



# Annual Report on Adoption Activity 2018-2019

## ***Mission Statement***

***Bromley Council's Adoption Service believes that every child has the right to a permanent, secure and loving family which embraces their individual needs and differences, including their culture and identity where this is possible.***

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# 1. Key Messages

Within children and family services at Bromley there has been a new and highly experienced senior leadership team which have seen a rapid and sustained pace of improvement in the last 18 months and supported by a whole-council investment in children's services.

The Ofsted inspection report of January 2019 notes the positive changes in the adoption service such as "*effective adoption services*", "*well-assessed and prepared adoptive families*", "*excellent adoption support*".

Permanence decision for adoption is also achieved in a timely manner. "*Early permanence is always considered as an option for a child and an effective family finding system supports children to achieve permanence without delay. Children's permanence reports are thorough and well evidenced, and include good consideration of alternatives to adoption, contact, and brother and sister assessments, if appropriate.*"

## Introduction

The purpose of the document is to report on the activity of the adoption service, fulfilling obligations in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) to report to the executive side of the local authority. It will include performance and developments in Bromley's delivery of adoption services; how the Council is compliant with key national minimum standards and the service offered to those seeking to adopt and those affected by adoption through the provision of adoption support. This report details the work of Bromley Council Adoption Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to end of March 2019.

Adoption is one of the most important and significant decision that can be made for a child. Bromley Children's Services wants every child to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. For those young children who cannot remain or return safely to their birth families, adoption offers them the best opportunity to experience a warm and loving family environment throughout life.

The adoption of children from care has a high profile nationally, with 2016 highlighting key adoption reforms being implemented. "*Putting Children First: delivering our vision for excellent children's social care* (July 2016)", sets out the programme of reforms to children's social care over the following four years. A critical development is that all Councils are required to combine their adoption

functions. This changing and challenging landscape will see Bromley part of the Regional Adoption Agency Coram Ambitious for Adoption by the summer of 2019.

As it stands Bromley Adoption Service is responsible for recruitment, assessment, approval and support of adopter's pre and post-order, family finding for looked after children with an adoption plan and post-adoption support services. The team provides a duty service for prospective adopters and offers consultancy on adoption matters to social workers from the Referral & Assessment, Safeguarding and Children in Care Teams. The team manages domestic and step parent adoptions; birth parent counselling; post placement and post adoption support and a range of intermediary services. The function of assessment of intercountry adoption applicants is subcontracted to 'The Intercountry-Adoption centre'.

## 2. Early Permanence

2.1. As part of our local authority's continuous improvement plan, early permanence for children has been a main focus.

A weekly Legal Gateway Panel has been running successfully for the last two years and is responsible for hearing all new cases, with the capacity to hear 5 cases at each Panel. This is chaired by the Head of Safeguarding Service and is attended by legal and Group Managers from the Fostering, Adoption and the Quality Improvement service.

The key aims of the Legal Gateway Panel are:

- To provide management oversight and scrutiny of all cases where a Legal Planning Meeting has been requested by Children Social Care (CSC)
- To provide senior Children Social Care management overview of cases involving children who are at risk of harm and need safeguarding
- To provide consistent oversight and scrutiny in the management of the threshold criteria and the decision whether or not CSC should commence care proceedings or consideration of safe alternatives to issuing proceedings
- To ensure effective early case planning, timely interventions and pre-proceedings assessments

2.2. As a member of the Legal Gateway Panel, the Group Manager for Adoption offers consultancy and advises in relation to the process for early family finding for adoption. The Group Manager for adoption membership to this panel also ensures management oversight and early allocation of permanence cases for adoption.

Similarly for the membership of the Permanence Panel. This meets fortnightly and focuses on children and young people entering care in Bromley to scrutinise care plans and ensure high quality and expedience; to ensure that all aspects of care arrangements, permanency and contingency plans are in place. All children and young people coming into care are presented between 6-8 weeks after accommodation. The panel is chaired by the Head of Fostering and Adoption, legal and Group Managers from Fostering, Adoption and Connected Persons are also in attendance.

2.3. Bromley is proud to be the first London borough to be awarded the '*Working towards Quality Mark*' in Early Permanence and have been benefiting from focal work on consolidating the Early Permanence service.

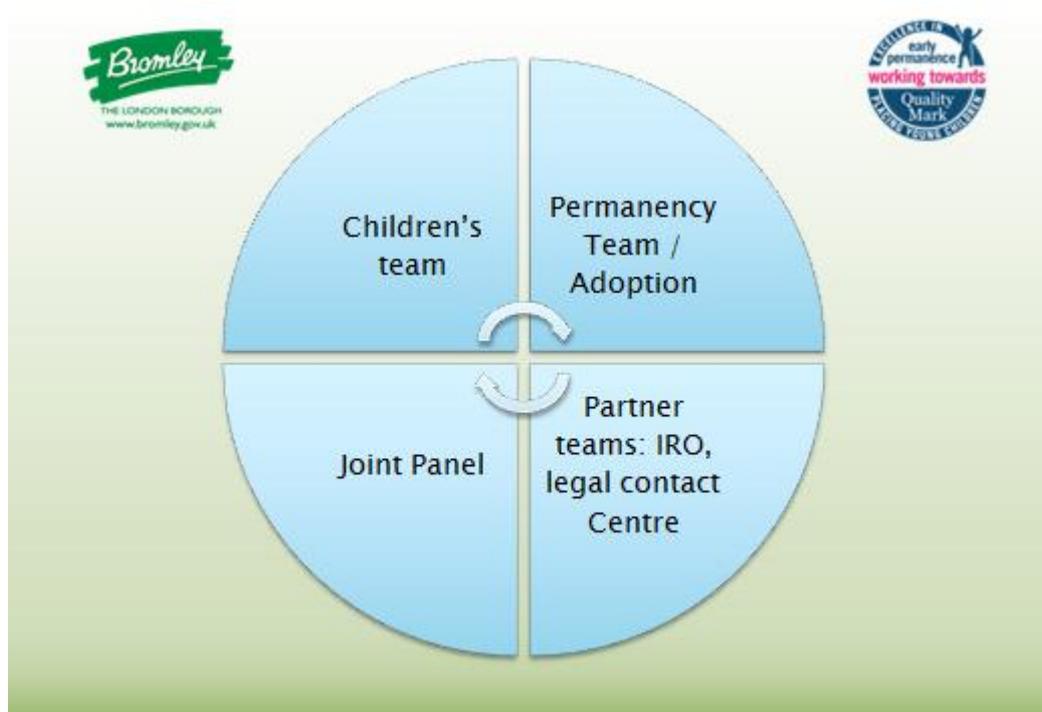
2.4. Fostering for adoption is becoming an established early permanence practice in Bromley, reflected through eight placements made so far (2 placements made in the financial year 2016/2017, 3 in the year 2017/2018 and 3 in the year 2018/2019).

2.5. Fostering for adoption and dual approval of adopters as foster carers was also evident in last year's practice. Whilst only one Bromley adopter was temporarily approved as a fostering for adoption carer for a specific child in the financial year 2016/2017, in the year 2017/2018 we had one Bromley adopter temporarily approved fostering for adoption carer for a specific child and a further 4 adopters being dually approved as early permanence carers via our new Joint 'Adoption and Fostering Panel'.

There were 6 dually approved early permanence carers in the year 2018/2019.

2.6. An Early Permanence Unit (EPU for short) was created in Bromley in 18/19, a platform for joint working across Referral & Assessment, Adoption team and sections of other relevant teams and panels in identifying, tracking and co-working early permanence cases.

The Early Permanence Unit brings together various practitioners and processes already operating in Bromley focusing on early permanence into a virtual unit. The joint working has enabled earlier identification of children where early permanence and early family finding was required and therefore avoided delay in child's achieving permanency.



### 3. Children with an Adoption Plan

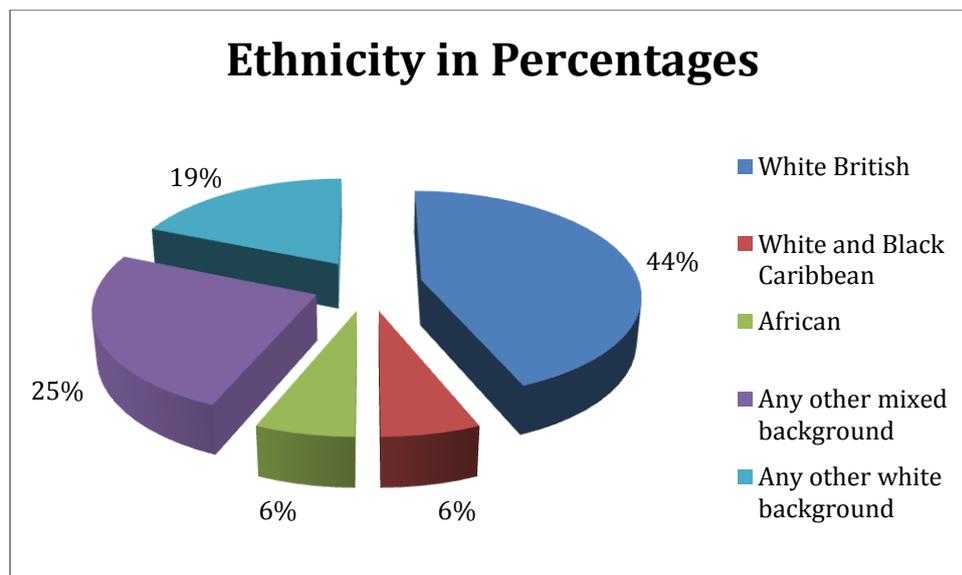
3.1. There were 16 children with an Agency decision for adoption in 2018/19, of which 9 were male and 7 were female. Of this cohort, there were two sibling groups of 2 to be placed together.

The ages of this cohort of children when an adoption decision was made were as follows:

Age	Number
Under 12 months	8
Aged 1-2	6
Aged 2-3	1
Over 5	1

3.2. In terms of their ethnic backgrounds, of the cohort of 16 children:

- 7 were of White British heritage
- 1 was of White and Black Caribbean background
- 1 was of African background
- 4 were of Any other mixed background
- 3 were of Any other white background



3.3. There was an increase in the number of ADM adoption decisions granted with 16 in the year 2018/19 compared to 13 ADMs in 2017/18.

3.4. There is also a decrease in the number of sibling groups requiring a placement together in 2018/19, comparing to the previous years and an increase in the number of children under the age of one. Bromley undertakes a comprehensive Together or Apart assessment in circumstances where separation of siblings may be required to determine the best permanence option.

3.5. Of the cohort of 16 children who had adoption plans agreed in the year 2018/19, decisions for adoption was rescinded in the same years for three of these children, 2 returning home to parent and one being placed with family.

## 4. Children Placed For Adoption in 2018/2019

Adoption performance has continued to improve in the year 18/19, both in terms of timescales and also number of children placed for adoption.

Following an Adoption diagnostic of our performance, a Family Finding Lead role was created in September 2017. This is a senior practitioner with dedicated role in family finding for children with adoption plans from early stages of the child care planning.

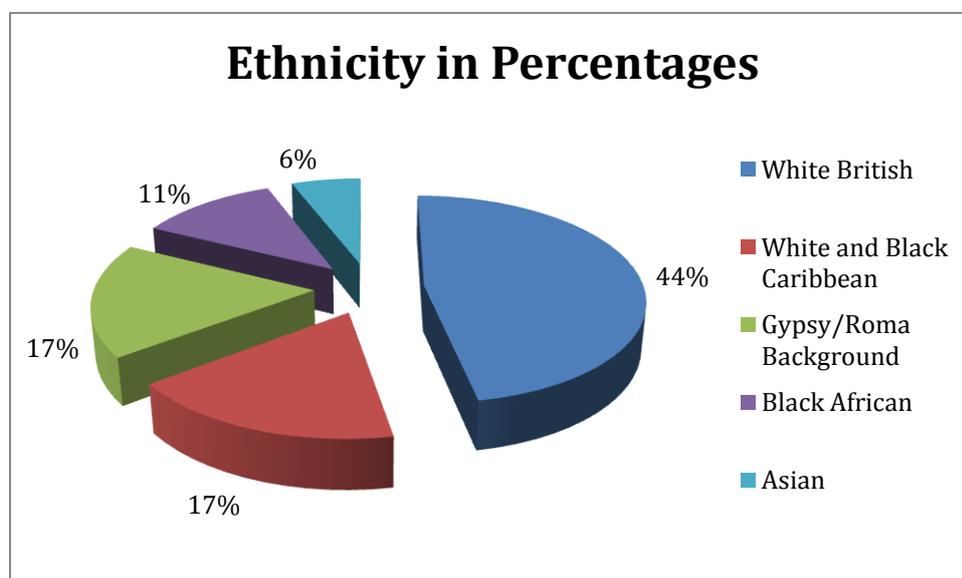
The Family Finding Lead undertakes the family finding in house and nationally for all cases where adoption is the plan, or likely to be the plan/ early family finding, working closely with practitioners from other teams, services or partner agencies.

4.1. There were 9 Bromley looked after children placed with prospective adopters during the year 18/19.

In terms of gender, there were 5 male and 4 female children, with the eldest being 8 year old and the youngest 8 months old at the time of adoption placement.

4.2 In terms of ethnicity, out of the 9 children placed:

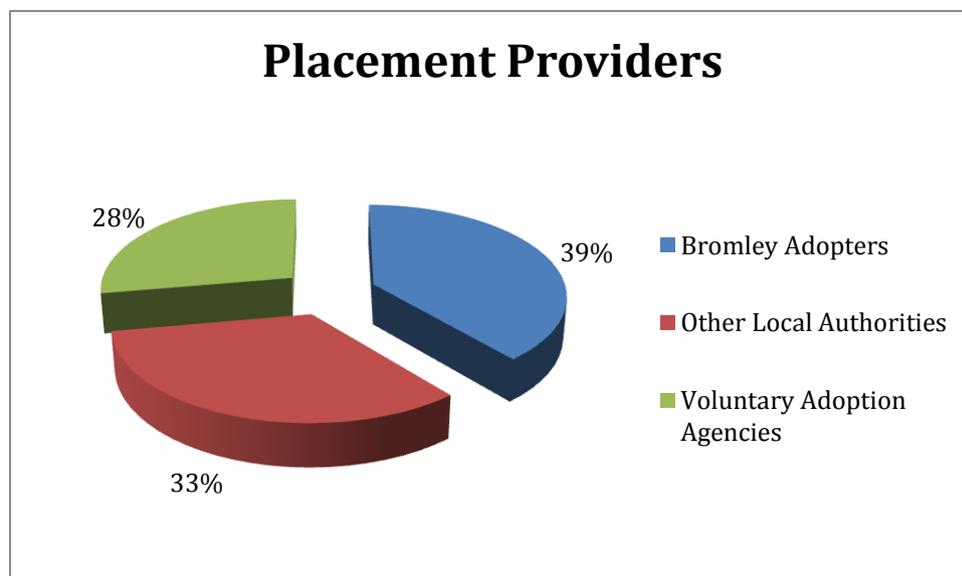
- 3 were of White British heritage
- 2 were of White and Black Caribbean background
- 1 was of any other black background
- 1 was of white and Asian background
- 2 were of Any other white background



In the year 2018-2019 we have continued to consider plans for adoption for children with significant health needs and disabilities. This included a 18 months old with complex health needs and significant disabilities.

4.3 Of the cohort of 9 children placed for adoption, 3 had initially been placed with their carer as 'fostering for adoption' placements (one at birth and the others at a few weeks old).

- 4.4. In terms of placement provider, of the cohort of 9 children, 5 were placed with Bromley adopters, 2 were placed with adopters from other local authorities and 2 were placed with adopters from voluntary adoption agencies under inter-agency arrangements.



- 4.5. As at 31 March 2019, there were 10 children in total waiting to be placed for adoption. The Family finding status as at 31st March 2019 for these children was:

- Actively family finding for 3 children
- Links already identified for 6 children and awaiting presentation at matching panel
- 1 child had been matched and introductions were in progress

## 5. Children Made Subject to Adoption Orders

- 5.1. 18 children were made subject to Adoption orders in 2018/19

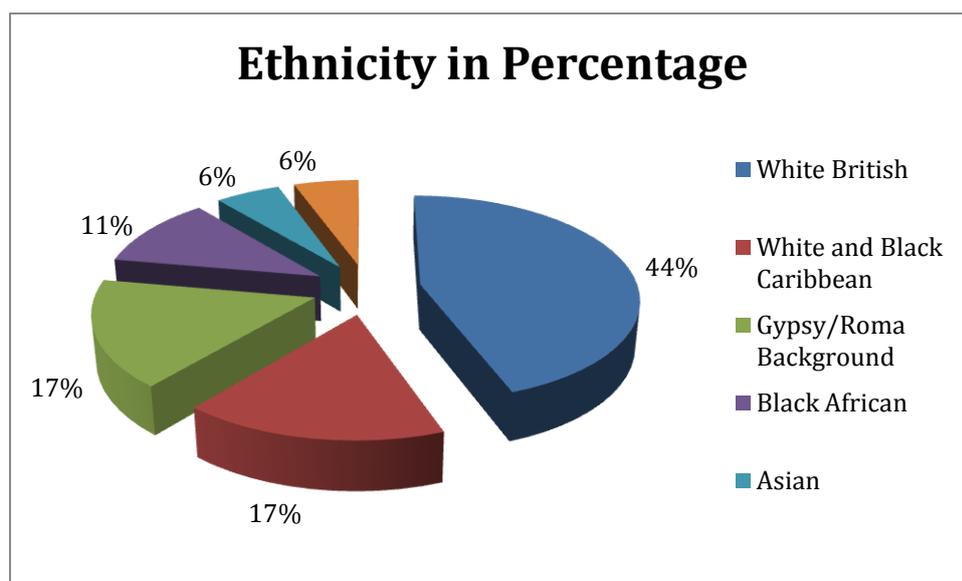
5.2. Out of the 18 children subject to an Adoption order, the eldest child was aged 9 years old at the time the Adoption order was granted and the youngest child was aged 11 months.

- 5.3 Of the 18 children cohort:

- there were three sibling groups of 2 adopted together and 12 individual children
- 7 of the children were female and 11 were male
- 7 of the children had been placed for adoption within the same year 2018/19

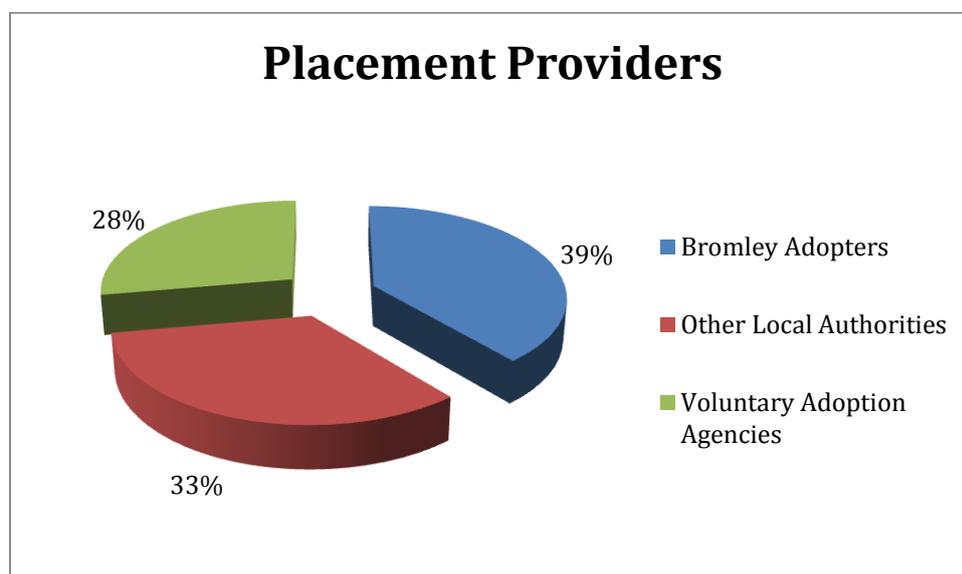
5.4 In terms of children's ethnic background, out of the 18 children:

- 8 were of White British heritage
- 3 were of White and Black Caribbean background
- 3 were of Gypsy/ Roma background
- 2 were of Black African background
- 1 was of white and Asian background
- 1 was of Any other white background



5.5. In terms of placement provider, of the 18 children adopted in the year 2018/19

- 7 of the children were adopted by Bromley adopters
- 6 were adopted by adopters from other local authorities
- 5 were adopted by adopters from voluntary adoption agencies



## 6. Adoption scorecards

The Adoption Scorecard shows that timescales for children being adopted in Bromley are also improving from a low starting point:

**A1:** 440 days average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted during 2016-2019. National threshold being 426 days.

**A2:** 171 days average time between a local authorities receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (2016-2019). National threshold being 121 days.

The published scorecards continue to be affected by legacy cases and a specific long adoption timeframe of a 15 year old adopted in 2016.

## 7. Panel

7.1. A Joint overarching Adoption and Fostering Panel was created in January 2018 to ensure that decisions relating to children, prospective adopters and foster carers are not delayed as the joint panel will meet at least every fortnight.

Our Joint Panel works in line with Adoption and Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards for Adoption and Fostering and allows for the dual approval of adopters as foster carers under the early permanence scheme.

7.2. Our Joint panel central list incorporates panel members with a wide range of personal and professional experience in the fields of adoption and fostering. Induction training and professional development courses were offered to panel members in 18/19, training jointly with the adoption social workers.

7.3. The adoption panel have a quality assurance role to support and challenge performance within the adoption service. Quarterly meetings took place in 2018/19 with the management group, independent chair and vice-chairs as well as other key staff to facilitate good communication between the panel and the agency to focus on continuing improvement.

7.4. The panel is served by a fulltime Panel Adviser also a manager in the Permanency service and who is responsible for effective operation of the Joint Panel, agenda setting, the quality assurance of panel papers (including CPR's) and takes a lead in the recruitment of panel members. Panel contributes significantly to the positive work of the Safeguarding and Social Care Division in planning for children and providing a key quality assurance role.

- 7.5 Bromley Joint Panel takes place every fortnight and alongside fostering matters, it also recommends prospective adopters and prospective early permanence carers for approval; matches of approved adopters with specific Bromley children; and the suitability of relinquished children for adoption. The final decision, in all of these cases, based on the panel's recommendation is made by the Agency Decision Maker, the Director of Children's Social Care.

## 8. Recruitment and Approval of Adopters

- 8.1. Our Recruitment Strategy has been refreshed to increase and maintain a diverse pipeline of adopters to reflect service and national need. The early permanence scheme was incorporated in the recruitment strategy.
- 8.2. Two experienced Senior Practitioners in the adoption team have been leading on Recruitment and Preparation of adopters, working closely with recruitment leads from our consortium partners, to ensure unified, consistent and co-ordinated recruitment activities, information sessions and Stage 1 and Stage 2 preparation groups.

Information sessions and Preparation Groups for adopters were held regularly throughout the year in partnership with two South Adoption Consortium partners Greenwich and Lewisham.

- 8.3. Early Permanency featured in our adopter recruitment and assessment. This is discussed with prospective adopters at point of enquiry and throughout the process: information pack, information session, Stage 1 and 2.

Our prospective adopters with an interest in 'Fostering for Adoption' attend the training run by Coram BAAF during their assessment and their family and friends can access the Information group run by Lewisham adoption team, one of our consortium partners.

- 8.4. Bromley's experienced adopters continue to contribute delivering these sessions, offering prospective adopters an opportunity for individual discussion and learning from their adoption experience. Last year we set up an 'Adopter Forum' where adopters contribute directly to our recruitment strategy, publicity materials and adoption practice developments in general.
- 8.5. The number of approved adopters has increased, with 11 approved last year, 6 of which were dually approved.
- . Our need to recruit and develop adopters able to adopt harder to place children and BME remains crucial which includes older children and sibling groups.

- 8.6. Adopter approval timelines has improved for the year 2018/19 but this will require consistent review and rigorous management oversight to maintain appropriate pace and challenge for adopters. The ambition is to work within the timescales for the adoption process of 6 months from beginning to end. In moving forward the role of Adopter recruitment will fall to the Regional Adoption Agency and will be covered within the 2019/20 Adoption Annual report.

### **Intercountry Adoption**

The Adoption Team is responsible for providing a service to people living within the borough that wish to consider inter-country adoption and the work was last year undertaken by the Inter-country Adoption Centre (IAC) through the membership arrangements we have with them.

## **9. Adoption and Post Adoption Support Services**

- 9.1. Adoption support offered to adoptive families has been to a high standard and we have been making good use of adoption support fund to access services for adopted children and their families.

We run a 5 day a week duty system for both adopter recruitment and support which has contributed to offering a prompt, timely and consistent support to our prospective and approved adopters.

- 9.2. In 2018/2019, the service received 45 new requests for adoption support which resulted in new adoption support assessments being conducted. Some of these resulted in successful Adoption Support Fund applications for funding independent therapeutic resources to support families with complex needs. A total of 87 families' received post-adoption support packages via our post-adoption support team during the year 2018-2019.

A total of 117 applications were made to Adoption Support Fund in 2018/19 and funding of £ 345,223 secured which enabled us to purchase various resources for our adoptive families. This included Family therapy, specialist assessments, sensory integration programme, therapeutic parenting courses, family mediation provisions, play therapy and music therapy. In addition the post adoption support team provided family mediation, therapeutic life history work, Video-intervention to promote Positive Parenting (VIPP) and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP).

- 9.3. A successful annual picnic event was held in the summer of 2018 attended by adopted children and their adoptive families. Feedback from the event was

extremely positive with adoptive parents having an opportunity to network and children engaging and participating with other adopted children.

- 9.4. The team had eleven workshops on offer for 2018/19. These included: Contact, Communicating with children using playful approaches, Transitions, Explaining to children the journey to adoption, Legal workshop, CAMHS services explained, Education workshops, Social Media, Explaining traumatic histories, Re-constructing life history books and How to care about your own adult relationships

The uptake on the workshops for Bromley adopters was minimal last year and this reflects the fact that our adopters do not reside in Bromley and families understandably utilise services in the local authorities in which they live. The details of the workshops are now circulated to 'We Are Family' (adopter support group, South London area) along with local consortium members to extend the offer of the adoption workshops to our consortium adopters.

- 9.5. Educational support to adopters is provided by Bromley's Head Teacher of Virtual School for Children Looked After. The Virtual Head supports adoption via workshops and consultations with adoption service to support adopters in accessing the right educational provision for Children Looked After.

Additionally the Adoption Support Fund has been used to provide play therapy resources in schools and this has reduced the need to access Pupil Premium Plus fund being used.

### **Post Adoption Contact:**

The letterbox arrangements are managed as part of the post adoption support duty system. At 31st March 2019, the adoption team were managing 563 letterbox contact exchanges for 228 children.

The duty social worker provides the initial point of contact for information, advice and support to all those involved in indirect contact between adopted child and their birth families. If counselling or intensive support is required a designated social worker will be allocated for further work.

There were 14 adopted children with direct contact arrangements in place with birth families members in 2018/19. The contact was mostly with siblings, but there is an increase in the number of direct contact arrangements involving both birth parents and grandparents. Each child will have one, two or more direct contacts annually with one or more parties.

Contact arrangements require a great deal of time and sensitivity from the service. The post adoption social worker prepares adoptive family members and birth family members to ensure the best possible outcomes from these contacts. The contacts are emotional and require sensitivity and empathy on the part of the adoption social worker. Direct

contacts are an important piece of work for the child as it assists identity formation, reinforces important attachments made to significant people and promotes the cultural identity. Direct contacts continue until the child is 18 or until either party requests a review to either increase or changing contacts arrangements to better meet the needs of the child.

### **Work with Birth Families:**

It is the responsibility of local authority adoption agencies to ensure that birth families affected by adoption have access to independent advice, information and support when the plan for the child becomes adoption. This is provided in Bromley through referral to the adoption support team. We offer a counselling service to birth parents affected by adoption to help assist them with loss and separation. As part of this work we offer advice with letter writing and at the end of the continuum, preparation and support for '*Wishing Well Contact*' or with direct contact should there be a plan for this to occur post-adoption. During 2018/19, 12 birth parents received birth parent counselling and support.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the provision of an access to information and intermediary service for birth relatives of adopted adults (to compliment that existing for adult adoptees) which would trace the adoptee and seek their views on contact. The adoption team have successfully reunited three adopted adults with their birth family members in 2018/19.

Any birth relative who requests an intermediary service is allocated an adoption support worker who provides them with support and advice.

Last year we established a support group to include all birth relatives who have been affected by adoption. This support group takes place on a monthly basis and is facilitated by a member of the team. It is envisaged that speakers will attend the group as identified by the group members.

### **Birth Records Counselling:**

The Local Authority has a legal responsibility to provide a birth records counselling service, and an Access to Information (ATI) service, which may lead to an intermediary service and possible reunion. There were 18 new referrals from adopted adult's during 2018/19. This is a very important part of the continuum of the adoption process and for many adopted people (particularly for those who were adopted before 1975) as they were informed that they would never have contact with their birth family members. Often this group of people are not even aware of their birth name nor have even seen a photo of their birth parents. This part of the service is a life changing and emotional journey for individuals who have been separated for many years without contact since early childhood.

The waiting time for this service has significantly reduced in 2018/19 to immediate allocation for a service; this is something which our service is very proud of achieving as most local authorities have many months of waiting for this service.

### **Adoption Allowances:**

A number of 65 adoption allowances were reviewed in 2018/19. This was primarily to pay regular adoption allowance payments in relation to adopted children. There were in addition to one-off payments made towards the costs of introductions and settling in allowance.

This payment is reviewed annually and is means tested.

### **Life story Work and Later in Life Letters**

We have a dedicated Life Story Worker in the permanency service whose role is to promote children's life story work as a continuum from early stages of permanency planning to post-adoption and working together with birth families, carer's and social workers from early stages and ensure that Life Story books are completed with no delay and are of a good quality.

Young children received into care through an order, and particularly those with a plan for adoption, have good support to understand their care history and the reasons why they come into care. A dedicated adoption life story worker in conjunction with child's social worker writes a life story book and later in life letters in child friendly language, and undertakes sometimes imaginative and resourceful direct work with children to help them make sense of their stories. All children with SGOs also have later in life letters.

## **10. Disruptions, Complaints & Allegations and Compliments**

- 10.1. No placements disrupted during 2018/19.
- 10.2. There was a slight increase in complaints with 6 in 2018/19 compared to 5 in 2017/18, and 3 in 2016/17.
- 10.3. There were no allegations in 2018/19.

- 10.4. A log of compliments was maintained in the last year. Various compliments were recorded from adopters, foster carers, birth parents, Judges or other professionals.

## 11. Regional Working

- 11.1. The South London Consortium comprises of seven local authorities Bromley, Croydon, Wandsworth, Greenwich, Lewisham, Lambeth, Southwark and four voluntary agencies Coram, Mosaic, Diagrama and TACT. The consortium aims to maximise placement choice for children and to minimise delay in family finding across the consortium authorities by sharing prospective adopters. We are working closely with each other and sharing family finding/ profiling events or staff training and conferences.
- 11.2. The quarterly management meetings are used to clarify and develop policy and practice issues across the consortium. The sharing of local practice guidance and procedures facilitates good working relationships and avoids duplication of work across the consortium.
- 11.3. Approved adopters are added to national database Link Maker under our the consortium section thus ensuring that family finding workers have access to a wider pool of adopters for the children they are finding families for.
- 11.4. A steering group has been established and led by our colleagues in Southwark to develop the early permanence scheme across the Consortium, along with training and support groups available to fostering for adoption carers and led by Coram BAAF.
- 11.5. The key aim as a consortium is for effectiveness of collaboration in matching children to adopters to maximise early placement of children for adoption and to offer a range of adoption support activities through specific partnerships amongst members. This includes:
- Joint Preparation groups
  - Joint-bids to the Adoption Support Fund
  - Early Permanence training for workers
  - Design and promotion of pan-London events and training
  - Support to '*We Are Family*' group
  - Early Permanence Steering Group
  - Early Permanence Friends and Family
  - Black Adopters Support Group
  - Family finding events

## 12. Developments and Ambitions for 2019/20 work in progress

- Bromley along with 7 other Local Authorities to join CORAM 'Ambitious for Adoption' Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) in summer of 2019. This arrangement was approved by the DfE and developed into a full partnership in September 2019. The RAA will focus on excellent practice and improved outcomes for children by applying established best practice as core, this includes early permanence planning and placement, preventive as well as therapeutic adoption support utilising evidenced programmes, approaches recognised as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.
- Continuously reviewing internal monitoring and review processes and systems to scrutinise if they could be more effective and efficient to support us in fulfilling our service's objectives.
- Continue to work closely with adoption stakeholders and the Regional Adoption Agency to improve adoption practice.
- To continue to further reduce the timescales for children with an adoption plan and for adopter approval; we aim to improve our Adoption scorecard and be within the top 10% nationally.
- Working closely with CORAM BAAF and partner agencies to use their expertise to further develop our early permanence service and achieve the '*Full Quality Mark in Early Permanence*'.
- To continue to develop our therapeutic services and set up a therapeutic unit as part of our Permanency service which will focus on supporting the foster carers, special guardians, delivering support groups and training courses for foster carers and guardians.

**Vicky West**

**Head of Permanency**

**Ana Parr**

**Group Manager Adoption**