

# L. B. BARKING & DAGENHAM ADOPTION AGENCY

## Annual Report

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For the period: 2013 - 2014

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### Introduction

As predicted, 2013/14 has very much been a year of transition and transformation, not only in respect to the services we provide to children and adopters but also within the Adoption Team. These developments have provided many challenges to be a part of and to manage and have been as a result of the rapid changes in adoption legislation and guidance from Central Government.

As a result of the national focus on adoption, significant changes to the regulations and processes within the Adoption Agency came into force in July 2014 with the introduction of the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013. The aim of these changes has been to reduce potential barriers and reduce delay in approving families as adopters, thereby increasing the number of placements available for waiting children.

Furthermore, on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2013, The Children and Families Act 2014 (CFA, 2014), was given Royal Assent, placing on statute changes to the adoption service that had already been implemented. For example:

- The new Public Law Outline (PLO) - which introduced a maximum 26 week limit for care proceedings;
- Fostering to Adopt.
- A new Two Stage approval process for Adopters.

Additionally,

- Section 5 - CFA, 2014: requires local authorities, who provide adoption support services, to prepare a personal budget for adopters, on request.
- Section 6 – CFA, 2014: places a duty on local authorities to provide information to adoptive and potential families regarding the support services available in the local authority’s area.
- Pupil premium: from April 2014, these payments will be made available to adopted children. This will enable adopters to work with schools to consider what individual support will be of benefit to their adopted child.

Alongside the statutory and regulatory changes, Children Services also has had to deal with the impact that recent case law (Re B, Re BS and Re T), that is having far reaching implications for local authorities when considering permanency for children, for whom adoption would usually be the plan. The clear message from case law is that adoption should be seen as the last resort, e.g. when “nothing else will do”. The full effect of this is yet to be felt, as can be seen with our figures for children with adoption plans for this period (p. 5), which is up for from 2012-13. Nevertheless, we already have had a number of challenges to Placement Orders already granted, and examples of cases that had in the past resulted in an adoption plan being agreed at courts, this is no longer the case.

It is likely, therefore, that there will be a decline in the number of children being placed for adoption, and with it a possible rise in the numbers of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs).

2014-15 is again likely to be an eventful year for the LBBD Adoption Service as there seems to be no sign of an end to the overhaul of our work.

### **The Adoption & Permanence Panel**

The Adoption Panel continues to meet on a monthly basis, but has moved from its base in the Civic Centre, to the Barking Town Hall. It has an established Chair and core membership, with one member leaving (LBBD Councillor) and a change to the Medical Adviser to Panel.

We have a small but committed membership, who works well together to complete the Panel's business. No panel meetings were cancelled, because they were not quorate.

### **Panel Developments for 2013/14**

As a result of the changes to the role of the Panel, introduced with The Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012, we have seen a significant reduction in the number of cases being presented to the Panel; as in general children's cases no longer are brought to this forum, except where they are being relinquished for adoption i.e. adoption with the birth mother's agreement. The Panel now only primarily have responsibility for the approval (or change of status) of adopters and the approval of adoptive matches between a family and child/ren.

## Panel Attendance 8 April 2013 – 10 March 2014

Name	Attended	Apologies	Notes
Roy Stewart	11	1	
Eileen Weaver	8	4	
Roger Gardiner	10	2	
Cllr Burgon	1	1	Attended April <b>Resigned before June 13</b>
Dr Ajayi	4	(8 Sick leave)	Attended April, May, June, July 13
Dr Magid	7	1	Took over from Dr Ajayi in Aug 13.
Jackie Parillon	10	2	
Alison Ryan	9	2	Alison attended April 13 Panel as an observer and this is not included in the stats opposite. <b>First official Panel was May 13.</b>
Emma Malcolm (central list)	7	N/A	
Jo Tarbutt (central list)	1	n/a	Jo attended in Aug 13.

## Panel Training

This annual joint training for Panel members and the members of the Adoption Team was held on 7th October 2013. The morning session was on the new Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) and Assessment Framework. In the afternoon the training covered adoption disruptions, using case studies from our last two disruptions to enable lessons to be learnt.

## Summary of the children referred for Adoption

### Agency Decision Maker (ADM) Decisions

Children who require a decision to determine whether they should be placed for adoption are now dealt with by the ADM. The Divisional Director for Children Services, Complex Needs and Social Care is the ADM for the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The Group Manager for Placements is the Deputy ADM and provides cover for the ADM when absent or where there is high demand. There have been 3 changes in personnel during this period, 2013 -14.

The total number of children approved for adoption by the Agency Decision Maker was 46; this is an increase of 15 from the previous year's figure of 31. This, in part, is likely to be attributable to the impact of the new Public Law Outline (PLO) criteria, in which care proceedings are meant to be concluded in 26 weeks.

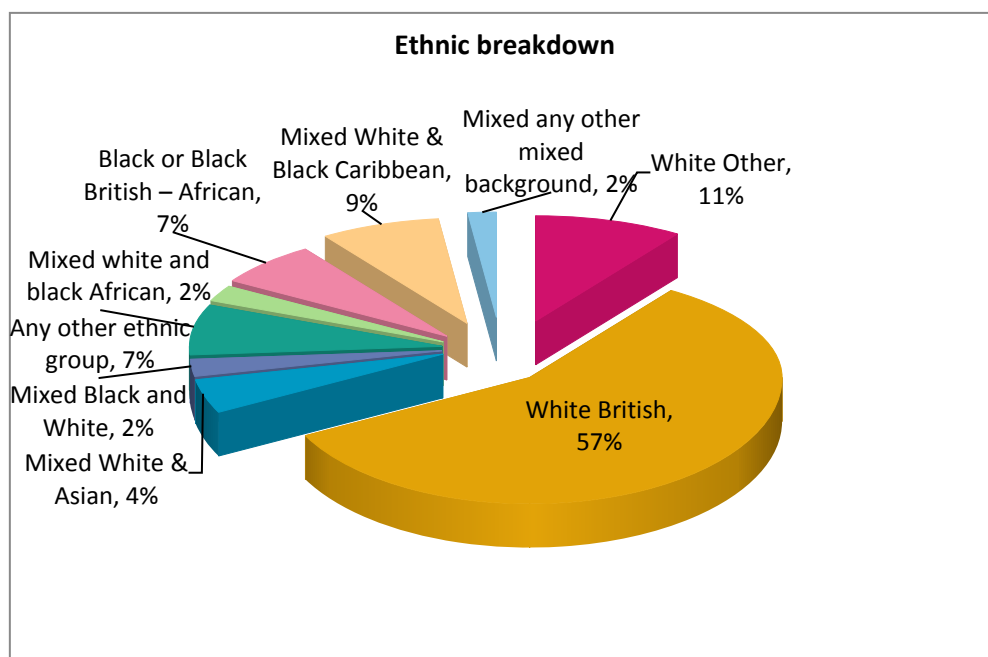
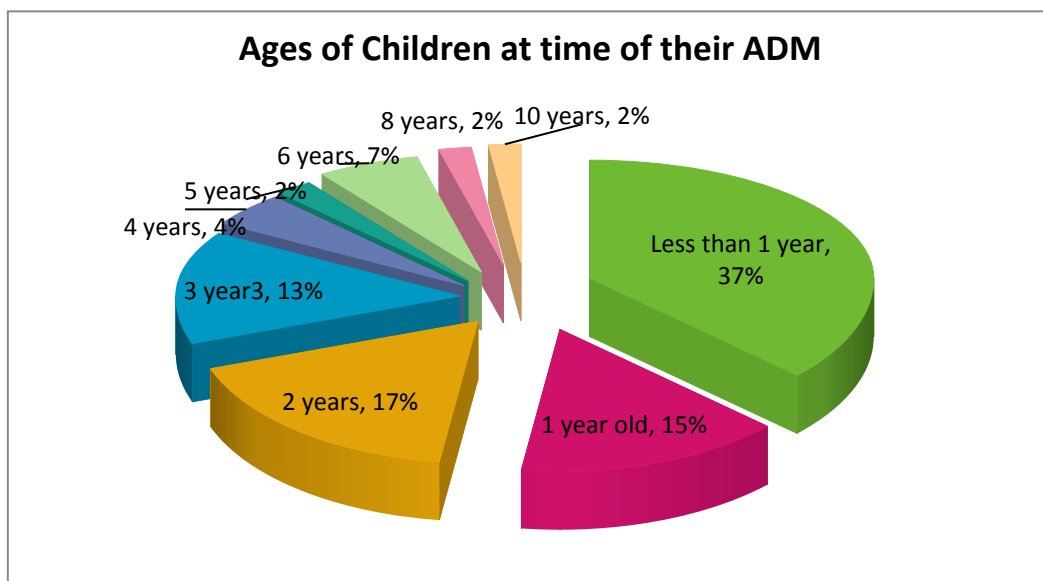


Figure 1

Figure 1, shows another decrease in the percentage of White British children receiving “should be placed for adoption’ (SHOPA) decisions from 58% in 2012/13 to 56% during this period. However, the number of children from White British and White other backgrounds has increased from 61% to 67%. We have an increase from children from Eastern European backgrounds, and this is an area we are seeking to target when considering the recruitment of prospective adopters.



## Changes to Care Plans

Between April 2013 and March 2014, twelve children’s adoption plans were rescinded by either the Adoption Panel or the ADM. This has been an unwelcome statistic for the local authority, as it means that sadly we have not been successful at

finding adoptive placements for these children. It is an area noted by our recent Ofsted inspection.

### Summary of the children who were adopted

The numbers of children who were granted Adoption Orders during this period is 17. This figure is slightly down on the numbers for the preceding three years. Of these, the information is broken down into the following:

Total number of Adoption Orders Granted April 2013 - March 2014	17
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Gender Breakdown	
Boys	5
Girls	12

Ethnicity	No. of individuals
White British	13
White European	1
Mixed Heritage	2
Asian Pakistani	1

Ages	No. of individuals
0 - 3	12
4 - 7	4
8 - 12	1

Sibling Groups and Individuals	
No in Group	No of Groups
2 siblings	2
3 siblings	1
Individuals	11

## Disruptions

During this period, one placement disrupted prior to the making of an Adoption Order.

## Adopters

The numbers of adults approved as Adopters was 19 for 2013-14. This figure is a significant improvement on 2012-13 - which saw a performance low of only 9 adoptive units (8 couples and 1 single adopter) approved – and gets us back to a position of consistency from previous year (16 and 18 for 2011-12 and 2010-11 respectively).

Of the 19 units, the information is broken down into the following



No of Approvals (units)	19
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#### Breakdown of Approvals

Couples	18
Single Adopter (female)	1

#### Ethnicity of Adults Approved

Couples	
White British	16
White European/White South American	1
Black Caribbean	1

Single Adopter	
White British	1

Types of Adopters		
New adopters	9	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Time adopters	5 couples	1 single applicant
Foster carers	4	

### Review of adoption status

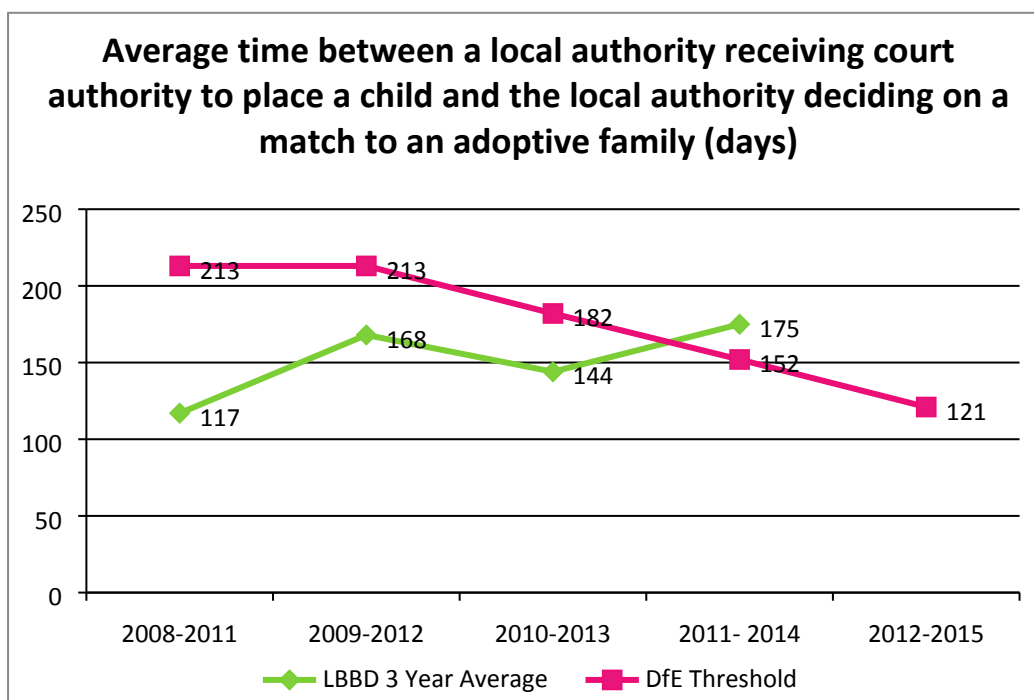
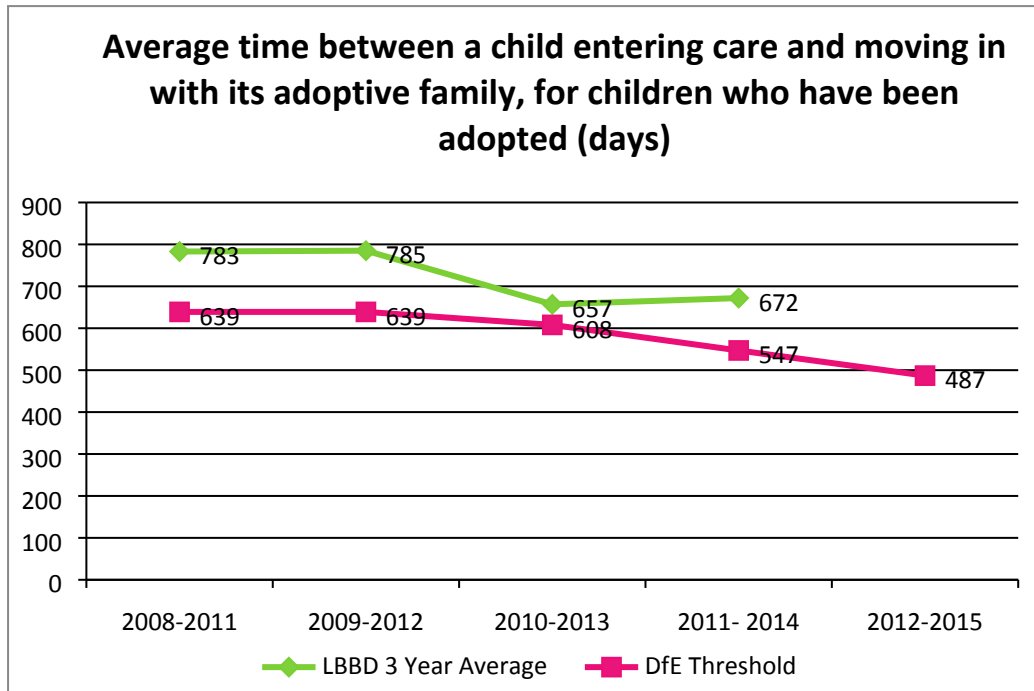
The Adoption Panel has reviewed the status of one couple and recommended that they no longer be approved. This recommendation has been ratified by the ADM. However, the couple have exercised their right of appeal, and the case is currently the subject of the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

### Timeliness: Adoption Scorecard

The Adoption Scorecard is now used to measure performance. This tool allows the Department for Education (DfE) to measure how swiftly children are placed for adoption, with government thresholds set against two indicators measuring:

- **A1** - The time it takes for a child from entering care to moving in with their adoptive family.
- **A2** - The time it takes match a child to a family following the making of a Placement Order.

We have made good progress on both measures as shown below.



## A1

- Our three yearly rolling averages (2010-2013) for the time taken between a child entering care and moving into its adoptive family **have reduced to 657 days compared to 785 days in 2009-2012**. The England average is 647 days so we are very close to the national position on this measure now. Our performance is far better than our statistical neighbours (average time is 705 days)

## A2

- Our three yearly averages regarding the time taken from when the authority receives a Court Order agreeing to a child being matched with an appropriate adopter is good and improving in 2010-2013. Our three yearly rolling averages **have reduced to 144 days compared to 168 days in 2009-2012**. Performance continues to fall within the Government threshold for this adoption measure set at 182 days in 2010-13 and is already lower than the 2011-14 threshold set at 152 days. Our performance is also far better than national and statistical neighbours.

The Government has set very challenging adoption timescales for the A1 & A2 measures for 2013-2016:

## A1

- 426 days for the time taken between a child entering care and moving into its adoptive family;

And,

## A2

- 121 days for the time taken from when the authority receives a Court Order agreeing to a child being adopted and the child is matched with an appropriate adopter. This amounts to 14 months and 4 months respectively (on average 30 days per month).

We are on track to meet the 2013-16 thresholds for measure A2, but we have a lot of work to do to meet the other government threshold A1. Looking at performance, we will need to reduce the time taken on this measure by 231 days (8 months) for reducing the time taken between a child entering care and moving into its adoptive family.

Our average length of care proceedings is still above the England and SN average; 62 weeks compared to 51 weeks respectively and is the highest across our statistical neighbours (Coventry is at 61 weeks).

We have adopted 65 children from care in 2010-13, representing 10% as a whole. This is compared to the national average of 13% and SN average of 15%.

Our timeliness for placing children with their adoptive families within 20 months of entering care currently stands at 43% (50 children), which was identified in the Adoption Diagnostic (see below) as needing to improve. Any drift in the process needs to be picked up quickly to ensure children are placed for adoption in a timely way and a comprehensive Tracker is being devised to capture all of the necessary information across all relevant teams involved in care planning to ensure issues of drift are identified quickly and acted upon. Progress of all cases of children in care

awaiting a final care plan to be implemented will be monitored at the Permanency Planning Group on a monthly basis.

## Service & Other Developments

### Adopter Assessments

The Adoption Team started implementing the new 2-stage adopter assessment framework in 2013, with the first cohort of prospective adopters starting the modified preparation training in September 2013, and being assessed and approved using the revised assessment template, which places more emphasis on social work analysis rather than self-reporting. Unfortunately it is too early to give a comprehensive account on the impact of these changes for this period.

However, we did receive 35 applications from prospective adopters, which were up from 9 received in the preceding reporting period. Furthermore, of the 18 families where matches were made, 17 of those waited 9 months or less for a match; with 8 waiting less than 3 months for a placement.

### Activity Days

Adoption Activity Days are events, co-ordinated by the British Association for Adoption & Fostering (BAAF), where approved adopters, or adopters in the assessment process who have a panel date within 3 months of the day, have the opportunity to directly meet a range of children waiting to be adopted in a prepared, supported, safe and fun environment.

They are themed days full of lots of fun activities such as face painting, climbing, craft and soft play. The children's foster carers and social workers attend the event with the children to support them.

LBBB was one of 12 London Boroughs who agreed to participate in the pilot London scheme held on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2013. Two siblings groups of two children, who we had struggled to family find for using the conventional methods, were chosen. Key to our agreement to taking part was to ensure that all of LBBBs children attending were properly prepared for the day. Our Play Therapist, Jill Comfort, provided 6 group work sessions for our children, together with four children from Tower Hamlets. This work ensured that the children negotiated the day well, comments from professionals and adopters alike remarked on how well the children engaged, but have also managed the disappointment of not being selected by the adopters from this event.

No "expressions of interests" were received from any of the adopters attending, nor did matches result for the four children attending the last year's Activity Day. Of the six children who attended June's event, we are following up four enquiries. Two were received for one of the sibling groups; and one each for the single children. We have, to date, not received any enquiries for the other sibling group.

As yet, no adoptive matches have resulted from our participation in these two events (although we have yet to learn the outcome of potential matches from June), we are keen to still be involved in future Activity Days, as we see it as giving us another opportunity, alongside the other methods employed, to find adoptive families for LBBB children.

## Diagnostic

We commissioned an Adoption Diagnostic to support us in addressing issues of delay for children whenever the child's assessed permanence needs indicate the value of adoption. The aim of this diagnostic was to assist in analysing those practices and processes which give rise to delay for children in Barking and Dagenham. The diagnostic partners (BAAF and Core Assets) were in Barking and Dagenham from 24th – 28th February.

A number of positive findings were identified, including:

- That we had already begun to address some of the issues around drift and delay at a strategic level.
- A low disruption rate.
- Efforts are made to keep children within their birth family where possible, and Family Group Conferences are routinely held.
- The service provided to adopters, adopted young people and birth parents by the post-adoption support team is impressive.

The following areas were identified for development, many of which were aware of, and were putting in efforts to address:

- Family finding for adoption too often appears to be a sequential process, which generally tends to start at the end of a long process of assessing birth parents and family, rather than running alongside it.
- Concern that generally family finding does not begin until a placement order has been made, although sometimes “feelers” are put out before that.
- Caseloads may be a significant contributor to delay in progressing children's plans.



- To ensure that special guardianship assessments are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that the best interests of the child will be served through special guardianship.
- Plans to re-structure the service, in order to reduce the number of transition points for children, need to be reinforced by additional quality assurance measures, such as mandatory training in permanence planning across the whole workforce.

An action plan has been drawn up to address the areas for development and will be reviewed on a quarterly basis.

### Adoption Support Services

Increasing demand is being placed on the small team of workers in the post adoption team as more families access adoption support services throughout their adoption journey. This work will include advising and various levels of support, including therapeutic support with our in-house provision or the commissioning of external packages of care, where necessary.

<b>Adoption Support Provision</b>	
<b>Type of support</b>	<b>Number of families</b>
Funded by the local authority and provided by your agency	24
Funded by the local authority and provided by another agency	3
Funded by the adoptive family and provided by your agency	0
Funded by the adoptive family and provided by your agency	0
Training funded for adopters	2

We are justifiably proud of the support services offered to children and their families, and have been commended on the quality, both in the peer review and the recent Ofsted Inspection.

There is likely to be more demand for these services in the coming years, as adopters have become increasingly aware of their entitlement to adoption support.

## Team Developments

To enable the staff to meet the new demands being asked of our service has meant an expansion to the existing workforce, through a mixture of, “invest to save” bids and funding from the Adoption Reform Grant (information about this funding, can be found below) or replacements for staff who have left. Therefore, the team now consists of: a Team Manager; a Deputy Team Manager; a SW consultant/play Therapist; a Training Officer; a Special Guardianship Consultant; a Post Adoption Co-ordinator; and 9 social workers.

## Adoption Training Officer

We made a commitment to provide a strong and comprehensive training programme for all our stakeholders, and in April 2013; a dedicated Training Officer post within the Adoption Team was established and recruited to. The Training Officer’s brief was to co-ordinate adoption and permanence focused training for prospective and approved adopters, foster carers, prospective and approved special guardians and social workers throughout the whole service. We were fortunate to recruit someone who was an experienced trainer, foster carer and adoptive parent.

Alongside prospective adopters' preparation training, the service also provides adoption and permanence training, which includes:

- Later Life Training
- Creative Direct Work Training/Creating a Life Moves Chart
- Festive improvisation and Magical Experience
- Moving Children onto Adoption for Foster-Carers & SSWs

### Marketing & Communications Officer

The Marketing and Communications Lead is a shared post between the Adoption and Fostering teams. Sophia Brooks, from our Marketing and Communications Team, started in post during September 2013, and in broad terms, the purpose of her role was to raise the profile of LBBD's Adoption Service to the wider adoption community, in and around east and north London, Essex and Kent primarily.

### Recruitment & Marketing activities

Key targets and measures in the marketing plan for the year are as follows:

- Increase recruitment of adopters for assessment for period October 2013 – September 2014.
- Monitor the number of calls to adoption team on dedicated recruitment line and where they heard about the campaign from.
- Monitor the number and type of email enquiries to [adoption@lbbd.gov.uk](mailto:adoption@lbbd.gov.uk).
- Monitor the number of hits on: [www.lbbd.gov.uk/adoption](http://www.lbbd.gov.uk/adoption).
- Continuously bench mark success and activity against members of the East London Adoption Consortium and successful agencies and Local Authorities.
- Review number of initial enquires and numbers that go through to adopt.

- Monitor the number of people who watch the LBBB adoption film on you tube (from Friday 13 December 2013), uploaded on the [lbbd.gov.uk/adoption](http://lbbd.gov.uk/adoption) page.

### Results to date

From 8 October 2013 and 30 April 2014 we received a total of 78 initial inquiries from various sources. They were 56 initial enquires via phone and online applications. There were 17 initial enquiries through attendance of open information sessions between 8 October to 30 April. Further initial enquires have been generated through road shows, for example, five enquires from Queens Hospital stand. This is a significant increase on this type of initial enquiries from the same period during April 2012 – March 2013, when we received 28 initial inquiries.

### Special Guardian (SG) Consultant

Over the last 9 years there has been a rise in work required with Special Guardians as this has become an increasing option for permanency for many children to remain within their families. However, many of the placements experience pressures and it was recognised that a dedicated resource was required to meet the increasing demand for support and an experienced social worker who had previously worked in LBBB's Assessment and Care Management teams has joined the Adoption Team as our SG consultant. She joined us in October 2013, and her brief is to provide support to the expanding number of families providing permanency for children, unable to return to their birth parents care. With this post, we are now able to offer specialist support and training to Special Guardians, to better equip them to care for children who have experienced trauma.

### What is Special Guardianship?

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) came into force on 30th December 2005, as part of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It offers a real alternative to long-term foster placements or adoption for those children who, for whatever, reason cannot live with their birth parents. SGOs allow children to remain within the family unit or other significant person who obtains legal Parental Responsibility for the child once the order is granted. It allows children to have a sense of normality especially for those young people struggle with the stigma of being 'in care'. The real emphasis behind Special Guardianship is to foster a lifelong relationship between the child, the Guardian and the Special Guardian's family.

The tables below show that there has been an increase in the number of SGOs granted over the past two years.

Total number of Special Guardianship Orders Granted April 2012 – March 2013	29
Sibling groups	7
SGOs to former foster carers	3

Total number of Special Guardianship Orders Granted April 2013 – March 2014	39
Sibling groups	9
SGOs to former foster carers	7

Whilst many of the children subject to SGOs have remained living in the borough, approximately 60%, another significant proportion has moved to neighbouring

London boroughs and Essex. We also have children placed in Kent, Surrey, Northumberland, Shrewsbury and Manchester.

### Adoption Reform Grant

The Adoption Reform Grant was awarded by the Government to help local authorities to make improvements in adoption practice arising from their adoption reform programme. Over three-quarters of the ring fenced funding LBBDD received was spent on recruitment of additional agency staff to meet the following demands:

- To increase resources in the Family Finding team to ensure early identification of adopters to place children with their adoptive family as quickly as possible.
- To increase play therapy capacity from our in-house play therapist from part time to full time.
- To ensure that all children in care have timely LAC and Adoption Medicals that are robustly tracked. This resulted in improvement performance at the end of 2013-14 with 94% of medicals having been completed.
- The remainder has primarily been used in upgrading or developing new marketing materials.

The grant was intended as a one-off allocation in 2013-14, but we were pleased to learn that the Government decided to continue support this work in 2014-15, therefore the grant has been extended. The above resources have been able to remain in place, building upon the work that began last year.

In 2013-14, the ring-fenced allocation was £300,000 and the non ring-fenced money was £600,000. The non ring-fenced money was put towards the overspend in Children's Services (not the Adoption Service) in that financial year. The ring-fenced

allocation was used to fund the above resources. £45,000 was used to fund the additional 2.5 days of play therapist time (based on play therapy private rates as the staff member gave up private practice work). The other 2.5 days are paid on a social worker salary as part of the establishment of the Adoption Team.

£30,000 was used to fund the post to improve LAC and adoption medical performance.

Approximately £160,000 was used to increase family finding staffing to ensure children were found adoptive families.

£54,000 was used to purchase Agency adopters as we had no in-house adopters who were an appropriate match to 4 children.

Approximately £11,000 was spend on publicity to recruit adopters and find families for the children who have a care plan for adoption.

## **Ofsted Inspection**

Lastly, Children Services was the subject of an Ofsted inspection from 29 April – 21 May, under the new inspection framework. The new framework replaces the stand alone inspection that the Adoption Service was previously inspected against. It incorporates the Adoption Service as part of the child's journey, although the Adoption Service still retains its own sub-judgement, which was Requires Improvement.

## **Priorities for 2014/15**

- Permanency Planning for children

- Finalise the draft Permanency Planning Policy with arrangements for a formal launch for the whole of Children's Social Care.
- Develop protocol to expedite family finding prior to Placement Order.
  
- Adopter Recruitment
  - Improve response times to adopters and co-ordinate tracking of statutory checks and relevant information.
  - Ensure that Fast Track process for adopters is incorporated into assessment protocol – second time adopters, fostering for adoption, specific child etc.
  - To expand the range of training offered to adopters either by attending in house training courses or LBBB purchasing bespoke training from external adoption providers, for example, Safebase.
  
- Panel Recruitment
  - Increase Panel membership.

**Paula Lyttle**

Adoption Team Manager

1<sup>st</sup> August 2014