**South East Region Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board**

**NOTES: April 25 10.30-12.00**

**Attendees:** Dr Mac Heath (CHAIR Milton Keynes), Michael Wilson (Adopt South East), Kevin Yong (CORUM and National ASGLB Sponsor), Amy Combes (for Sarah Skinner - Adoption PARTNERSHIP), Alastair Lee (Data lead, East Sussex), Rachel Reynolds (Adopt South), Ingrid Crisan (Medway), Carole Atkin (Bucks), Sue Thompson (SUPPORT Sector Led Improvement Programme)

**Apols:** Lorna Hunt VICE CHAIR (Chair Adopt Thames Valley and PACT), Teresa Rogers (Adopt Thames Valley), Rebecca Eligon (SUPPORT Sector Led Improvement Programme), Cathrine Clarke (Corum), Vanessa Glenn (ADM Adopt South), Raheela Khan (Slough), Sandra Carnell (Bucks), Hilary Loades (Brighter Futures/Reading), Alison Alexander (Cornerstone) Cathrine Clarke (Corum), Richard Morris (CAFCASS), Lucy Peake (Kinship)

# Item 1: Minutes, action log and feedback from national board.

Minutes and action log agreed.

The national board will be held this afternoon. MH summarised the national board’s ongoing work on the top 100 children waiting for adoption and placing sibling groups. MH highlighted that the work of the national board’s task groups.

The Special Guardianship Task Group was gaining momentum, with the SEN green paper and Education White paper recommendations due to be published. The challenge is how to ensure colleagues understand the relatively new arrangements for Special Guardianship, including expectations re financial allowances and kinship groups.

The Racial Disparity Task Group is looking at the challenges to carers’ understanding and how reflective practitioners are, with research looking at qualified and agency social workers in the South East in relation to the promotion opportunities for Black social workers and if this influences experiences in RAAs.

The Support Task Group is looking at the long-term planning for social care and health support provided in different areas – this is perceived to be something of a postcode lottery. This work includes ensuring health colleagues understand adoption and special guardianship issues and this is aligned in practice to Health Assessments.

The Adoption Matching Task and Finish Group focuses on children waiting for adoption and the disparity with approved adopters, and what has been learnt over the years.

There is the potential for a new task and finish group to consider contact time, recognising the agenda has changed and the expectation from courts has moved on. There is good practice in the region but also inconsistencies in practice.

MH will feedback to the national board: the pressure on foster carers, the blocks and challenges regarding court time and the judiciary and the process for adopters. MH will raise the need to spend time on data, although it is quite historical by the time the board meets.

MH opened the discussion.

MW said that adoption support benefitted from the broader opportunities social care can provide, there were local variations with health input and the potential to influence commissioning. MH added, the contribution from other disciplines in multidisciplinary assessments is helpful with a social work lead. There needs to be clarity on priority planning at the matching and placing stages with consideration to the support needed in the future as part of the post adoption planning, drawing the distinction between core specialist support and universal support.

RR said there is a great difference in the support offered and gaps in services, some with waiting lists across the region.

MW said there was an issue with how the services work together to support children and is due an overhaul, eg support from CAMHS, where an assessment is requested but therapy is often provided without an assessment when it is for an adopted child. In Education, teachers are not supported to understand the needs of adopted children (either through qualification or on the job training). There are local solutions but there needs to be a collective strategic conversation about supporting the needs of adopted children.

AC echoed MW. There needs to be a holistic sense of need, recognising that needs are not necessarily related to adoption, there may be genetic or FASD issues.

MH raised that there are inconsistencies in LAs in how referrals are routed via MASH/front door or to adoption services. There needs to be a consistency as not all needs will be related to adoption.

IC raised the need for strategic forward planning and mapping known future demands, when children’s histories are known issues can be foreseen.

MH said that the practice in adoption needed to be reflected in Special Guardianship, and collaborative thinking was critical to identify pinch points in services.

CA agreed. There are difficulties with front door referrals relating to adopted children being routed to the RAA, and CAMHS advising parents to contact post adoption support as this is a quicker process to support.

MH recognised the complexity and inconsistency of these issues and the need to help families navigate through support.

**Action:** MH to feedback to the national board later today.

# Item 2: Special Guardianship work

MH fed back as LP was unable to make the meeting. The conference was successful with 19 LAs represented and helpful input from kinship leads and teams. There were high levels of commitment but less clarity around resources and funding opportunities. MH asked for ideas of how to become more involved in understanding the kinship agenda.

CI said that Special Guardianship needs to be repositioned closer to the centre of services, there should be a review of training and support.

CA agreed that there needs to be more support and training for Special Guardians.

**Action:** MH to meet LP and RE to consider next steps for Special Guardianship.

# Item 2: Contact/Family Time

MH suggested an online conference to agree language and understanding of contact/family time to improve practice across the region with representatives from each LA. Feedback from the courts identified levels of inconsistencies of understanding.

AC said Barnardo’s provides contact/family time on behalf of Adoption PARTNERSHIP. The aim is to create more choice of contact, including letters, email, Zoom and face to face meetings. The starting place is with frontline social worker’s care plan recommendations to the courts. Adopters fear children contact with birth families in the future. There needs to be a focus on social workers making care plans and how to facilitate face to face contact, including assessment and mental health and emotional support for birth families. Additional resources are required to ensure the best interests of the child are met.

MH asked “Do we trust adopters enough?”

AC said throughout the process adopters present themselves as having the best interests of the child, but once the child is a loved family member, their behaviour shifts, and asked how adopters can be supported throughout this process.

MW said decisions are made about contact at the wrong time, at court emotions are running high. Adopters are trusted with every other decision for the child, but the social worker decides on contact. This is an ideological issue, is this respectful and what is the social contract with the family?

AC agreed. The expectation on adopters can be unrealistic. If there are more resources and support to birth families, adopters may be more trusting. There is a benefit to transparency of meeting, rather than curious approaches via Facebook etc. This important issue needs resourcing.

MH agreed this area generates an interesting debate and needs a new approach as legislation has not been updated to consider contemporary circumstances.

**Action:** MH to raise issue of contact/family time at national board as a task to consider nationally.

# Item 4: data discussion

KY presented highlights from the South East 2021/22 Q3 data. The number of adopters available is higher than the number of children with placement orders, however this is not impacting on the number of children placed. This is explained by the number of adopter approvals remaining stable whilst the number of children coming through for adoption is decreasing. The number of children waiting with POs is increasing for white, single under 5s with no disability and sibling groups. The trend on approvals is flat, and the number of assessments has dropped, as there is a lack of children it is likely that the number of approvals will fall.

The timelines and average days to complete the key phases of adoption process highlighted variations between RAAs. RR explained the Adopt South is very focussed on timescales and has the capacity and resources, with a recruitment team and separate stage 1 team to support prospective adopters. AC said Adoption Partnership had faced challenges in timescales when GP surgeries had been unable to provide appointments for medicals for adopters. The expectation was that this would improve now surgeries were opening up, there was also consideration to commissioning a private service to complete the medicals. CA said Bucks closely tracked through stage 1, and recognised the quality of applicants had increased following the publication of an adoption ready checker on their website.

The current age profile of adopted children showed a bulge in 6 year olds.

AL added that there are currently twice as many adopters and children waiting to be adopted.

MH raised concerns that it was not so simple to say there was a need for new adopters and the disappointment of potential adopters who do not adopt will need to be managed.

# Item 5: RAA feedback

AC (Adoption PARTNERSHIP) said the data was spot on. There are adopters approved and waiting but they do not meet the needs of children ready to be placed. Foster carers are wanting to adopt children with approved POs, as a result of extended placements during the pandemic.

RR (Adopt South) said care plans and POs are down. Support workers are working with harder to place children but there is a need for adopters for sibling groups and harder to place children.

CI (Medway) said the protracted length of care proceedings was a concern, locally a 70 week maximum had been agreed with the judiciary.

CA (Bucks) said there were similar issues with length of care proceedings. Bucks was launching a Special Guardianship readiness checker, similar to the Adoption readiness checker, to allow SGs to support themselves.

MH highlighted the good work and creativity employed across the region.

# AOB

CA raised that Bucks is the only LA in South East not in a regional group. The DFE has recommended Bucks either make a formal request to join an existing RAA or Bucks can create a regional agency.

MH thought in principle it was a good idea for Bucks to join an existing RAA.

**Action:** MH to email DCS and RAA leaders re Bucks request to join an existing RAA. Bucks to provide data to support this request.

**Action log:** This action log was updated on April 25 2022

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|  | **Action** | **Responsible** | **Date issued** | **Status** |
| **60** | MH to write to DCS group to consider Bucks joining an existing RAA | MH | April 2022 | Closed |
| **59** | MH to raise issue of contact/family time at national board as a task to consider nationally | MH | April 2022 | Closed |
| **58** | MH to meet LP and RE to consider next steps for Special Guardianship | MH | April 2022 | Open |
| **57** | TR/RR to feedback on top 100 analysis and actions (once surveys and interviews complete | RR/TR | Jan 2022 | Open |
| **56** | RR to feedback on impact of sibling worker (in 6-12 months) | RR | Jan 2022 | Open |
| **55** | MH to feedback to national board the SE position on contact: contact is a critical area and important for national strategic consideration, however there needs to be focus separately on SG and adoption; and the language needs to be changed away from contact | MH | Jan 2022 | Ongoing |
| **54** | MH to invite KK to July or October meeting | MH | Jan 2022 | Complete |
| **53** | Terms of reference were agreed | All | Jan 2022 | DECISION |
| **52** | All to send any comments or amendments to terms of reference to Rebecca | All | Oct 2021 | Complete |
| **51** | Book April 2022 meeting in person in Crawley | RE | Oct 2021 | Complete |
| **50** | Item on January agenda re: 100 longest waiting children and adopters | RE/KY | Oct 2021 | Complete |
| **49** | RE to work with board to draft bid to regional recovery fund for work on SG | SG | July 2021 | Complete |
| **48** | Consider how to have a further in depth conversation about contact | MH | July 2021 | Complete |
| **47** | LH to circulate details of all party parliamentary group (added to minutes and email) | LH/RE | April 2021 | Complete |
| **46** | Medway to share SG training materials with group, RE to circulate | HS/RE | April 2021 | Complete |
| **45** | LAs to contribute to SG benchmarking pilot | All | April 2021 | Complete |
| **44** | Circulate template that Corum has developed to collect SG data in London | KY/RE | April 2021 | Complete |
| **43** | Update and circulate ASGLB South East membership list | RE | April 2021 | Complete |
| **42** | New vice chair to be confirmed at next meeting. Lorna Hunt confirmed as Vice chair | MH | Jan 2021 | Complete |
| **41** | Items for future consideration (as a consequence of themes coming out of national board) added to forward plan | RE | Jan 2021 | complete |
| **40** | AL to work with KY to look at breakdown of adopters and their experience through the process and where and if different groups drop out. | AL KY | Oct 2020 | Complete |
| **39** | KY to work with AL to draw data together regarding SG. RE to follow up with KY and AL to timetable this in for a deeper discussion in 2021. | AL KY RE | Oct 2020 | Item in April 2021 |
| **38** | All to publicise offer of support for SGs and direct to Grandparents Plus, sign up needs to be before Nov  | ALL | Oct 2020 | Complete |
| **37** | RE to send out Adoption Guide/blueprint | RE | July 2020  | Complete |
| **36** | Send to RE to send around to group training relating to Public Law recommendations, and information on kinship care week | LP | July 2020 | Complete |
| **35** | provide feedback to KY on dashboard | All | July 2020 | Complete |
| **34** | MH to escalate need to extend flexibilities, particularly relating to timing of DBS and medicals | MH | July 2020 | Complete |
| **33** | To circulate monthly data from survey to RE so it can be shared with board members between the meetings | KY | July 2020 | Ongoing |
| **32** | Future agenda item on race, adoption and Special guardianship | RE | July 2020 | Complete |
| **31** | Standing item on agenda on feedback from RAA leaders | RE | July 2020 | Complete |
| **30** | Share content of RAA leaders work relating to barriers to adoption which includes ethnicity | SS | July 2020 | Complete |
| **29** | Share papers from Adopt Thames Valley: learning log, risk assessment and COVID 19 paper | TR | May 2020 | Complete |
| **28** | Share feedback from ASGLB SE with South East DCS group (as per bullets below) | MH | May 2020 | Complete |
| **27** | Share feedback from ASGLB SE with national board about emerging trends in the South East:* some evidence of delay in adoption order hearings and care proceedings,
* a mixed picture on enquiries with some RAAs and LAs reporting the same levels
* little evidence that adoption introductions are being delayed
* more demand for mother and baby placements
* a particular impact on SGs of COVID-19 (particularly older and vulnerable carers)
* support for the new flexible ASF arrangements
* Little use of the new regulations as in the main RAAs and LAs have been able to manage
 | KY | May 2020 | Complete |
| **26** | Investigate if percentage of ASF that goes to SG has increased from 12% (as a result of changes brought in from COVID-19). No updated data available as of Mid July. | KY | May 2020 | Complete |
| 25 | Update terms of reference to include focus on both special guardianship and adoption and to update existing membership | RE | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 24 | All to respond to schools admission code consultation particularly on aspects relating to adoption | All | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 23 | All to send Corum details of any Asian families who may be interested in participating in research/sharing their story | All | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 22 | Discuss with DCSs different options for greater judiciary input into the board/regional approach, and RE to approach RM from CAFCASS to encourage him to attend the board | MH/RE | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 21 | MH to consider future item on adopter mindset around trans-racial placements– which is often about placing black and mixed race children in white families, but could be placing to BAME families. | MH | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 20 | Bucks to present Bucks’ approach to permanency at next ASGLB | NW | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 19 | NW and LP to meet to consider current post-order practice and how we can improve this regionally – both quick wins and longer term. | NW/LP | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 18 | KY to produce regional and national benchmarks in data returns | KY | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 17 | KY to continue to push to improve the quality and completion of family finding data  | KY | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 16 | AL to consider what information could be produced for a future detailed item at the board on SG, SG breakdown and age. | AL | Jan 2020  | **Complete** |
| 15 | All to provide info to LP on any information relevant to the digital hub for kinship carers. | All | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 14 | ALL to contact AL if they do not have access to the restricted data on the SESLIP website. | All | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 13 | AL to let the board know of anything they can do to help with lobbying DfE about case management system suppliers.  | AL | Jan 2020 | **Ongoing** |
| 14 | MH to consider whether future item or separate workshop on insights from evidence (i.e. turning data to insight) | MH | Jan 2020 | **Complete** |
| 15 | To provide feedback to KY on the adoption blueprint before Christmas | All | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 12 | Bring back adoption blueprint as an agenda item at a future meeting | MH/RE | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 11 | Raise adoption blueprint at RAA leaders group on 22 Nov | SS | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 10 | Get feedback on centres of excellence, specifically how they have fed into adoption blueprint. Answers: Centres of excellence have funding and are in a better position to make use of those guides | KY | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 9 | Circulate invites and encourage attendance at permanency workshops facilitated by CORUM | All | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 8 | See if there is any insight as to the reasons underlying the small minority of less positive perceptions about virtual heads’ responsibilities around adoptees | KY | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 7 | Significant item on data benchmarking and requirements at next meeting | AL | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 6 | Ensure any work in the in-house fostering project at a sub-regional footprint uses those groupings flexibly  | RE/PG | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 5 | AL to work with complex LAC project (Mark Evans and Rosemary Perry) and in-house fostering project (RE) to see whether it is possible to map where children are (both those adopted and in long term fostering and SGO arrangements). | AL | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 4 | Share presentation on mockingbird  | TR | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 3 | Add item on ASF preparation  | RE | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 2 | RE to contact the board’s PAs to get feedback as to whether to continue the download or to revert to previous emailing of documents | RE | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |
| 1 | RE to work with MH to set future meeting dates | RE/MH | Nov 2019 | **Complete** |

# Proposed agendas

Future items:

* Contact and support to birth families; possible conference
* Support: Examples of best practice, benchmarking on use of ASF in the south east, can we look at subregional variation between RAAs? Which areas are securing most ASF support (for adoption/SG)/best practice
* Reasons for approved adopters waiting (is it bureaucratic/procedural, adopter choice)
* Analysis on disruption

Standing agenda items

* National board feedback
* RAA leaders’ feedback
* RAA round-up