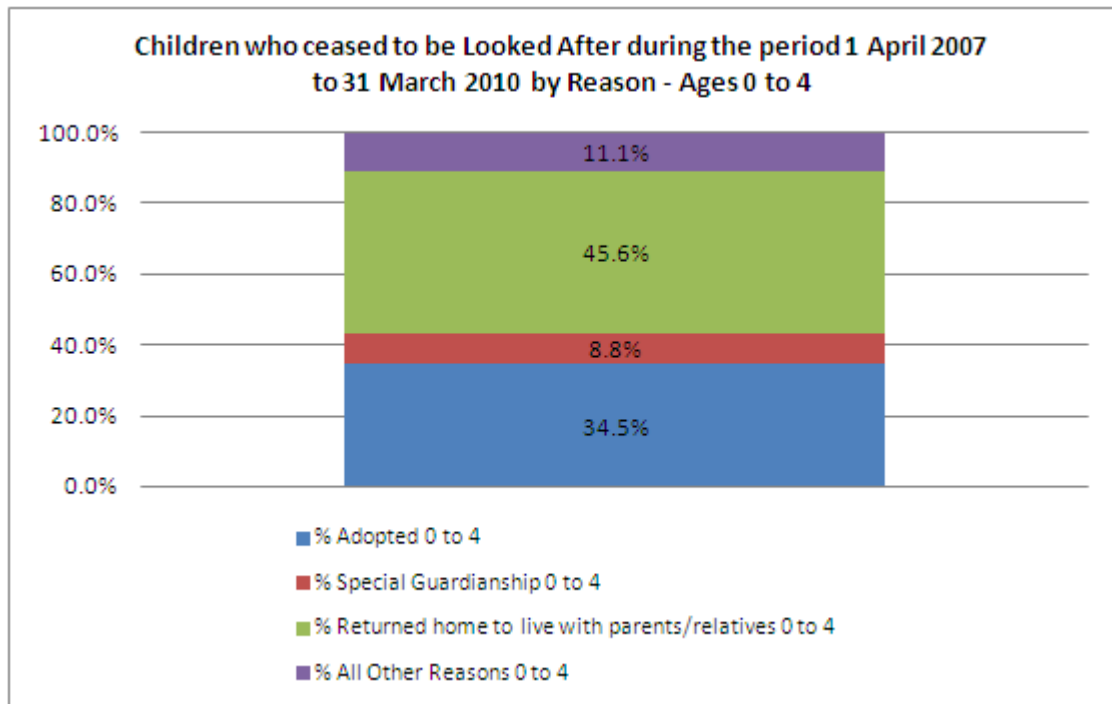
There were 27 children adopted from care during 2010/11 and 24 of those children [88.9%] of children in care adopted during the year were placed within 12 months of the decision that the child should be placed for adoption. There were also 12 children that were made subject to a Special Guardianship Order that had previously been in care.



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The DfE have produced a range of comparative adoption statistics which have been used to consider performance activity in Brighton & Hove.

This graph profiles the fact that over this 3 year period in Brighton and Hove, 34.5% of children who left care aged 0 to 4 did so through adoption compared to 33% nationally, and 8.8% through special guardianship compared to 9% nationally. There is however considerable variation amongst different local authorities.



There were no disruptions of adoptive placements pre adoption order during 2010/11.

Profile of adopters

There were 27 adopter assessments undertaken within 2010/11 and of those 16 new adopter households were approved. There were 4 assessments that were discontinued for a number of reasons and 3 that were put on hold which have subsequently recommenced. There were a further 4 households that were presented to panel in April/May 2011.

The Practice Manager within the service that takes the lead role in terms of recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters has oversight of all the recruitment and preparation processes for prospective adopters.

Although there is no longer a specialist concurrency team the service still endeavours to provide concurrent placements for the very small number of children where that may be an appropriate care plan. The profile of concurrency is still featured at recruitment events and experienced concurrent carers are supportive in terms of attending these events or meeting with

prospective concurrent carers to discuss their experiences and the particular challenges of the concurrency process.

Of the 16 approved adoptive households 14 were White/British and the remaining 2 of mixed heritage. The service has continued to profile the need for more Black and mixed heritage adopters and foster carers to meet the needs of the children in our care.

As of 31st March 2011 there were 8 Brighton & Hove approved adopters that had not yet been formally matched with a child or children, however of these five were in early discussion about a potential placement. The remaining 3 were on hold for a period due to specific personal reasons.

There were 3 Brighton & Hove adopters that had children placed from other authorities during the year, two had placements from within the consortium and one had 2 children placed from another local authority.

Step parent adoptions

There have been 6 step parent adoptions completed in 2010/11 with a further 12 in the process of assessment as of 31st March 2011. A further 7 assessments were discontinued for a variety of reasons. The volume of work is equivalent to that undertaken last year but with an increase in numbers of potential applicants opting for a parental responsibility agreement thereby negating the need for social work assessment and court hearing.

4. 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 31 children placed for adoption it is a very positive achievement that 21 of these children were matched within 6 months or less of the plan for adoption being approved at panel. Of the remaining 10 children the delay in identifying appropriate adopters related to the age of the child, plan to place as part of a sibling group or particular complexities relating to the child's special needs. Three of the 10 children that were not placed within 6 months of the plan for adoption being agreed were placed within 12 months. It is also of note that for some children there can be delay between the plan for adoption being agreed at panel and the conclusion of care proceedings and granting of a Placement Order at final hearing.

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

All of the 55 children identified as needing to be placed for adoption had a permanence plan agreed at the 4 month child in care review [some of which included adoption as part of a concurrent or twin track care plan]. Of these 17

children, were presented to panel within 2 months of the plan for adoption being agreed at the child in care review and a further 16 within 4 months of the review decision. The delay in coming to panel for other children often reflects the fact that adoption is part of a parallel planning process and could not be presented to panel until all the experts had reported within care proceedings and alternatives to adoption had been clearly ruled out. However there has also been discussion with the Independent Reviewing Officer team and agreement made that a full review does not have to be convened to consider the plan following submission of all the expert reports; rather the IRO should be consulted and the date of that consultation and IRO endorsement of the care plan for adoption needs to be recorded with the expectation that the plan for adoption should be considered by Panel within 2 months of that IRO endorsement of the care plan. Compliance with these timescales is now being recorded clearly on panel minutes in line with new expectations within the Adoption Guidance 2011.

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 16 adopter assessments, 10 were completed within the required 8 month period. Of the remaining; 4 took between 9 months and 12 months and the remaining 2 took between 14 and 16 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. In a few situations there were delays in allocating the assessment which reflected the need to prioritise other tasks or due to staff sickness. The continued high volume of children's cases needing to come to panel during the year has also resulted in very busy panels and the need to constantly prioritise items for panel. As a consequence decisions have had to be made at times to delay bringing an assessment of a new adopter to panel to enable a plan for a child or a match with prospective adopters to take priority.

5. The Adoption Consortium

The Adoption South East Consortium comprises Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Kent, Bromley, Bexley and Medway. The 6 Local Authorities work closely to maximise placement choice for children and to minimise delay in family finding by sharing prospective adopters. There is nil cost to the Local Authority if the number of placements made equals the number received. The cost thereafter is the standard Local Authority Inter Agency Fee of £14,452. per placement. This contrasts with the cost of placements with a voluntary adoption agency which for 2010/11 were £23,179.

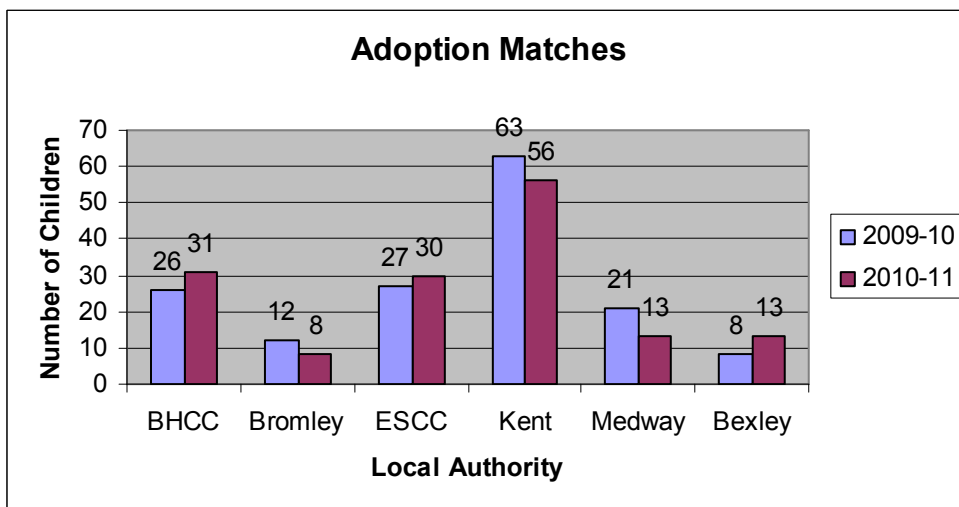
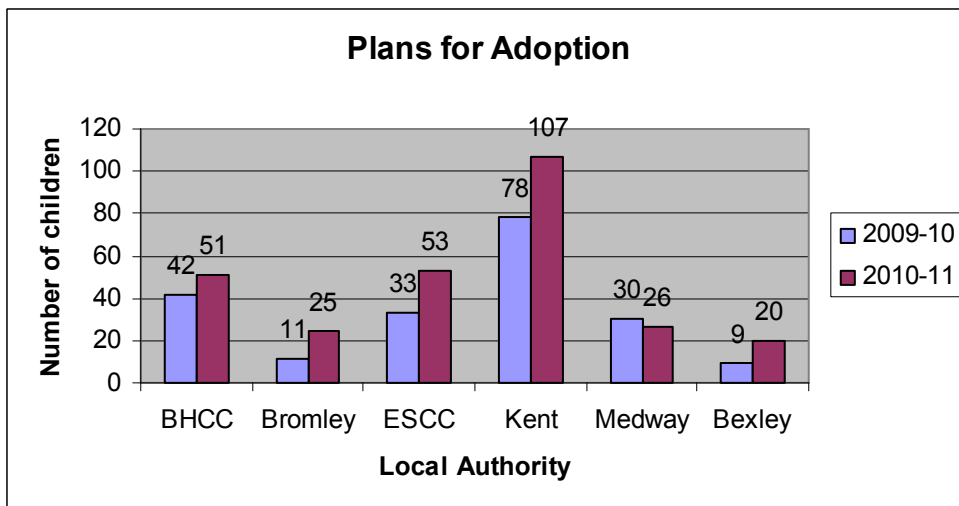
The quarterly management meetings attended by the Service Manager are used to clarify and develop policy and practice issues across the consortium. This year particular focus has been given to recruitment and matching with work now underway to develop a consortium website. Managers have also been working together to consider the practice implications of the new

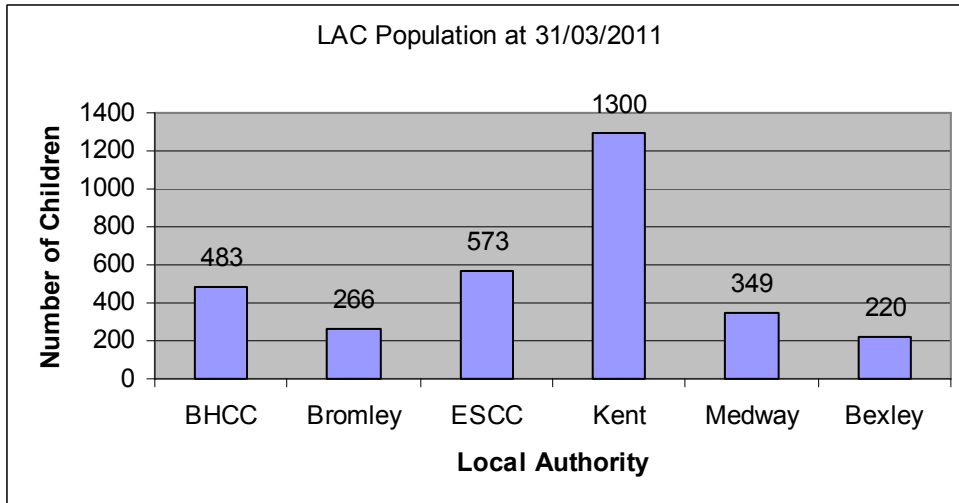
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adoption minimum standards. Brighton & Hove co-ordinated a very successful 10th birthday celebration conference for the Consortium which was held in November 2010; the theme was 'adolescence and adoption' and the event was attended by adopters and staff from across the 6 authorities.

There have been 4 Consortium Practitioners meetings during the year with a variety of topics being covered including neonatal substance abuse and its impact; post placement depression and the impact of neglect on early brain development.

There has also been work within the Consortium considering benchmarking information in relation to numbers of children with plans for adoption and adoption matches. The 3rd graph provides information on the numbers of children in full time care in each authority as of 31st march 2011 to set the adoption activity figures into context. All of the authorities apart from Medway have seen an upward growth in terms of the numbers of children with plans for adoption and there is variable success in terms of keeping pace with the capacity to place those children for adoption.





This chart provides information on the number of placements made across the consortium authorities for 2010/11.

	Children Placed	Adopters Provided
Bexley	1	1
Brighton & Hove	5	2
Bromley	0	4
East Sussex	3	0
Kent	4	2
Medway	1	3
TOTAL	14	12

6. Recruitment & Preparation

The Adoption and Permanence Service received 204 enquiries to the duty service throughout the year, very slightly up on the previous year and 83 people attended information sessions held during the year including another very successful information day that was held as part of National Adoption week in November 2010. 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. There were two preparation groups including the additional 'motivation and loss' days held during the year for prospective adopters.

There are always a range of people making initial enquiries to the service; some people are at the very early stage of their thinking about adoption and other people are much further on and clear about their wish to parent through adoption and ready to proceed with the next stage. Hence there are high numbers of enquiries and a considerable drop of rate in relation to people then progressing on to making an application. It is very important that potential applicants have time to consider all the issues thoroughly and

enabled to proceed at a pace which is right for them. The issue of recruitment and conversion rate from initial enquiry through to approval is one that is considered within the Consortium and practice issues shared amongst the Consortium agencies.

The recruitment strategy for the service continues to be reviewed annually and there is a target for 2011/12 to approve a further 20 adopter households and the dates of three preparation groups during the year have been planned. There has also been further consideration of the duty response to prospective adopters in an effort to streamline the process and information sessions are planned throughout the year.

The Recruitment and Publicity Officer for BME foster carers and adopters has continued to profile the work of the service with key local community and faith groups.

The Fostering & Adoption service continues to give priority to keeping their dedicated website up to date with comprehensive information for prospective and approved adopters reflecting the fact that most applicants 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. Brighton & Hove pay for PACT to provide the initial information and follow up to prospective applicants. Once applicants decide to proceed they are required to meet the costs of the assessment themselves.

During 2010/2011, PACT sent out 6 information packs to prospective adopters, and carried out 2 initial interviews. They received no applications and no adopter households were approved. Two children were placed with an approved adopter and there is one couple approved and still waiting to adopt.

7. 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 adoptive families, adopted children and birth families. This continues to remain an area of considerable growth and pressure within the service. There is a requirement within the regulations to have an Adoption Support Service Advisor which in Brighton & Hove is undertaken by one of the Practice Managers who maintains oversight of the range of adoption support services provided to all parties in the adoption process.

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All staff within the Adoption and Permanence team are involved in some way with adoption support work. Social workers within the team continue to offer support to families pre and post adoption. The duty service also responds to calls requesting information about adoption support services and requests for adoption support assessments. The nature of support requested varies considerably but frequently includes requests for advice on strategies for managing behaviour; help and advice for children in school where their attachment difficulties may be making it hard for them to settle and learn and assistance with talking to children about adoption and making sense of their sometimes very troubled backgrounds.

The service also has responsibility for providing an assessment of support needs to families living in Brighton and Hove whose children were placed by a different Agency and it is more than 3 years post Adoption Order.

Many adopted children struggle at some point with achieving their educational potential and there is increasing acknowledgement of how their attachment difficulties and early trauma affect their ability to make the most of school. Brighton and Hove continue to employ a part time teacher to offer advice and support from an attachment perspective to professionals in schools where there is an adopted child. She also offers training to schools and runs support groups and training for individual members of staff who are working with adopted children in a 'key worker' role.

Brighton and Hove no longer have a contract with the Post Adoption Centre to provide adoption support services as this contract was brought to an end in September 2010 as part of the budget savings measures required for 2010/11.

Support groups

There are currently two evening adoption support groups facilitated by adoption social workers. One of these groups has been running so long that a number of members are now grandparents, a role that can be both rewarding and challenging and where peer support is invaluable. The team run a weekly parent and toddler group which has been very well received by those adopters with preschool children.

The group for Brighton and Hove lesbian and gay adopters and foster carers continues to thrive. It is run by its members with a link through to the service provided by the Adoption Support Services Advisor. They combine evening support groups for the adults with additional activities to include the children.

The service facilitates an annual picnic and activity fun day which are opportunities for adoptive parents and children to get together and renew old acquaintances and develop new supportive networks. Both events are very well attended.

There have also been workshops provided for adopters during the year on talking about adoption and attachment difficulties in the classroom.

A bi-annual newsletter is produced and circulated to approved adopters to advise them of any events and share adoption related information including signposting other training events.

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.

The team manages around 200 'letterbox' contacts where there is an exchange of letters or photos between the adoptive family and the birth family. Additionally there are a growing number of adoptive families where there is some form of face to face contact between the adopted child and their birth relatives. The nature of this contact will vary from an annual meeting to very complex arrangements involving a number of birth family members (siblings, grandparents and parents).

Dedicated workers offer support and advice to all parties and keep arrangements under review to ensure that they continue to meet the adopted child's needs over time. This year the team has also started to send out feedback forms to all parties to seek their views on how the contact has gone and contribute to the review process. Careful preparation to all parties, feedback afterwards and mediation when there is a need to change arrangements are all essential to maintain beneficial contact. It is very encouraging that birth family members in particular, who may previously have been in conflict with the Local Authority over plans for their children, have been able to work productively with staff in the team in relation to the maintenance of contact.

Staff within the service are also 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 involve the preparation of statements and giving evidence at final hearings in relation to contact plans. Practice Managers from within the team also gave a very highly commended key presentation at the local Family Justice Council training event in June 2011. This presentation highlighted current research in this area but also profiled important practice lessons from the experience of providing this model of post adoption contact within the service over the last 8 years.

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

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who requests an intermediary service is provided with support and advice and given the details of providers of intermediary services.

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 Adoption Agency Advisor has oversight of this service and meets at regular intervals with the worker to provide consultation and advice as required.

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. The team has continued to receive regular requests for birth records counselling and there is currently a wait of 3-6 months for this service. There has been an increase in the number of enquiries from younger adoptees whose histories can be more complex, coming as many do from a background of abuse and neglect.

The team has also recently started to send out feedback forms to those they have been working with to seek their views on the service they have received.

A social worker within the team takes a lead role in providing a duty service in relation to enquiries from adopted adults. As an adoption agency the service is 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 2010/11 was £554,254 in relation to 63 children. There were 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. The adoption team gives robust consideration to a request for an adoption allowance ensuring that all other options such as state benefits, including disability living allowance is considered, and a financial assessment of the adopter's means is undertaken before agreement is given to an ongoing

allowance. In line with the Adoption Support Regulations one off lump sum payments are often considered where appropriate to provide support to an adoptive family rather than an ongoing allowance. Allowances are only agreed in cases where the child/ren would be unlikely to be adopted without it.

9. Family and Friends Team

The work of the Family and Friends team has continued to expand in line with the sustained high numbers of children in care or on the cusp of the care system. There is a clear regulatory requirement to ensure that at all relevant stages of the care planning process the potential for children that are not able to live with their birth parents to be placed within their wider family or friendship network is thoroughly explored.

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 those families in line with those provided to adoptive families.

There are two part time Practice Managers in the Family and Friends team who take responsibility for the oversight of referrals into the team from the fieldwork teams. Care planning in relation to family and friends care can be complex with the need for careful risk assessment work and the Practice Managers along with the Agency Advisors and Service Manager play a key role in terms of providing consultation to the social work teams on family and friends practice and quality assurance of viability and assessment work. The team has also revised the assessment tool and guidance during the year in line with the new regulatory framework for the placement and assessment of prospective family and friends carers as detailed within the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 that came into force in April 2011.

New national statutory guidance in relation to Family and Friends care was published in April 2011 and work is underway to ensure compliance with the requirements of the new guidance. This guidance sets out the framework for support to family and friends carers and requires the local authority to publish a policy setting out its approach towards meeting the needs of children living with family and friends carers.

Within the year there were 25 approvals of new Family and Friends foster carers. As of 31st March 2011 there were 52 children placed within 36 different family and friends foster placements.

Support needs post placement can often be high as these carers do not have the opportunity for the same 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.

10. Adoption & Permanence Panel

It is the responsibility of the service to ensure the effective running of the Panels and the Adoption Agency Advisor manages the panel administration team and takes a lead in the recruitment of panel members. The Agency Advisor also undertakes a significant role in providing consultation and advice to social workers on aspects of adoption and permanence planning and plays a quality assurance role in terms of the oversight of the papers being presented to panel. Panel makes a recommendation about the cases that are presented at panel and the final decision is made by the Agency Decision Maker which in Brighton & Hove is the Lead Commissioner for Children, Youth and Families, a senior social work manager who does not have direct management responsibility for either fieldwork social work services or the Fostering & Adoption service.

There has been a sustained significant increase in the workload of panel over the last year which reflects the upturn in adoption activity in Brighton & Hove.

The current independent chair of panel Sarah Borthwick took up this role in January 2009. A report on the activity of the adoption and permanence panel is appended to this report.

12. Complaints

There were 5 complaints made regarding the Adoption Service during the year. The complaints included concerns about the decision making in relation to a viability assessment and a prospective match as well as a delay in receiving letterbox contact information. The Service Manager maintains an

oversight of all complaints and disseminates any learning to the team as appropriate.

13. Strategic issues and forward plans

The Adoption and Permanence service has continued to be affected by the significant rise in the children in care population since 2009. The impact has been shown in the sustained increase particularly in the numbers of children with plans for adoption but also in relation to the volume of family and friends work. At times it has been difficult to manage the many competing priorities and to allocate family finding work within the team and ensure that this work is given priority alongside the need to ensure recruitment activity is maintained. Clearly it is vital for children that there is minimal delay in expediting plans for permanence but family finding and matching is a complex and specialist area of work. Children need to be prepared carefully for a move and foster carers play a very important role in supporting children with these transitions. Staff within the team advise social work staff on all aspects of adoption planning and provide training to social workers as part of their core training programme. There are also considerable financial consequences of not being able to place children in a timely way with either in-house adopters or adopters from within the Consortium. However it is a significant achievement that the Service has continued to work to maximise the opportunity for children with plans for adoption to be placed in a timely way with a further increase in the number of children matched with adopters in 2010/11. The Adoption & Permanence Panel has also continued to operate very effectively and flexibly managing to prioritise the agenda and to organise additional panels were required in order to endeavour to keep pace with the volume of work and to ensure that the panel processes do not result in any delay in progressing permanence plans for children as appropriate.

A new lifestory strategy was developed and implemented within the last year which complies with the new Adoption Guidance. Life story work is a vital area for all children that are adopted or permanently fostered. It provides children with a structure and an understandable way of talking about themselves and their life history and this capacity is clearly associated with better functioning and better outcomes in adult life in part because it assists in resolving trauma. Children need to revisit their past at key points in their development and the team work with adoptive parents to assist them in developing the confidence to support their children with this process. Considerable amount of work has gone into this strategy taking account of evidence from best practice and additional training has been provided by the service to fieldwork staff to understand the significance of this critical area of work for children. The Adoption & Permanence staff team have also now had the opportunity to share learning and experience in this area and plans are in place now for this to be embedded as a key area of adoption supervision and support work both through individual and group work with adoptive parents.

Work is currently underway to ensure compliance with the new adoption minimum standards, guidance and regulations. Some of this work is being

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undertaken in collaboration with Consortium colleagues as all local authorities are going through similar processes of updating and developing new guidance and procedures.

The service will also continue to take a lead on policy and practice guidance in relation to Family and Friends work across Children and Families social work teams. Managers and staff within the Family and Friends team continue to provide specialist advice and consultation to social work staff on this complex area of practice. The team has also worked very hard to provide ongoing specialist support to family and friends carers and there is an effective peer support system in place. The service undertook significant work to develop a new assessment tool which has now been reviewed and updated and work is ongoing to develop a Family and Friends policy document in line with the new statutory requirements. Family and friends carers and other key stakeholders will be consulted as part of this development work.

Sharon Donnelly
Head of Service, Fostering & Adoption
July 2011

Appendix 1

BRIGHTON & HOVE ADOPTION & PERMANENCE PANEL ANNUAL REPORT (1 April 2010 – 31 March 2011)

1. Introduction

This report briefly summarises the work of Brighton & Hove Adoption and Permanence Panel over the last year. It has been a really busy year and the number of children needing to be adopted continues to rise. This is in line with higher numbers of children being looked after in Brighton & Hove and it reflects the emphasis by the Local Authority on achieving successful adoption placements for children who require them.

I have now been the Independent Chair of the Panel for over two years and I continue to be impressed by the quality of much of the work that is presented. The Panel has continued to function effectively and we have consolidated the adjustments to our processes that we made in the previous year.

2. Composition of the Panel

Over the past year, the Panel was constituted in line with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, the Fostering Services (Amendment) Regulations 2009 and National Minimum Standards.

The Panel has had mostly full and stable membership over the year. Members n 2010/11 were:

- Sarah Borthwick, independent Chair
- Sophie Heiser, independent member, adopter and Vice Chair
- Dr. Sian Bennett, Medical Adviser
- Councillor Juliet McCaffery, Brighton & Hove elected member
- Chris Thornton, independent member, foster carer
- 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
- Tina Darby, independent member, foster carer and adopter (**joined February 2011**)

Michael Wilson was Agency Adviser to the Panel.

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Natasha Watson, Hilary Priestley, Sandra O'Brien, Lucy Ditchburn and Andrew Pack shared the role of Legal Adviser to the Panel.

Andrea Critcher, Rachel Robertson, and Jess Freegard were the Panel Administrators. Jess Freegard left in January 2011.

Sophie Heiser took on the role of Vice Chair from Dr Bennett in June 2010.

Panel members and officers continued to demonstrate a high level of commitment to the Panel's work over the year.

3. Work of the Panel

The Panel met on a two weekly basis over the year. From 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011, it met on **25** occasions. This included **1** additional Panel meeting. All meetings were full days.

The Panel recommended that **55** children should be placed for adoption. This was a further increase in the numbers of children with adoption plans from previous years. (41 children were recommended in 2009/10). Out of the **55**, Placement Orders were advised for **54** children. For **1** child, a dual plan of both adoption and permanent fostering was recommended. **31** children were placed with adoptive families, including **2** placed with concurrent carers. This also represented a higher figure for placements than in the previous year.

The Panel recommended that **5** children should be placed in permanent foster care and it recommended **1** match of a child with permanent foster carers. This was a lower figure than in the previous year.

The Panel recommended **16** new families as suitable to adopt. This was a slightly lower figure than the previous year. **15** were couples and **1** was a single carer. Of the **16**, there were **3** sets of concurrent carers. **14** households were white/British. In **1** household, one applicant was black British/African/Caribbean and the other applicant was white British/Australian. **1** household was a same sex male couple, **1** household was a same sex female couple and the remaining households were heterosexual couples.

Only **9** new family and friends' carers were recommended over the year as the majority of family and friends' carers in Brighton & Hove were considered by the Fostering Panel. Of these **9**, there were **2** full approvals, **4** 1st interim approvals and **3** 2nd interim approvals. The Panel did not recommend approval in **1** family and friends' case.

The Panel considered **6** progress reports on children and it deferred items on **3** occasions for further information to be provided.

The Panel recommended termination of approval for **1** prospective adopter.

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

4. Functioning of the Panel

Preparation and reading

Panel members continue to read lengthy and complex reports about children and their birth parents before making important recommendations about their lives. This is time-consuming work and requires great commitment and analytical skills in making sense of the material presented. Over the last year, the increase in the number and size of reports have continued to place considerable demands on Panel members' time, on Panel administration and on legal and social work input. In response to the workload, agreed summaries of expert reports regarding children and their birth families are increasingly being provided. Full reports are always made available for consultation at the Panel and are provided beforehand in particular cases where there is disagreement regarding the adoption plan or where they can provide advice on family finding for children.

Process

The Panel continues to work effectively. The business is conducted thoroughly and all Panel members participate and ask questions. It sees applicants, prospective adopters and carers with social workers and it sees social workers on their own when additional questions need to be asked about assessment practice or about confidential references. It sees social workers together with practice managers for many of the children's cases. All children and young people, where it is thought appropriate due to their age and the circumstances, are able to attend Panel if they wish. Social workers and managers usually remain in the meeting to observe the recommendation being made. On one occasion, the Panel saw an adopter on their own and in this case, the adopter and practice manager were asked to leave prior to the Panel's recommendation to allow the Panel some discussion time alone.

The Panel has consolidated the changes to the process of how it makes its recommendations having taken account of social worker feedback over previous years. The process appears to work well.

Feedback

Feedback forms are given to all social workers, applicants, prospective adopters, foster carers and young people attending the Panel. Over the year, the Panel received **6** forms from prospective adopters and **1** form from a social worker.

The written feedback from applicants and prospective adopters continued to be very positive about the experience of attending Panel. People feel they are treated with warmth, empathy and respect. Many comment too that they are quickly put at ease and enabled to participate. The practice of introducing

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myself as the chair of the Panel and outlining the questions that will be raised prior to people coming into the room continues to be received very positively.

One couple whose case was deferred were understandably upset that their case was not heard by the Panel and they provided written feedback about this. It was clearly a very difficult experience and it remains very unusual for the Panel to defer such cases.

Information

Applicants, prospective adopters and foster carers should have information available to them in respect of Panel members and the Agency Decision Maker in the waiting room. This is being updated in line with changing membership over the next few months. A booklet is sent to them about attending Panel and they have discussions with their assessing social worker or supervising social worker to prepare them for attending the Panel.

Liaison with the Service

For every case presented to the Panel, I complete feedback forms for the Agency Decision Maker. This arrangement seems to work well. We have also started to hold quarterly meetings to discuss practice issues. These are held with the Agency Decision Maker, the Panel Chair and Agency Advisers to both the Adoption and Permanence Panel and Fostering Panel. In addition, the Agency Decision Maker and Head of Safeguarding met with the Panel and the Head of Adoption and Fostering and Agency Adviser provided Panel members with regular updates about developments in the service. A consultation was held with Panel members to obtain their views about government's proposed changes to the membership and functioning of Panels. These views were incorporated into Brighton & Hove's response in November 2010.

Reviews and training

The Agency Adviser and I met with Panel members individually over the year and completed annual appraisals. This was a very useful exercise and it reinforced people's commitment and ability to contribute to the Panel process. I also had an appraisal with the Agency Decision Maker for Brighton & Hove and the Agency Adviser. A training course was provided to Panel members on the impact on children and families of drug and alcohol misuse and on the experience of post adoption contact. This was a very valuable and productive day.

5. Practice

A number of practice issues have been raised by Panel members over the year. Some of these relate very specifically to individual cases where Panel members were concerned about practice and feedback has been provided

directly and confidentially. Other practice issues are general and are outlined in this report.

Reports

In general the work presented to Panel has continued to be of a high standard over the year. As in previous years, the Panel has seen some excellent reports provided when matching children to families. The assessment reports about prospective adopters generally have been comprehensive and well evidenced. Child Permanence Reports have also been of good quality in many cases. More focus on children's birth fathers has been in evidence and the Panel has highlighted the importance of this. The Agency Adviser has continued to work very hard to monitor and to advise staff on the requirements for reports. Given the continued increase in the work, it will be very important for the agency to ensure that the high standards continue to be met and staff are well supported in undertaking the work.

Work with children

The Panel has been very impressed with the preparation work undertaken with many of the children requiring adoption. This has often involved direct and therapeutic work with children as well as support to foster families and adopters. A new life story work strategy has been introduced. This is innovative and involves adoptive families much more in the process. Health advice continues to be excellent and support in education has usually been explored carefully. Nevertheless, the Panel is aware of the pressure of work on social workers who are responsible for visiting children in foster care and this can mean that some children may only be visited at the statutory minimum. This is of concern as it is crucial to get to know children well when making critical decisions about their lives. In addition, Panel has seen a rise in the number of older children and sibling groups who have experienced significant neglect over a period of time. Panel has raised its concerns individually with the Agency Decision Maker as appropriate.

Childrens' Guardians

It has become clear to Panel members over the year that a number of children in care proceedings have been without Childrens' Guardians due to staff turnover and sickness rates. This remains a significant concern and has been highlighted within the court process.

Contact arrangements pre-adoption

When children are in foster care prior to plans for adoption being agreed, the Panel is made aware of the contact children are having with their birth parents, siblings and other members of their birth family. Many arrangements are supervised and occur several times a week and have been agreed at court. These often continue throughout the proceedings whilst assessments are being completed. For some children the arrangements appear to be in their best interests and are planned well but for others, in the Panel's view,

there have been concerns about the frequency and distressing impact on children. The Panel has therefore raised a number of concerns around the practice and process of supervision of contact. A management meeting was held to look at issues raised.

Family and friends' carers

Panel members considered a small number of family and friends' carers over the past year and were impressed at the high level of commitment offered. Reports and assessments are continuing to develop and they demonstrate the complexity of some of these cases. The format of reports has improved and allows a better understanding about the complexity of relationships and dynamics within families. It provides more focus on how the family and friends' carers specifically meet the needs of the child or children concerned. However in some cases, care continues to be needed in ensuring an accurate and balanced assessment.

6. Conclusion

The quality of adoption and permanence work and care planning for children in general has remained good in Brighton & Hove and there has been evidence of excellent practice in a significant number of cases. The Panel continues to work effectively and we will continue to develop our practice over the next year as new Adoption Statutory Guidance comes into force from 1 April 2011.

Sarah Borthwick
Independent Chair, Brighton & Hove Adoption and Permanence Panel, 2 June
2011