



Annual Adoption and Permanence Report

2009-2010

**Fostering and Adoption Service
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1. Introduction

The report will provide detail of the adoption and permanence work undertaken within the Children and Young People's Trust [CYPT] from April 2009-March 2010, including information on adoption activity and compliance with the national adoption standards.

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

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

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

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

2. Adoption and Permanence Service

The Adoption and Permanence Service Manager has continued to be Karen Devine for 2009/10. This service comprises the adoption and permanence team and the family and friends 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 team is made up of a number of experienced social work practitioners, social work resource officers and an adoption support teacher. The team provides a duty service for prospective adopters and for adoptive families and birth parents that are not currently receiving a service from the team. Team members take a lead role in providing other services such as birth records counselling, adoption support work and step-parent adoption. The practice manager who acts for the CYPT as the Adoption Support Services Advisor manages staff that have a dedicated role in providing post adoption support including letterbox and direct contact arrangements.

The Adoption Agency Advisor, Michael Wilson, plays a key role in ensuring the effective running of the Adoption and Permanence Panel, providing a quality assurance role in relation to reports being prepared for panel and for providing specialist advice to staff within the CYPT in relation to adoption and permanence work.

It is essential that there are close working links between the Fostering and Adoption service and the other area and city wide teams involved in working with children in care and their families. Since March 2010 the Fostering & Adoption service has been managed within the Integrated Area Working branch.

Staff within the service provide consultation on all aspects of practice relating to permanence planning or family and friends care to area social work teams. Occasional training events are also provided for area social workers and managers and staff also deliver training in relation to adoption and permanence planning issues within the CYPT core skills training programme.

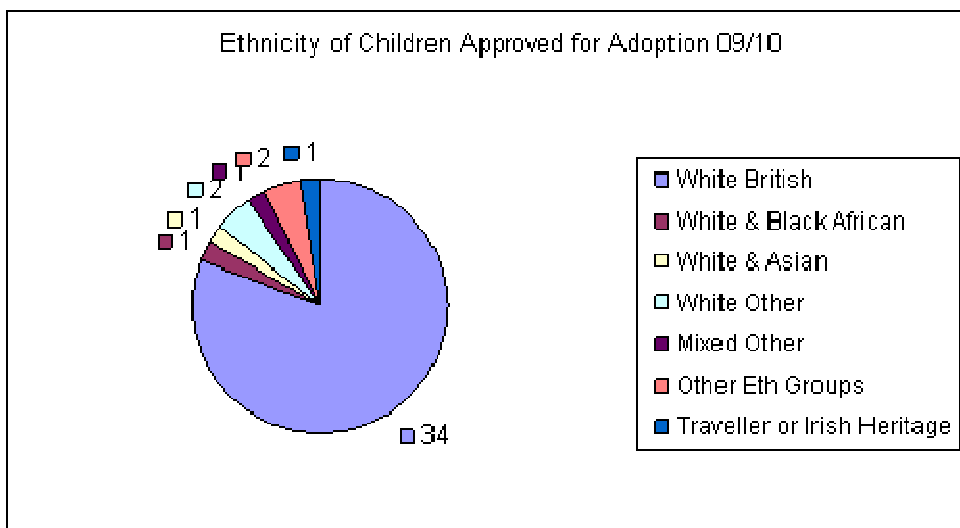
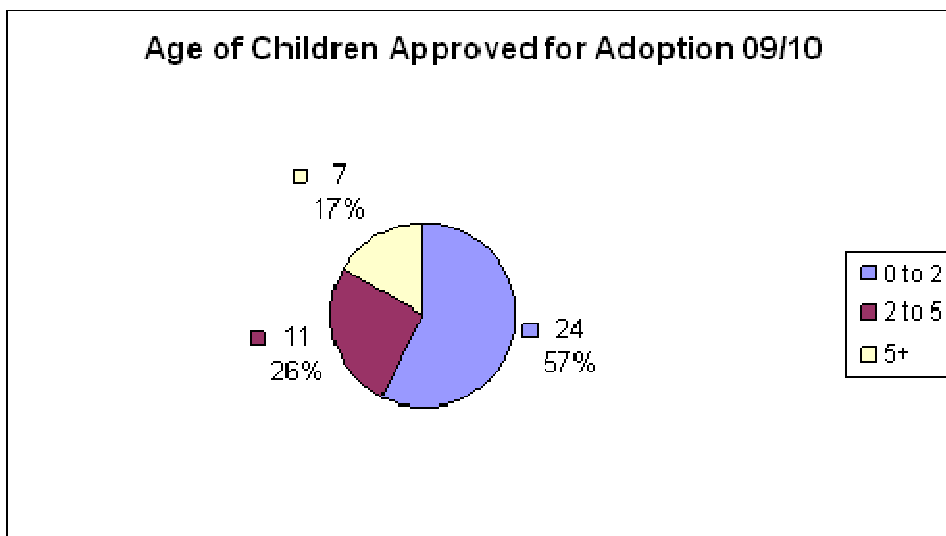
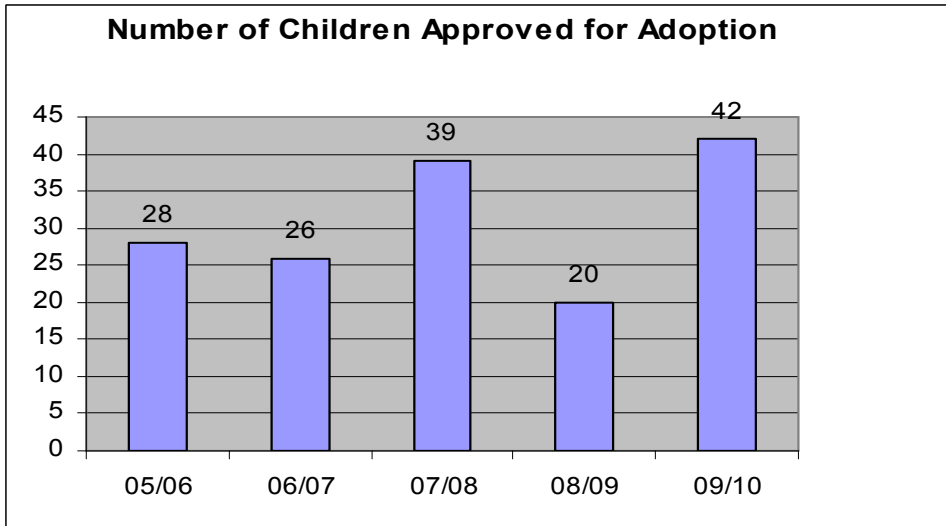
Brighton and Hove continues to be a member of the South East Adoption Consortium and the Service Manager attends the quarterly meetings of the Consortium Managers as well as representing Brighton and Hove at the British Agencies of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) quarterly meetings of the South East adoption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

The Adoption service was last inspected by Ofsted in January 2009 and this was fully reported on in the annual report for 08/09. The outcome of the inspection was very positive with the service being judged overall as 'good' with 'outstanding' for promotion of equality and diversity. It is not anticipated that the service will be inspected again until 2012 as it is a requirement that adoption services are inspected on a 3 yearly cycle.

3. Adoption Agency Activity 2009/10

Children approved for adoption

There were 42 children identified as needing to be placed for adoption in 2009/10. This is a significant increase from the figures for 2008/9 and includes 3 babies that were voluntarily relinquished by their mothers. There have been fluctuations in numbers of children with plans for adoption in recent years, for example the 08/09 numbers reflected a significant number of sibling groups. However this increase relates to the sustained rise in the numbers of children coming into care and subject to court proceedings over the last 18 months as the number of children in care has increased by 16% from April 2009 (399) to March 2010 (467). Panel also considers plans for permanence through fostering for children under 9 years and there were 10 children within the year that were approved at panel with a plan for permanent fostering.



This cohort of children with plans for adoption in 2009/10 comprise 30 single children that need an adoptive placement, 4 sibling groups of 2 and one sibling group of 3. The graphs above also give a breakdown in terms of age and ethnicity.

As of end March 2010 there were 26 children with a plan for adoption approved at panel that were still waiting to be placed with an adoptive family. Of these 26 children, 11 were still subject to outstanding court proceedings as the plan had been agreed at panel within the last 3 months and a Placement Order had not yet been made as of 31st March 2010. It is not possible to advertise for these children or expedite placement plans until a Placement Order has been made and this can sometimes be 2 months or more following the panel decision.

Of these 26 children 7 were single children under 2 on 31st March and 4 of these children were matched with adopters by end June 2010 and 2 of the other 3 have potential matches that will be taken to panel within next few months. There were also 7 single children aged 2 – 5 years. Of these 7 children one has now been matched with adopters and 2 other children are currently placed with foster carers that are being assessed as adoptive parents for them. There is now a plan for one of the other children to be matched with Brighton and Hove adopters and family finding is underway for the other 3 children that all have specific special needs. There is also one single child over five years with a dual plan for adoption or permanent fostering and this reflects the difficulty of finding adoptive parents for a child of this age with particular complex needs as a result of his experience of neglect and abuse.

There were also 5 sibling groups that were waiting to be matched as of 31st March. Two of these sibling groups of 2 have now been matched with Brighton & Hove adopters. There is one sibling group of 3 with a potential match that will be going to panel within next few months and 2 other 2 sibling groups with active family finding still ongoing.

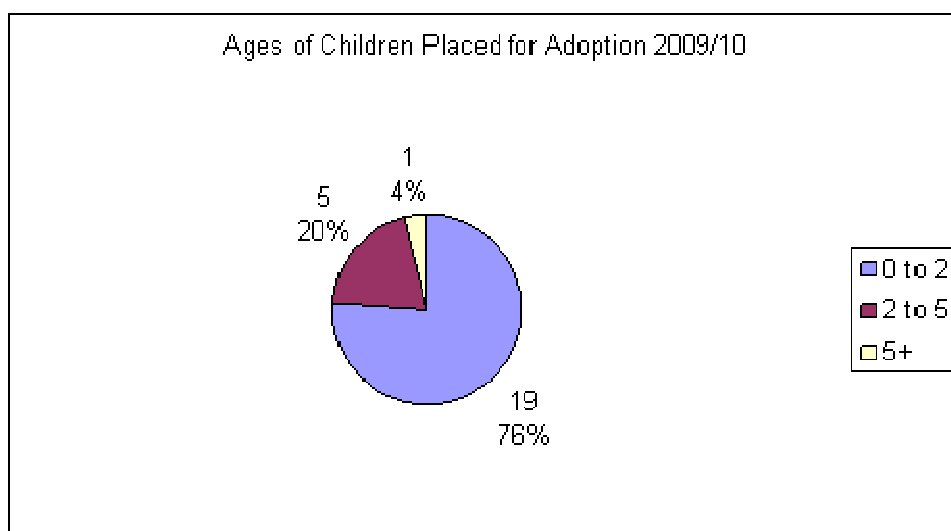
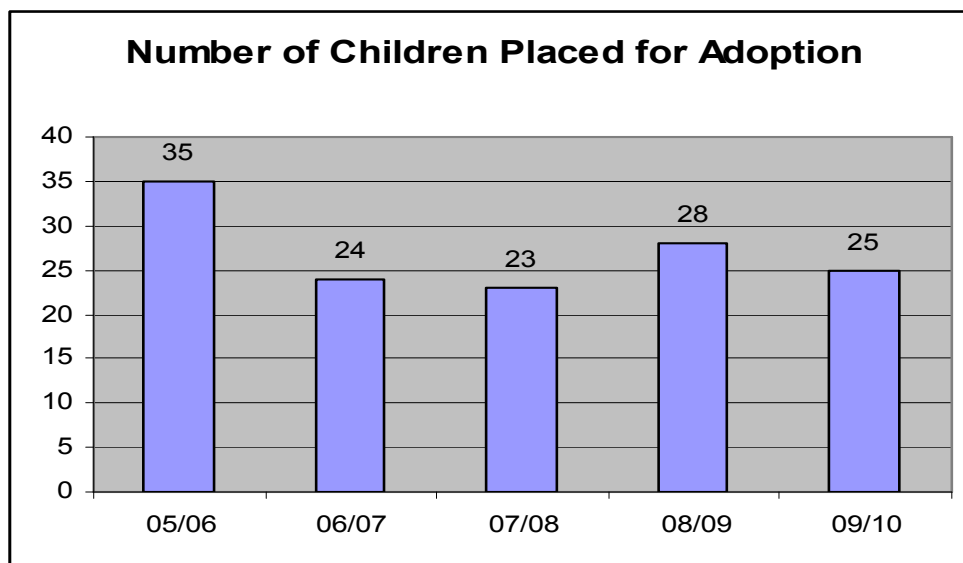
Profile of Children placed for adoption

There were 25 children matched with adopters during 2009/10 and two children that were matched with concurrent carers [foster carers that are able to go on to provide an adoptive placement if that becomes the plan for the child].

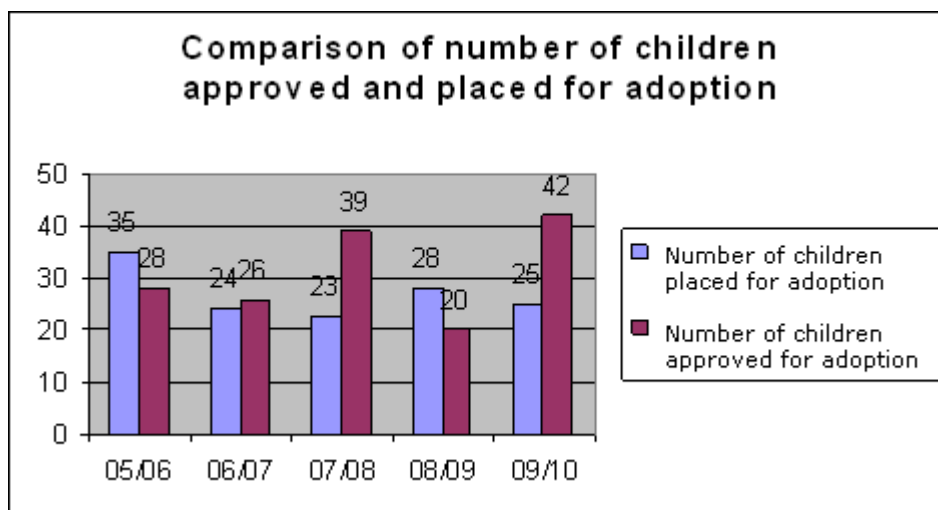
Pascale Davison is the lead Practice Manager for family finding for children that need an adoptive family. She takes the lead in convening permanence planning meetings to consider in detail the needs of the child, the preparation work that needs to be undertaken to support that child for a move and the family finding strategy. She has 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.

Of these 25 children there were 14 boys and 11 girls, 21 single placements and 2 sibling groups of 2. The age profile of these children is reflected in the graph below which shows that there remain a high number of children under 2 with a plan for adoption. Twenty one of these children are White/British and of the remaining four children two of them were placed transracially and two with adopters that reflected their ethnicity. There were 4 children of this cohort with a specific disability.



It is a significant achievement that 20 of these children were matched within 6 months of the plan for adoption being approved at panel. Of the remaining 5 the delay in identifying appropriate adopters related to the ethnicity of the children and need to endeavour to find adoptive families that in some way reflect their heritage or because of their complex special needs.



The Adoption & Permanence team has been very successful at identifying adoptive families for children under 2 including black or minority ethnic children or children with complex needs. Many of these young children have been profoundly affected by their exposure to alcohol or drugs in utero. There is now a great deal more known about Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and this has been a feature in a high number of children coming to panel with a plan for adoption.

The Nurse Consultant for Children in care has done some analysis of the profile of children in care under 5 that were referred to the Medical Advisor for adoption or permanence medicals in 2009/10. There were 49 children under 5 years seen by the Medical Advisor during this time and 33 of those children had been exposed to harmful substances prior to birth. Of the 33 children 14 had been exposed to problematic alcohol use by their mother in pregnancy and 10 of the 14 had also been exposed to other harmful drugs. There were 5 babies exposed to harmful drugs without evidence of also problematic alcohol use in pregnancy. There were also 14 babies exposed to significant levels of tobacco use in pregnancy where there was no evidence of problematic alcohol or drug use.

Of the 25 children matched with adopters in the year 20 of those children were placed with Brighton & Hove adopters. Of the five other children two were placed with adopters from within the South East Consortium, one was placed with adopters from another authority and the remaining two with adopters from a voluntary adoption agency. The service would always look to place a child with in-house adopters if possible but family finding has to be extended further if for example there are no in-house adopters able to meet a child's needs in terms of ethnicity or it has been agreed when considering the matching needs of the child that they need to live at some distance from Brighton and Hove for safety reasons if it is felt that the birth family may pose a risk to the stability of the placement.

A high number of the children placed last year have ongoing contact with their birth family. There are plans in place for twenty three of the children to have on-going letterbox contact with a number of different relatives and 12 of the

children have proposed direct contact arrangements with one or more relatives. Contact plans are still developing for a further three children which highlight this growing area of practice and key support that the service provides to adoptive families and birth family members.

There were 29 children adopted during the year and an additional 12 children that had been in care for more than 6 months that were made subject to a Special Guardianship Order.

There were no disruptions of adoptive placements pre adoption order during 2009/10.

Profile of adopters

There were 21 adopters approved during the year plus two further carers that were approved as concurrent foster carers. This is again a positive achievement for the service as it is an increase on the number of adopters approved in 08/09 [17].

Mary Angel is the Practice Manager within the service that takes the lead role in terms of recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. She has oversight of all the recruitment and preparation processes for prospective adopters and works to ensure that there is a continual pool of approved adoptive parents that can provide homes to Brighton & Hove children in care with plans for adoption.

A decision was made last year to close the specialist concurrency team and the base budget for staffing for the service was reduced accordingly. However the service will still endeavour to provide concurrent placements for the very small number of children where that may be an appropriate care plan however responsibility for assessment work with the birth family remains with the area team.

Of the 21 approved adoptive households 4 were Black or 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.

There were 4 other assessments that were started and discontinued for a number of reasons relating to the prospective adopters personal circumstances.

Three of the 21 adoptive families approved during the year involved assessments of the child's current foster carers. These were not concurrency placements but situations where a special relationship had developed between the foster carers and the child in their care and although they had not previously considered adoption they decided that they wanted to put themselves forward to provide a permanent and secure home for the child in their care via adoption. The local authority would also consider such a care plan carefully if foster carers do indicate their wish to be considered as

adoptive parents as this obviates the need for the child to move again. However the foster carers are expected to attend the preparation group for prospective adopters and their assessment is focused on their motivation and understanding of the lifelong commitment of adoption and implications of this for all in their family.

As of 31st March 2010 there were 15 Brighton & Hove approved adopters that had not yet been matched with a child or children. Of these six were in early discussion about a potential placement.

There were 3 Brighton & Hove adopters that had children placed from other authorities during the year, two had single placements and one set of adopters had a sibling group of two.

Step parent adoptions

There have been 7 step parent adoptions completed in 2009/10 with a further 6 in the process of assessment as of 31st March 2010. This represents a decrease from last years figures [14 step parent adoptions completed], although there were 5 other assessments that were started and discontinued for a variety of reasons and 3 others waiting to be allocated.

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 25 children placed with prospective adopters 20 were placed within the required timescales of the decision being made that they should be placed for adoption. The reasons for delays in over 6 months from agreement of the plan for adoption to approval of a placement has already been highlighted and reflects in part the lag between approval of the plan at Panel and the making of the Placement Order and the specific needs of the children needing placement.

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

All of the 41 children identified as needing to be placed for adoption had a permanence plan agreed at the 4 month LAC review [some of which included adoption as part of a concurrent or twin track care plan]. Of these 41 children, 27 were presented to panel within 2 months of the plan being agreed at panel and 8 children within 4 months. 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.

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 21 adopter assessments, 7 were completed within the required 8 month period. Of the remaining; 3 took between 9 months and 12 months and the rest took between 12 and 18 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. There has also been a very high volume of children's cases needing to come to panel during the year and this has 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.

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 post adoption contact, contact point, adoption support, adopter recruitment and assessment. An Independent Review was undertaken of the Consortium during the previous year which recommended the development of a consortium administrator post and consortium website to improve the sharing of details of approved prospective adopters and children waiting for adoption. These proposals have been considered for some time within the consortium but agreement to funding to date not been secured across all agencies so no progress has been made in either developing a consortium website or administrator. A business case is being made for the investment by each agency of the £5k required to recruit a co-ordinator as the consortium will need to become more effective if it is to provide sufficient adopters for the increase in children this year with an adoption plan.

There have been 4 Consortium Practitioners meetings during the year with a variety of topics being covered including attachment style interview in adoption assessment, assessment and preparation of adopters with birth children, therapy techniques in adoption support, and assessing same sex adopters.

6. Recruitment & Preparation

The Adoption and Permanence Service received 189 enquiries to the duty service throughout the year. Two information sessions attended by 83 people were held throughout the year including another very successful information day that was held as part of National Adoption week in November 09. 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. Two preparation groups including the additional 'motivation and loss' days were held during the year for prospective adopters.

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

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

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

Inter country adoption

Since 2005 Brighton & Hove has had a contract with Parents and Children Together [PACT], a voluntary adoption agency, to undertake the preparation, assessment and approval of inter country adopters. PACT has considerable specialist experience in this area of work and provides a dedicated service to people from Brighton & Hove that wish to adopt from abroad. Brighton & Hove just 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 2009/10 PACT sent out 17 information packs to prospective adopters and carried out 1 initial interview. They received 1 application and 1 adopter household was approved as inter country adopters. There are 4 Brighton & Hove inter country adopters that are approved and waiting for children to be placed from the countries that they are approved for.

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 both adoptive families, adopted children and birth families. This continues to remain an area of considerable growth and pressure within the Service. The Adoption Support Service Advisor in Brighton & Hove is Gillian Luckock and she maintains oversight of the range of adoption support services provided to all parties in the adoption process.

All staff within the Adoption and Permanence team are involved in some way with adoption support work. Social workers within the team continue to work with between 40 – 50 adoptive families at any one time and provide a duty service to respond 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.

Post Adoption Centre

Brighton and Hove City Council has continued to have a service level agreement with the Post Adoption Centre [PAC] to provide a helpline, monthly surgeries and time limited direct work with adopters, prospective adopters, adopted adults and birth families. In view of the value for money work within the CYPT and the need to make financial savings the Service will not be renewing this contract after September 2010 and the work will need to be absorbed in house.

Support groups

There are currently two evening adoption support groups facilitated by adoption social workers. Additionally there is a weekly parent and toddler group. 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.

During the year a time limited group for adopted children was also run by the service which was very successful. The aim will be to repeat this group again at some time in the future.

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 were well attended with 60 adults and children coming to join in the fun day.

In the last year the team ran two workshops on 'supporting your adopted child in school' and plan further workshops next year.

A bi-annual newsletter is also 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 manage 220 'letterbox' contacts where there is an exchange of letters or photos between the adoptive family and the birth family. Additionally there are 50-60 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).

This service is supported by dedicated workers who offer support and advice to all parties and keep all arrangements under review to ensure that they continue to meet the adopted child's needs over time. 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.

Work with birth families of adopted adults

The ACA 2002 brought with it an opportunity for the birth relatives of adopted adults to request an intermediary service, which would trace the adoptee and seek their views on contact. Only agencies that are specifically registered to carry out this work may do so and the Adoption and Permanence team continue not to have sufficient resources to offer this service. Any birth relative who requests an intermediary service is provided with support and advice and given the details of 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 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 have managed to reduce the waiting list for this service to less than 3 months. 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.

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 2009/10 was £570,009 in relation to 62 children. This represents a reduction of £47,803 on the previous year. 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. It is likely that there will continue to be pressures on this budget with the higher numbers of children coming through with a plan for adoption and the significant special needs of some of the children that the service is currently family finding for.

9. Family and Friends Team

The work of the Family and Friends team has continued to expand in line with the 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.

The Practice Managers in the Family and Friends team, Cas Short and Jackie Thompson-Ake take responsibility for the oversight of referrals into the team from the area social work team. 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 area teams on family and friends practice and quality assurance of viability and assessment work. They also contribute to the policy and practice development in this specialist area of work within the CYPT.

During 2009/10 the team experienced some staffing difficulties relating to staff leave and sickness and this combined with a significant increase in the volume of work resulted in a high number of assessments being undertaken

by independent social workers instructed within court proceedings. Not only is the use of such independent social workers significantly more costly but the quality of the assessments can be variable and there is not the level of accountability and supervision that is provided when the assessments are undertaken in-house.

By the end of the year the team was in a healthier staffing situation and a decision had been made as part of the value for money work being undertaken within the CYPT to recruit a number of additional freelance social workers that would undertake any assessment work that could not be managed in-house but who would be paid a fixed rate for the assessments and would be supervised by the Family and Friends team Practice Managers. This has proved a successful measure and should improve the quality of the assessments and the costs incurred in undertaking this work.

During 2009/10 there was also a considerable amount of development work undertaken by managers in the service. A new assessment tool has been developed by the Service which focuses specifically on evidencing the capacity and ability of the prospective carers to meet the needs of the children. A training workshop was put on for managers within the area teams to focus on family and friends practice and to launch this new assessment tool.

Within the year there were 31 approvals of new Family and Friends carers. In most cases the initial viability assessments are undertaken by the area team with the full assessments being completed by either staff in the Family and Friends team or independent social workers instructed within court proceedings. Not all the assessments progress to full approval as either family and friends foster carers or carers able to offer permanence through special guardianship.

The team also has responsibility for supervising family and friends approved foster carers and as of 31st March 2010 the team were supervising 24 such placements. There were also 4 placements allocated to freelance social workers to supervise due to the distance of these placements from Brighton & Hove.

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 Agency Advisor, Michael Wilson, 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 preparing reports for panel on either plans for children or reports on adoptive parents 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 Steve Barton.

There has been a sustained significant increase in the workload of panel over the last year. This in part reflects a change in practice for all adoption panels following a judicial review which determined that panel members should read all the expert reports in care proceedings or a summary of such reports if available. This has increased substantially the workload of panel members in reading and thoroughly preparing for panel meetings. During the year there has been a necessity at times to convene additional panels. The very high demand for panel time relates to the high number of family and friends assessments and the increasing numbers of children in the care system and numbers of children subject to court proceedings.

There new independent chair of panel Sarah Borthwick was appointed and 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 3 complaints made regarding the Adoption Service during the year. One complaint related to adopter recruitment and the practice of affording priority to out of area baby adopters in the recruitment process. It was explained that this prioritising of applications was necessary in order to meet the needs of the children we have waiting for adoption. Another complaint was made by prospective adopters who felt the matching process for 2 children they had been considering, had not been handled appropriately by the area team. The third complaint was from a single adopter who had had a child placed 2007 that disrupted within a few months and the adopter later

complained that the child should not have been placed with her. This is currently subject to Stage 2 of the corporate complaints process.

13. Strategic issues and forward plans

The Adoption and Permanence service like all parts of the CYPT that provide services to children in care has been affected by the significant rise in the children in care population since December 2008. The impact has been shown in the increase particularly in the numbers of children with plans for adoption and the increasing volume of family and friends assessments. 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 area of work. There will be continued discussions with area team managers to review this work whilst maintaining clear scrutiny of the decision making process. The rise in the numbers of children with plans for adoption also place a considerable demand on the team to maximise recruitment activity as there are also considerable financial consequences of not being able to place children with either in-house adopters or adopters from within the Consortium.

There has been an increase in referrals for relinquished babies and as this is a very specialist area of social work practice the team has played a lead role in the care planning work. Currently practice guidance in relation to this role is being developed by the Service Manager.

The Agency Advisor is also taking a lead role in developing a strategy for the CYPT on lifestory work for children in care and adopted children. This is involving consultation with area social work staff as well as Independent Reviewing officers. This is an area of work that was highlighted as a good practice requirement from the last inspection of adoption services and has been seen as an opportunity to consider in depth how best to meet the needs of children in permanent and adoptive placements to have full and clear information about their birth families and the decisions that were made about them but how to also equip their adoptive parents to assist them with this information as appropriate as they grow up in their new family.

The service will continue to take a lead on policy and practice guidance in relation to Family and Friends work. The new assessment tool will be kept under review and further guidance and training developed as appropriate. Currently the Department of Education has issued draft guidance and national minimum standards in relation to Family and Friends work which is currently subject to consultation. These new regulations will require a further review of practice and a requirement for example to publish a policy in relation to this work and to have a lead senior officer for this work identified by the authority. It is likely that these new regulations and standards will come into force in April 2011.

The value for money work streams and the need to consider savings measures has implications across the range of Fostering and Adoption activity. The high numbers of babies in the care system and the need to achieve early permanence planning has been reported on within the Fostering annual report but clearly has implications for the whole service.

Sharon Donnelly
Head of Service, Fostering & Adoption
July 2010

Appendix 1

BRIGHTON & HOVE ADOPTION & PERMANENCE PANEL ANNUAL REPORT (1 April 2009 – 31 March 2010)

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 adoption placements has increased substantially. This is in line with higher numbers of children being looked after and it reflects the experience of many other local authorities across the country.

I have now completed my first full year as the Independent Chair of the Panel and I have been impressed by the quality of the work that has been presented. The Panel itself has continued to function effectively and we have made some adjustments to our processes having taken account of feedback over the course of the year.

2. Composition of the Panel

The Panel is 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 were:

- Sarah Borthwick, Independent Chair
- Dr. Sian Bennett, Medical Adviser and Vice Chair
- Councillor Juliet McCaffery, Brighton & Hove elected member
- Chris Thornton, independent member, foster carer

- Denise Charlton, independent member, adopted person (left February 2010)
- Juni Parkhurst, independent member, adopted person, ex foster carer
- Sharon Donnelly, Brighton & Hove council officer, fostering and adoption
- Carl Campbell, Brighton & Hove council officer, childcare, fieldwork
- Jacqueline Coe, Brighton & Hove council officer, education
- Sophie Heiser, independent member, adopter

Michael Wilson was Agency Adviser to the Panel from April 09. Natasha Watson, Hilary Priestley, Sandra O'Brien, Farida Amin, 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.

Panel members and officers demonstrated a very high level of commitment over the year.

3. Work of the Panel

The Panel meets on a two weekly basis. From 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, it met on **27** occasions. This included **2** additional Panel meetings. All meetings were full days.

The Panel recommended that **42** children should be placed for adoption. This was just over double the numbers of children in the previous year's figures. Out of the **42**, **3** of the children were voluntarily relinquished and Placement Orders were advised for **39** children. For **2** children, dual plans of both adoption and permanent fostering were recommended. **25** children were placed with adoptive families and **2** were placed with concurrent carers. This was a lower figure for concurrent placements than in the previous year and it reflected the changes to concurrency work and the views of the court about using concurrent carers in fewer cases.

The Panel recommended that **10** children should be placed in permanent foster care and it recommended **2** matches of children with permanent foster carers. This was consistent with the previous year.

The Panel recommended **21** new families as suitable to adopt. Again this was a substantial increase on the previous year. **15** were couples and **6** were single carers. Three families were of dual heritage (white and black and/or minority ethnicity) and two were from black and minority ethnic groups. In addition, the Panel recommended **2** sets of concurrent carers.

There was a considerable increase in the number of family and friends' carers recommended over the year. The Panel made recommendations in **17** cases. It did not recommend approval in **2** family and friends' cases.

The Panel considered **8** progress reports on children and it deferred items on eight occasions for further information to be provided.

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

It has therefore been a very busy year for adoption and permanence work and much of the practice remains of a very high standard.

4. Functioning of the Panel

Preparation and reading

Panel members read lengthy and complex reports about children and their birth parents before making crucially 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 placed considerable demands on Panel members' time, on Panel administration and on legal and social work input. Panel members have responded to this effectively and have come to meetings very well prepared. However, it can be an onerous task. It is hoped that agreed summaries of some reports may be provided in the future and this is being explored by the Legal Department.

Process

The Panel works 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 social workers and practice manager were asked to leave prior to the recommendation to allow the Panel some discussion time on its own.

It is an impressive and thoughtful Panel to work with and the work is undertaken with appropriate rigour. It is however quite a formal Panel and it has made some changes to the process of how it makes its recommendations having taken account of social worker feedback over the year.

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 **8** forms from prospective adopters and **4** forms from social workers and managers. The Agency Adviser also requested specific feedback at the point of undertaking reviews of Panel members and the Chair and we received some honest and constructive comments. This feedback was shared with Panel members both individually and at the Panel meeting.

The written feedback from applicants and prospective adopters was in the main very positive about the experience of attending Panel. People feel they are treated with courtesy and respect. Many comment too that, although it is daunting to meet with such a large number of Panel members, they are quickly put at ease and enabled to participate. The practice of introducing myself and outlining the questions that will be raised prior to people coming into the room has been received very positively.

However, from some of the feedback provided by social workers and their managers, it is clear that attending Panel can be a very difficult experience on occasion. This is particularly the case where areas of concern have been raised by Panel members. The Panel now tries to ensure that any concerns about the cases presented are clearly highlighted early in discussions to allow for responses from social workers and managers. It highlights strengths and vulnerabilities about applicants just prior to making recommendations and has a discussion of Panel members' views prior to forming final recommendations. Panel members are therefore able to challenge and question each other's views, should they wish to, prior to making their final recommendations.

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. 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 works well. I also met with the Agency Decision Maker to discuss a case that had raised concern about practice. The Head of Adoption and Fostering provided Panel members with regular updates about developments in the service. It is planned for the Agency Decision Maker to meet with the Panel over the next year.

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 input was provided to Panel members on assessing and planning placements for sibling groups. More training is being planned over the next year.

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 remained of a good standard over the year. For example, 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. The Panel has been impressed when photographs of birth parents have been obtained and included and has advised this must be done in all cases wherever possible. The Agency Adviser has worked very hard to monitor and to advise staff on the requirements for reports. Given the continued increase in the work, it will be important for the agency to ensure that the high standards continue to be met and staff are well supported.

Sibling assessments

The Panel made a number of recommendations over the year regarding sibling groups including whether they should be placed together or apart in permanent placements. The Panel raised concern about the need for fuller assessments when making such recommendations and decisions. This was addressed with the Teams and the Panel has seen some excellent assessment work undertaken in line with the Good Practice Guide, Together or Apart, published by BAAF.

Name changes for adopted children

It became clear to the agency and to Panel members over the year that Brighton & Hove does not have a policy on the circumstances when adopted children's given names might be changed. Given the significance of names for children and adults, it has been suggested that a written policy is developed.

Family and friends' carers

Panel members were impressed at the very high level of commitment offered by family and friends' carers. However some of the work was very challenging both in respect of the nature of the cases and the paperwork. It is very difficult to achieve good information in 6 weeks and present it to Panel as required by the Regulations. There were some reports which were not adequate and further information was urgently required before an interim approval was recommended or agreed. In one case, given a number of serious concerns, interim approval was not recommended and in another case, full approval was not recommended. This was very difficult for everyone involved.

Panel members appreciate the complexity of this work but have been concerned that in a small number of cases, assessments have appeared too optimistic. There has been concern too that children have been placed for some considerable time before the carer's approval is presented to Panel.

Further work has been undertaken in Brighton & Hove to improve the format of the reports and to develop understanding about the complexity of relationships and dynamics within the families concerned. Guidance to staff has clarified social workers' responsibilities in the field work and family and friends' teams. The new report format should allow more focus on how the family and friends' carers specifically meet the needs of the child or children concerned.

6. Conclusion

The quality of adoption and permanence work and care planning for children in general has remained very good in Brighton & Hove and there has been evidence of excellent practice in a number of cases. The Panel continues to work effectively and we will continue to develop and review our practice over the next year.

Sarah Borthwick

Independent Chair, Brighton & Hove Adoption and Permanence Panel, June 2010