

## **Adopt Thames Valley Permanence Support Team** **Annual Report** **1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019**

The ATV Permanence Support Team are one of the many organisations, agencies, teams and professionals responsible for contributing towards meeting children's, adults' and families' permanence support needs. The team plays a key role (directly and through sharing expertise to support other professionals) in permanence support.

The provision of a range of adoption and special guardianship support services are embedded in the statutory framework. This is based on the recognition that adoptive and special guardianship children and their adoptive and birth families are likely to have a range of additional needs. The lifelong effects of adoption particularly are recognised in legislation, hence the provision of the provision of support services to children and to adults affected by adoption.

Service areas within ATV Permanence Support Team -

- Adoption Support
- Special Guardianship Support
- Adults Affected by Adoption (AAA)
- Birth Relative Support (BRS)
- Letterbox Service

Although traditionally located within children's services, the team's remit includes young people beyond the age of 18 years old. The Adoption Support Fund extends to include adopted and SGO children who were previously LAC up to the age of 21 years, and up to 25 years for SEN children. Work extends into adulthood with adults affected by adoption and birth relatives.

Each partner local authority is required to maintain services designed to meet the needs of all those affected by adoption and special guardianship, including adults affected by adoption and birth relatives.

Report contents -

- Permanence Support Team overview
- Permanence Support Team referrals – process and statistics
- Adoption Support and Special Guardianship support offer
- Adults Affected by Adoption services
- Letterbox Service
- Birth Relative Support services
- Staff Team
- Team compliments and complaints

## **Permanence Support Team overview 2018 – 2019:**

During its' first year of service the ATV Permanence Support Team has been managed as seven separate local authorities under one regional team umbrella, as directed. The primary aim was to continue to provide the existing level of service in each local authority, whilst also safely managing the transition to becoming a regional adoption agency. It is of significant credit to the staff team that service provision has continued, despite the additional workload and challenges created by the transition process and the high vacancy levels through inherited posts and newly created posts.

As planned, the first Permanence Support Review was undertaken to review how this regional service should develop. Please see the accompanying Permanence Support Review report.

The overarching aim for 2019 – 2020 is to begin implementing the Permanence support Review recommendations, and to continue to review the service as part of a continual process, whilst continuing to provide current services.

The first actions and priorities for 2019 – 2020 have been to recruit an Assistant Team Manager (0.5fte), to contract the additional management hours agreed, and to recruit a Swindon based administrator (1fte) for the Permanence Support Team and Adoption Team, to try to develop some capacity in order to implement the recommendations.

As part of our continual process of review, the role of the Assistant Team Manager (ATM) has been re-focussed in order to allow the team to function more safely and effectively in the coming year. The new ATM will be based in Swindon, managing the staff team based there and supporting the management team with implementing the Permanence Support Review. The development of the specialist services (Birth Relative Support; Adults Affected by Adoption, Letterbox Services) will be delayed until resource allows, and the aim will be to continue to provide the existing services in these areas with some smaller service developments where possible, over the coming year.

The recruitment process for social work staff also continues 2019 - 2020, with 18 recruitment processes having already taken place in the team since ATV was launched (new appointments and internal promotions). The aim remains to achieve a fully staffed team, continuing to recruit high calibre staff to join the current skilled, capable and motivated social work team, in order to provide improving services to our ATV families. One of the significant recruitment challenges this year has been limited and inconsistent support from LA partners in relation to advertising ATV posts in their areas; alongside differentiations in pay scales between LA partners resulting in successful applicants refusing job offers, as the host authority is at the lower end of the pay scale.

## **Permanence Support Team referrals:**

During the first year of service the ATV Permanence Support Team has maintained different referral routes into the team. This has allowed services to continue to run, business as usual, whilst the seven local authorities were brought together as a regional agency and a review was carried out to determine the future design of the Permanence Support Service.

Alongside the Front Door and the Oxfordshire Helpdesk service; other referral routes into the service were through Oxfordshire's ICS (Fwi) for Birth Relative Support referrals and Letterbox referrals.

## **Front Door Service (Serving Bracknell; Reading; Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead; Swindon; West Berkshire and Wokingham)**

(Received enquiries in relation to adoption support; special guardianship support, birth relative support and adults affected by adoption, and Letterbox services):

- Open Oxfordshire County Council office hours, Monday to Friday 8:30am – 5pm, and Friday 8:30am - 4pm.
- Separate phone number to the Adopter Recruitment enquiry line, to avoid distress or confusion for Permanence Support Service users, particularly birth relatives.
- Acted as a "front door" for all parties affected by adoption and permanence, and for professionals, providing a referral route staffed by administrative staff. Administrators have access to a Team Manager to triage calls where safeguarding concerns may be indicated.
- Referrals were passed to workers linked to the locality area, and the aim is to respond to referrals with an initial advice, support and triage call within 5 working days. Cases were allocated where it was assessed that an Assessment of Need was required.
- Adoption Support and Special Guardianship Support Assessment of Need interviews were primarily offered in the family home or at another appropriate venue, as the ATV office bases in Woodley and Swindon are less suited to office-based appointments. This allowed a more social work based model of practice, but was less efficient in terms of staff time (travel time).

Due to administrative staff shortages, there have been significant periods where the Front Door Service has had slightly reduced opening hours as other non-administrative staff members have needed to cover the service. There have also been periods where other ATV administrators outside the team have needed to cover the service. This has led to some delay in processing referrals.

Temporary administrative staff are currently in place, and the team is currently providing a Front Door Service covering Oxfordshire County Council office hours.

## **Helpdesk Service (Serving Oxfordshire)**

(Received enquiries in relation to adoption support; special guardianship support and adults affected by adoption):

- Open Monday, Tuesday, (closed Wednesday), Thursday and Friday, from 10am - 2pm.
- Acted as a "front door" for all parties affected by adoption and permanence in Oxfordshire, and for professionals, through a dedicated support, advice and referral helpline staffed by qualified social workers.
- Assessment of Need interviews were offered where there was an assessed need.
- Adoption Support and Special Guardianship Support Assessment of Need interviews were primarily offered at the Oxfordshire office. This followed a more medical work model of practice but was more efficient in terms of staff time (no travel time).

### **Enquiries and Referrals:**

**Figure: Permanence Support Team Enquiries and Referrals Statistics 2018 – 2019:**

	Adoption Support	Special Guardianship Support	Birth Relative Support	Adults Affected by Adoption	Letterbox
Bracknell	17	3***	8	2	11
Oxfordshire	Unavailable (As a reference; 95 received 2016-17, pre-ATV with demand having increased by 14% on the previous year)	Unavailable (As a reference; 69 received 2016 – 17, pre-ATV with demand having increased by 14% on the previous year)	Unavailable (As a reference, currently 94 Oxfordshire open cases)	Unavailable (As a reference, currently 27 Oxfordshire open cases)	33
RBWM	24	7	9	9	6
Reading	27	5**	15	15	14
Swindon	45	12*	25	18	Unavailable
West Berkshire	53	16	10	24	6
Wokingham	35	21	9	9	5

\*Swindon special guardianship support transitioned from the LA to ATV 1<sup>st</sup> Feb 2019; referral numbers relate to February and March 2019.

\*\* Reading special guardianship support remains with the LA, these statistics relate to enquiries only.

\*\*\* Bracknell special guardianship support remains with the LA, these statistics relate to enquiries only.

The Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) ICS recording system has not provided reliable data in terms of producing end of year reporting, and we have not had capacity to manually count hundreds of referrals and enquiries. Statistics have been provided from services where spreadsheets are used alongside ICS to monitor enquiries and referrals. OCC will be moving across to a different ICS recording system later in the year, with improved reporting functions.

The number of referrals and enquiries received 2018 – 2019 gives a flavour of the demand on resources for services. However, the demand for services was also significantly impacted by many other variables, such as the level of need/risk for each referral; the number of “active” cases that each LA transferred across to ATV at Go Live 1<sup>st</sup> December 2017, and the number of enquiries and referrals in the period 01/12/2017 – 01/04/2018 in the first few months after Go Live, etc.

### **Adoption support and Special guardianship support offer 2018 - 2019**

- Initial specialist advice, support and signposting
- Assessments of Need
- Social work interventions
- Parent support courses (externally commissioned trainer)
- Peer support services (buddy scheme and group activities)
- Mailing list
- Therapeutic interventions delivered by external providers, ASF funded

Figure: Permanence Support Services offer 2018 - 2019:

	Special Guardianship	Adoption
Bracknell	N**	Y
Oxfordshire	Y	Y
RBWM	Y	Y
Reading	N***	Y
Swindon	N*	Y
West Berkshire	Y	Y
Wokingham	Y	Y

\* Swindon’s special guardianship support transitioned to ATV 1st Feb 2019

\*\* Bracknell’s special guardianship support remains with the LA

\*\*\* Reading’s special guardianship support remains with the LA

### **Initial specialist advice; support and signposting:**

Service users referred to ATV have received initial specialist advice, support and signposting to non-ATV services over the phone, in relation to adoption and special guardianship. In consultation with the family the social worker assessed whether an Assessment of Support Needs was required, and thus allocation to a social worker (active cases).

### **Assessments of Support Needs:**

On behalf of partner LAs, ATV fulfils the statutory duty to provide an Assessment of Support Needs where requested by eligible parties (adoptive family members; special guardianship family members; and birth relatives).

### **Support plans:**

Where a child and family required a support plan, a social worker was allocated to implement and review the support plan, including –

- a) Undertaking the recommended social work interventions
- b) Referring to other services within ATV
- c) Referring to other services outside ATV
- d) Source and commission therapeutic interventions from external providers

Current ICS systems were not able to gather statistics in relation to the number of special guardianship and adoption support plans implemented by the Permanence Support Team 2018 - 2019.

The service model for allocated Permanence Support cases was to provide effective short-term interventions to eligible families, with families re-referring themselves as and when required, rather than long-term case holding. Practice experience highlighted the need for some longer-term casework/holding for a significant minority of cases, in order to stabilise placements and to prevent special guardianship and adopted children coming into care.

### **Social work interventions:**

As a general trend, during this year of managing the challenges of transition to ATV and the number of vacancies within the team (inherited vacancies and new posts created), social workers' have had less capacity to undertake social work and therapeutic interventions. Social work interventions offered have focussed on those services within the adoption support and special guardianship regulations, and in line with the Schedule of Responsibilities determining ATV's role and LA's role in relation to supporting these service users.

Interventions have included assistance in relation to contact (advising teenagers on post 18yo contact; reviewing contact arrangements; court work in relation to contact;

mediation and developing contact agreements); advice and support in relation to therapeutic parenting; providing specialist advice on permanence in multi-agency settings such as TAC; EHCP; CPA and other social care, education and health processes; life story work, including advice on talking to your child, providing enhanced Life Story Books and Later Life Letters for teenagers; joint work with safeguarding colleagues where children have been at risk of being accommodated (placement disruption); to name a few.

Within the team we have staff trained in a range of interventions, including Theraplay; DDP; Non-Violent Resistance; play therapy; Life Story Work; ADOPT parent programme (we have not had capacity to run the ADOPT parent programme this year). Those skills have been used to inform assessments and commissioning services, but we have not had the capacity to use those skills for direct social work interventions as the team would have liked to.

Life Story Work interventions present a particular challenge for ATV and partner LAs. Producing an initial Life Story Book and a Later Life Letter when a child is placed is the responsibility of the child's social worker, however across the region adopted and special guardianship children and their families are not receiving these tools. The lack of these life story work tools impacts on identity and belonging; attachment and family relationships; contact and birth relatives; and many other areas of child development less directly. ATV is unable to meet the demand for unmet need in relation to missing Life Story Books and Later Life Letters that are impacting on children later in life, alongside updating these tools for teenagers and providing or commissioning therapeutic Life Story Work interventions where assessed as required.

### **Parent support courses provided by externally commissioned parent trainer 2018 - 2019:**

Parent support courses were accessed by families through the helpdesk, the Front Door and through social workers within the team referring and signposting. An Assessment of Need was not required.

#### **Coping with Teens short course:**

6 week course (20 hours) run jointly for adopters and special guardians with teenagers aged 10 - 18 years, covering specific strategies to tackle the challenging behaviour of adopted and special guardianship teenagers.

2018 – 2019 two courses were run for adopters and special guardians in Oxfordshire; continuing the previous service offer.

#### **Dealing with Anger and Strong Feelings short course:**

3 session course (10 hours) run jointly for adopters and special guardians of children aged 4-10 years. The course encourages reflection and specific strategies to deal with anger and strong feelings in children and their parents and guardians.

2018 – 2019 one course was run for adopters and special guardians in Oxfordshire; continuing the previous service offer.

2019 – 2020 these above two parent support courses are now open to adopters and special guardians across ATV – and will be located in Woodley and Shrivenham summer 2020.

### **Peer support services for adoption support and special guardianship support:**

Peer support services were accessed by families through the helpdesk, the Front Door and through social workers within the team referring and signposting. An Assessment of Need was not required.

#### **Adoption buddy scheme:**

Oxfordshire's Adopter Buddy Scheme was set up in 2005, and the scheme continues to thrive facilitated by an externally commissioned parent trainer. Buddying offers an individual and flexible peer-support service. Each match offers up to 12 hours of individual peer support for an adopter at a time and place to suit them. Buddies each receive 20 hours' supervision from an external trainer as well as email and telephone support.

14 new adopter buddies were trained in Autumn 2018, and ATV now we have 24 buddies (with matches in Oxfordshire and now in Berkshire). 2019 -2020 the scheme is now open to adopters across the ATV region.

#### **Peer support group activities:**

Swindon area:

The peer support offer for adopters in the Swindon area was maintained, with four events during 2018 – 2019, including an annual summer picnic.

Feedback from Swindon adopters attending the winter adopter pantomime event and the Permanence Support Coordinator who organised the event -

*“Thank you so much for organising the pantomime, both my boys had a lovely time.”*

*“Thanks for the tickets X all the children enjoyed the panto”*

*“Just wanted to say thank you very much for organising the Panto tickets. The kids really enjoyed it, what a great show”.*

*“Great panto as always. Thanks for organising it!”*

Oxfordshire area:

The peer support offer for adopters and special guardians in the Oxfordshire area was also maintained, with an annual summer picnic for adopters and an annual picnic for special guardians.

Berkshire area:

Berkshire authorities were unable to provide any level of direct peer support offers this year. There are two services provided by local charitable organisations: *Homes for Good* and *Parenting Special Children* which have continued to provide drop in

services, parenting support and training. An ATV worker has attended the monthly drop-ins and provided support there and workers have promoted the other services.

### **Permanence Support Team mailing list:**

The Permanence Support Team inherited mailing lists, at various stages of development, from the partner Local Authorities. These mailing lists had been used to communicate with services users.

2018 legislation changed in relation to data protection requirements (GDPR), creating a significant resource challenge in terms of auditing inherited mailing lists and contacting all service users to ensure mailing lists were GDPR compliant. This project remains in process but has been delayed by lack of administrative resource.

The Permanence Support presence on the ATV website remains at an early stage of development, and it is not yet a fully developed resource for service users or professionals in terms of communication or sharing information.

### **Externally commissioned therapeutic services funded through the Adoption Support Fund:**

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) became available nationally from May 2015, allowing Local Authorities to apply to central government to fund therapeutic interventions for adopted children. From 1st April 2016, the ASF became available for Inter-country adoptions (once the placement has been made and the child is in England) and for Special Guardianship children who were looked after immediately prior to the order. The Fair Access Limit remains capped at £2500 for specialist assessment and £5000 for therapeutic intervention. ASF requirements change periodically and the fund is only guaranteed until 2020. The government spending review due by autumn 2019 will inform whether the ASF continues longer term and in what form.

According to statistics gathered from the Adoption Support Fund Report provided on the ASF portal, the following completed (funding approved) ASF applications were made in the past three financial years.

Figure: ATV ASF Applications 2018 - 2019

	ATV ASF Applications 2018 - 2019	Service user groups able to access ASF applications through ATV 2018 - 2019
Bracknell	16	Adoption only
Oxfordshire	135*	Adoption and special guardianship
RBWM	33	Adoption and special guardianship
Reading	22	Adoption only
Swindon	34	Adoption only
West Berkshire	24	Adoption and special guardianship
Wokingham	44	Adoption and special guardianship
<b>Total</b>	<b>308</b>	

Figure: ASF Applications made by LA partners pre-ATV 2017 - 2018

	ASF Applications made by LA partners pre-ATV 2017 - 2018
Bracknell	15
Oxfordshire	99*
RBWM	15
Reading	29
Swindon	23
West Berkshire	23
Wokingham	44
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>

Figure: ASF Applications made by LA partners pre-ATV 2016 - 2017

	ASF Applications made by LA partner pre-ATV 2016 - 2017
Bracknell	15
Oxfordshire	87*
RBWM	26
Reading	20
Swindon	44
West Berkshire	12
Wokingham	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>233</b>

Figure: Detailed breakdown of ATV Applications 2018 - 2019

LA	ASF applications	ASF applications – value (£)	Matched funded applications	Matched funded – value (£)
Reading	35	114,459	0	0
RBWM	56	193,310	0	0
Wokingham	67	296,025	1	1,000
Oxfordshire	173	222,181	0	0
Bracknell Forest	20	71,396	0	0
Swindon	41	122,200	2	7,475
W Berks	34	69,711	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>1,089,282</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8,475</b>

\* ASF funding and match funding figures only provide information on therapeutic support, which is only one element of the adoption support and special guardianship support services that local authorities have a statutory duty to provide.

\* These figures also only provide information on therapeutic support provided to those children eligible for the ASF (adopted children and special guardianship children who were

not looked after); whereas any other therapeutic support will have been funded by the LA following an application by ATV.

\* These figures also only provide information on therapeutic support provided that is within scope of the ASF, again any other therapeutic support will have been funded by the LA following an application by ATV.

### **Analysis:**

It is important to note that many of the above ASF applications include more than one child (each child requires an individual Assessment of Need to support the ASF application).

There is a trend of an increase in the number of ASF approved applications over the past three financial years.

There is a consistent discrepancy with Oxford being the highest number of ASF applications made. This is due to the relative size and population of this LA as well as the fact that Oxfordshire's in-house ATTACH Team generates their own assessments and ASF applications on a regular basis as therapeutic work is reviewed more frequently than is possible with external providers.

At this time, we are only aware of one ATV application which was declined by the ASF. This was due to a timing error, which resulted in the application being out of scope.

Work continues alongside colleagues within OCC from Commissioning and Contracts, Finance, Legal, Insurance and Local Authority Designated Officers (LADO) to continue to develop policies and procedures around safely and effectively implementing the ASF and commissioning services through the ASF. This has become more relevant as ATV works with such a broad range of providers. We have also invested in training within the Permanence Support Team to develop knowledge around commissioning therapeutic services, and this will remain an area of ongoing development.

ASF funded therapeutic services have been commissioned outside of the region where required. Finding and safely and effectively commissioning services from therapeutic providers remains a challenge. Learning from other LA's continues through attending consortium events and regional workshops.

### **Recovering central government ASF funds:**

Prior to ATV the Oxfordshire Permanence Support Team and the Oxfordshire ATTACH team had provided therapeutic services and recovered central government funds. These funds recovered through the ASF were reinvested to develop sustainable therapeutic services within OCC, as per the conditions of the ASF.

- Funding from the Oxfordshire Permanence Support Team was committed to staff training; consultation and supervision; accreditation; and licence fees from external agencies, in order to provide therapeutic services such as the AdOpt Parenting Programme, NVR, Theraplay and Life Story Work.

- Funding was also committed to fund an Adoption Support Fund Administrator's post, to support social workers with the administrative work in relation to the ASF.

The ATV Permanence Support Team has not had capacity to deliver many therapeutic interventions this year, whilst managing the transition to ATV. This has meant there has been very limited scope to reclaim any central government ASF funds.

### **Adults Affected by Adoption services (AAA)**

ATV Adults Affected by Adoption (AAA) services initially remained with social workers in the team linked to the LA areas; continuing to follow the model inherited from the local authorities forming ATV. However, where there were significant backlogs of AAA referrals and capacity issues to meet the need, additional sessional hours were commissioned from the Oxfordshire based AAA social worker.

The AAA specialist worker was promoted to senior practitioner, and her role developed to lead on training and supervising AAA work within the whole team, and in supporting the Front Door and Helpdesk with triaging all AAA referrals. This has allowed us to provide a more responsive and expert service to adults affected by adoption in more LA areas.

Advice and guidance was available to adults affected by adoption and to birth relatives affected by adoption contacting ATV. The AAA service provided support to adopted adults requesting Access to Adoption Records; with intermediary services also being offered only in exceptional cases.

The Support Group for Adopted Adults continues to meet every 2 months in Oxfordshire, facilitated by the specialist AAA worker. The aim is to provide adopted adults with an opportunity to share their feelings and experiences of adoption, search and reunion in a supportive environment. From a pool of about 25 adopted adults invited to the group, about 10-15 people attend each meeting. Verbal feedback from participants has been very positive.

The worker cannot continue with the additional sessional work hours due to personal circumstances, and we are currently recruiting for an appropriate sessional worker.

Figure: Referrals for Adults Affected by Adoption Services 2018 - 2019:

	Adults Affected by Adoption Referrals and Enquiries 2018 - 2019
Bracknell	2
Oxfordshire	ICS reporting is unavailable 27 active cases April 2019
RBWM	9
Reading	15
Swindon	18
West Berkshire	24
Wokingham	9

\* Figures do not include Access to Records enquiries from birth relatives; other enquires from adults affected by adoption resolved with advice, signposting and phone support; and they do not evidence the complex casework taking place to meet the needs of Access to Records requests for 18 – 25yo.

## **Letterbox Services**

Letterbox Services were organised into three locality areas; continuing to follow the model inherited from the local authorities forming ATV –

- Oxfordshire
- Swindon
- Berkshire (including Bracknell; Reading; RBWM; Swindon; West Berkshire; and Wokingham – previously BAAS).

The aim for 2018 – 2019 was to continue to provide the existing Letterbox Services whilst managing the challenges of the transition to becoming a regional adoption agency.

The Letterbox Services in Swindon and Berkshire were recorded on paper files prior to ATV. A significant administrative resource challenge this year has been data migration; creating individual ICS records for all the parties involved in each Letterbox arrangement and inputting Swindon and Berkshire’s Letterbox data onto ICS records. With the additional administrative resource recently provided we are on track to meet the data migration deadline before Oxfordshire County Council

changes ICS systems from Fwi to Liquid Logic. Our Letterbox workers are also now managing unfamiliar recording systems, and it is appropriately taking us time to embed these changes.

Figure: ATV Letterbox Service offer 2018 - 2019:

	Special Guardianship	Adoption
Bracknell	Y	Y
Oxfordshire	Y	Y
RBWM	Y	Y
Reading	Y	Y
Swindon	Y	Y
West Berkshire	Y	Y
Wokingham	Y	Y

Figure: Letterbox Service arrangements 2018 - 2019:

Local Authority	Total number of children with Letterbox arrangements 2018 - 2019	Total number of new Letterbox referrals 2018 - 2019
Bracknell	72	11
Oxfordshire	473	33
RBWM	82	6
Reading	211	14
Swindon	150	Data unavailable
West Berks	101	6
Wokingham	55	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1144</b>	<b>75</b>

**Oxfordshire Letterbox Service:**

Between 2014 and 2019 demand for Oxfordshire Letterbox services increased by 33% over this 5 year period (data relates to increase in number of individual children

with letterbox arrangements, however each child can have letterbox contact with a number of different birth relatives so the % increase in exchanges facilitated may be greater).

The Oxfordshire Letterbox Service was developed from an adoption only service to include special guardianship children in around 2016.

The Letterbox Service had a 2 month period without a Letterbox Administrator again this year, during the period Dec 2018 – Feb 2019, whilst maternity cover was sought. Considerable work has been undertaken by the Letterbox Administrator and Letterbox Coordinator in order to get the back-log of exchanges up to date. This further period, after similar periods in previous years, without a Letterbox administrator has led to complaints.

### **Berkshire Letterbox Service:**

The letterbox service, Berkshire area, has 525 active letterboxes. Although this number is representative of the overall number of children, with an arrangement, exchanges within each can vary greatly. Overall yearly exchanges of individual letters can reach 2,500.

There have been a number of historical letterbox arrangements set up this year and the service has been responsive and supportive to ensuring these are now in place for the relevant children. No complaints regarding the service have been received. The Berkshire Letterbox Service has maintained a consistent Letterbox administrator throughout the year.

The Berkshire Letterbox Service has always been available to adopted and special guardianship children, however there has been limited take up for special guardianship children.

### **Swindon Letterbox Service:**

150 children have letterbox arrangements in Swindon. The Swindon Letterbox Service was developed from an adoption only service to include special guardianship children this year.

The Swindon Letterbox Service has had periods without a Letterbox Administrator during the year, as the worker has been required to cover the Permanence Support Front Door due to administrative staff absence. This has led to delays in processing Letterbox referrals, setting up arrangements and processing letterbox exchanges, and we still have a significant backlog to work through. Administrative cover is currently in place for the Front Door, and the new administrative resource for Swindon (agreed in the Permanence Support Review) has been recruited and is due to start soon. These administrative resources will give us an opportunity to work through the backlog.

## **Birth Relative Support Services (BRS):**

Birth Relative Support Services were and are currently organised into two areas; continuing a similar model inherited from the local authorities forming ATV –

- Oxfordshire
- Swindon and Berkshire (including Bracknell; Reading; RBWM; Swindon; West Berkshire; and Wokingham).

In Oxfordshire the worker provides Oxfordshire BRS services in relation to adoption and special guardianship; and manages the Oxfordshire Letterbox Service.

Berkshire LAs (previously BAAS) provided a worker (providing BRS services in relation to adoption in Bracknell; Reading; RBWM; Swindon; West Berkshire; and Wokingham, with the loss of BRS work in Slough with the transition to ATV), and this senior practitioner continues to provide BRS services to these LAs.

Swindon previously contracted After Adoption to provide BRS services in relation to adoption, and this contract was ended with the transition to ATV. The Berkshire BRS worker has taken over providing BRS services in Swindon. This has led to a significant improvement in services to birth relatives and professionals. This also proved a timely intervention as After Adoption has recently gone into receivership, affecting other Regional Adoption Agencies.

The aim for 2018 – 2019 was to continue to provide the existing Birth Relative Support Services whilst managing the challenges of the transition to becoming a regional adoption agency.

The aim going forwards will be to provide a more consistent service to birth relatives across ATV, in order to improve outcomes for adopted and special guardianship children.

**Figure: Birth Relative Support Service offer 2018 - 2019:**

	Special Guardianship Birth Relative Support service	Adoption Birth Relative Support service
Bracknell	N	Y
Oxfordshire	Y	Y
RBWM	N	Y
Reading	N	Y
Swindon	N	Y
West Berkshire	N	Y

Wokingham	N	Y
-----------	---	---

Figure: Birth Support Services referrals 2018 - 2019:

	Birth Relative Support Referrals 2018 - 2019
Bracknell	8
Oxfordshire	ICS data unavailable (current caseload 94)
RBWM	9
Reading	15
Swindon	25
West Berkshire	10
Wokingham	9

\* Of the 75 referrals for Birth Relative Support services across Bracknell, Reading, RBWM, Swindon, West Berkshire and Wokingham there was a 93% engagement rate. Figures are not available from ICS for Oxfordshire.

### **Peer support for birth relatives:**

The Oxfordshire and Berkshire Birth Mother's Support Groups have both continued to meet monthly.

The Berkshire Birth Mother's Support Group has a cohort of 29 members.

This Oxfordshire Birth Mother's Support group provides a drop-in service for birth relatives to meet with the Birth Relative Support worker and Letterbox Administrator, for BRS support and to seek advice in relation to Letterbox enquiries. The support group was previously co-facilitated by a support worker from the Elmore Team (adults complex needs team). This support was withdrawn as it could no longer be provided without funding from ATV.

The aim for 2019 – 2020 is to develop a Swindon Birth Mother's Support Group.

### Information sharing:

To promote and provide information about the Birth Relative Support service, annual visits are made to the various children’s teams to ensure knowledge about referring families and understanding of the services available. This has been a particular focus in Swindon following the transition from After Adoption as the provider.

Information sharing has also included in-house training for all the new Permanence Support staff joining the team in the last financial year; the continued input into the preparation of prospective adopters in relation to birth relatives and letterbox; and visits to voluntary organisations to inform them about birth relative support.

### Support for birth relatives in relation to adoption:

The birth relative service continues to offer birth families support with the adoption process up until the indirect contact of letterbox exchanges, where support with writing their letters is provided where needed.

Birth parent/Adopter meetings are a vital part of pre-order birth relative support services, which in our practice experience support improved outcomes for children including improved engagement in Letterbox services by birth relatives and adopters. Birth Relative Support workers offer facilitation to social workers and support to birth families prior to and during, the one -off meetings between the prospective adopters and children’s birth families.

Comments have included; *“fantastic service-I am happy with it”* from a birth father. A thank you card was received; *“Thank you for all you do for me”* from a birth mother undergoing gender reassignment. Grandparents who had been supported and encouraged to attend a one-off meeting when the birth parents were unable to, wrote; *“It’s like a weight off my shoulders. We appreciate everything you are doing, thank you so very much”*. Social workers have commented *“have appreciated the support, the meeting had been organised and managed extremely well”*

	Facilitated birth parent/adopter meetings 2018 - 2019
Bracknell	3
Oxfordshire	10
RBWM	2 (one of which took place over the telephone due to security risks)
Reading	3
Swindon	1

West Berkshire	3
Wokingham	1
Total	23

**Support for birth relatives in relation to special guardianship and for adopted young people:**

Birth Relative Support in Oxfordshire has continued to offer services to a broader range of service users accessing Permanence Support in Oxfordshire. This year services included supporting birth relatives with contact in adoption and special guardianship (those special guardianship children and families with the highest levels of need/risk); and work with young adopted people (16 and 17 year olds) who have been in contact with birth relatives (often via social media).

**Staff team 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019:**

OXFORD/SWINDON/WOODLEY	Role	FTE	Staff
<b>2.8 fte 3 staff + 1 vacancy</b>	Team Manager	1	1
	Team Manager	0.8	1
	Assistant Team Manager	0.5	1
	Assistant Team Manager	0.5	0 (Vacancy)*
SWINDON	Role	FTE	Staff
<b>4.5 fte 5 staff</b>	Permanence Support Coordinator (FSW)	1	1
	Social Worker	0.6	1
	Social Worker	0.6	1
	Social Worker	0.5	1
	Social Worker	0.8	1
OXFORD	Role	FTE	Staff
<b>6 fte 8 staff + 1.1 vacancy</b>	Senior Practitioner	0.5	1
	Senior Practitioner	0.5	1
	Senior Practitioner	0.5	1
	Senior Practitioner (BRS specialist)	0.8	1
	Senior Practitioner (AAA specialist)	0.4	1
	Social Worker	0.8	1
	Social Worker	1	0 (Vacancy)** Maternity leave 2018 - 19

	Social Worker	0.7	1
	Social Worker	0.1	0 (Vacancy)***
	Social Worker	0.5	1
	Social Worker	0.2	0
<b>WOODLEY</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>FTE</b>	<b>Staff</b>
<b>10 staff + 1.1 vacancy 9.1fte</b>	Senior Practitioner (Bracknell link)	1	1
	Senior Practitioner (RBWM link)	0.6	1
	Senior Practitioner (RBWM link)	0.5	1
	Social Worker (RBWM link)	0.4	1
	Senior Practitioner (West Berks link)	1	1
	Senior Practitioner (Wokingham link)	0.6	1
	Social Worker (Wokingham link)	1	1
	Social Worker (Reading link)	1	1
	Social Worker (Reading link)	1	0 (Post withdrawn)****
	Social Worker (Reading link)	0.6	1
	Social Worker (Reading link)	0.3	0
	Social Worker (Reading)	6 hours per week	0 (Vacancy)***
	Senior Practitioner (BRS specialist)	1	1
<b>Administrative support</b>	<b>ROLE</b>	<b>FTE</b>	<b>STAFF</b>
<b>4 staff + 1 vacancy 4.1 fte</b>	ASF Administrator (ASF funded)	1	1
	Letterbox Specialist Administrator Berkshire	0.6	1
	Letterbox Specialist Administrator Oxfordshire	0.5	1 (Maternity cover)
	Team Specialist Administrator	0.5	0 (Maternity cover)
	Front Door Specialist Administrator	1	1 (Temporary cover in post)
	Team Administrator (Swindon)	0.5	starting 13/05/2019
<b>Total staff team</b>		<b>26.5 FTE</b>	<b>28 Staff 4.2 vacancies</b>

			<p><b>24 SW staff + 3.2 vacancies</b></p> <p><b>4 Administrative support staff + 1 vacancy</b></p>
--	--	--	--

\* ATM Post recruited to; successful applicant in recruitment process; due to start Jul 2019

\*\* SW Post advertised

\*\*\* SW Hours identified for sessional work AAA social work post

\*\*\*\* SW Post currently withdrawn by Reading, awaiting decision as to whether post and SGO support will transfer to ATV

\*\*\*\*\* Administrative Post recruited to; successful applicant due to start Apr 2019

## **ATV Permanence Support Team - Compliments and Complaints:**

### **Q1: April 2018 – Jun 2018:**

#### **Compliments Received:**

- **April 2018** – Parent thanked Permanence Support for all their hard work and help – saying it is so significant to them and their children.
- **April 2018** – A mother thanked Permanence Support for seeing her child. The child said the Social Worker was the “best Social Worker”.
- **April 2018** – A card to Permanence Support from a Service User to say they are grateful for their time, expertise and rewarding conversation.
- **April 2018** – A student social worker from Achieving for Children emailed to thank a Permanence Support Social Worker for their help and support.
- **April 2018** – A private solicitors firm thanked an Adoption Team Social Worker for providing helpful court statistics around family finding.
- **May 2018** — Thank you card from Letterbox Service User saying the team does a “grand job” and she is grateful for all the help.
- **June 2018** – Panel feedback to an Adoption Social Worker. “Panel have been impressed by your presentation and manner both yesterday and on previous recent Panels. In particular, comment was made of your ability to remain non-defensive despite some quite challenging questioning, and your no-nonsense and uncomplicated approach, all of which translates into a sense that your judgement can be trusted.”
- **June 2018** – Adopter feedback on Adoption Senior Practitioner. “We very much value the patience, professionalism and guidance from S, who has considerably supported us with the linking and introductions to our daughter, and the ongoing support.”

### **Q2: Jul 2018 – Sep 2018:**

#### **Compliments received:**

- Email from Service User to Swindon Social Worker thanking them for support and talking things over – 14<sup>th</sup> September 2018 – *“thank you so much it was*

*good to chat it over with you. It really really helped me so much as sometimes I can be too close to a situation to see..... you really did help me.”*

- Email from Special Guardian regarding Oxfordshire Social Worker to say thank you for his support in Court. 14<sup>th</sup> September 2018 – *“they described X as lovely and really appreciated him being there”*.
- Email from Service User to Wokingham Link Social Worker thanking them for work on ASF fund – 12<sup>th</sup> September 2018
- Email from Service User to Swindon Social Worker regarding group activities day and how beneficial and enjoyable it is for their child – 7<sup>th</sup> September 2018 – *“We could do any day. X does have cubs on a Wednesday at 6:30pm, but would happily give it a miss for something like this. X would love to go. She knows she’s ‘special’, and this events are great for that purpose. When she goes she knows she’s going to meet the likes of you and [the worker] who understand her. It takes the pressure off so she can really relax and enjoy herself. It’s the same with making friends at events – there’s no inferiority. We would support any event like this – the only time we struggle is with the Christmas event at Roves Farm. That’s just because I’m Christmas mad and our days are packed out. Easter too, but that’s because I have to work.”*
- Email from Service User to Swindon Link Social Worker thanking them for work on ASF fund application – dated 5<sup>th</sup> September 2018 – *“Thank you for letting us know and thank you to X for all your hard work on this application.*
- Comment made by adopters to Oxfordshire Social Worker, saying she is the first person to “really hear them” and thanking her for listening and for her time. 24<sup>th</sup> August 2018 – *“X and her husband said that she and her husband X felt like I have been the first person to ‘really hear them’ after our meeting this morning and thanked me for listening and giving them the time to discuss things. She also said to thank you for the advice you have given.”*
- Email from Service Users to Wokingham Social Worker thanking her for support and stating the difference it makes to their family. They said the social worker was brilliant. 31<sup>st</sup> July 2018 – *Mother says she is so thankful to us and truly believes my professional training and skills can actually make a difference to their family. She said that just from our first 1:1 meeting I helped her to reflect on the escalation and triggers and between herself and X .*
- Email to Team Manager from Swindon staff member to say thank you for the can-do attitude. 24<sup>th</sup> July 2018 – *“thank you for your ‘can do’ attitude with this. So helpful!”*
- Email from letterbox service user to Woodley letterbox administrator, thanking her for quick response. 1<sup>st</sup> August 2018

### **Q3: Oct 2018 – Dec 2018:**

#### **Compliments received:**

- Oct 2018 – Compliment from an adoptive father in Berkshire for an administrator receiving a referral; giving thanks for putting his mind at rest saying “having spoken with you I feel so much better already and have some real reassurance and peace of mind”.

- Nov 2018 – Compliment for a senior practitioner based in Berkshire for work undertaken with an adopted adult; *“Thank you so much for seeing this through for me and please thank the archive person... many thanks for sparing the time to listen. This was so very helpful”.*
- Nov 2018 – Compliment for a social worker in Oxfordshire from a special guardian; *“We would like to say how very much we have appreciated the help of the team. X has provided us with the support and advice we needed to work our way through the difficulties of having a child under an SGO. It was good to know that he was there, working in [our child's] best interests...I felt that he really cared what happened to [our child] and that made a big difference to us as a family. We felt listened to. We don't think there is anything he could have done better. He saw us through a difficult time.”*
- Nov 2018 – Compliment for a senior practitioner based in Berkshire regarding work around child on parent violence. *“I just wanted to thank you all for all you've done so far & what you are continuing to do. I'm very aware that my ability to continue to fight for support has diminished over the last year or so & I just want to let you all know how blessed I feel to have you all in my corner & meeting with you all really showed me that.”*
- Nov 2018 – Compliment for a senior practitioner based in Berkshire; *“I wanted to say (from me) how much we appreciate what you are doing for [our child]... for the first time, we are talking to someone who properly understands [our child's] situation.*
- Nov 2018 – Compliment for a senior practitioner based in Berkshire from adoptive parents; *“I appreciate all you have done for us...you have been a true professional”*
- Nov 2018 – Compliment from LA colleagues in Berkshire regarding a social worker, remarking on the good recruitment choice and the worker's understanding of the service.
- Nov 2018 – Compliment for a social worker based in Swindon from a local school, noting the pertinent questions, the listening and appreciating that the worker “got it”, and complimenting the ATV Manager for recruiting a good staff member.
- Dec 2018 – Compliment for a social worker based in Oxfordshire regarding work with a special guardianship young person; *“Thank you so much X for all you have done for [our child] today. The awful experience will have been made easier because of your support. I too felt comforted knowing you were standing by her.”*

#### **Q4: Jan 2019 – Mar 2019:**

##### **Compliments received:**

- Jan 2019 – compliment from a special guardian regarding an ASYE member of staff, for her professionalism; open and friendly manner; knowledge and willingness to find further information; and maturity.
- Jan 2019 – compliment from an adopter for a senior practitioner based in Berkshire; “Thank you so much for everything you have done and are doing for me, I can’t put into words how much this means!”
- Jan 2019 – compliment from an adopter for helpdesk staff based in Oxfordshire. *“Thank you for your support, advice and acting as a sounding board. It helped me to clarify my feelings and thoughts”.*
- Jan 2019 – compliment from a LA colleague for an ATV manager for advocacy work in relation to a special guardianship family; “You are wonderful, thank you - hope we hear back soon!”
- Jan 2019 – compliment from a LA school for an ATV manager; “I just wanted to say thank you from [us] for all your help and support. We’ve learnt so much from you, always found you approachable and good to work with. We shall both miss working with you but know you’re very deserving of your promotion”.
- Feb 2019 – compliment from a special guardian for a social worker based in Swindon regarding a contact hearing; “we would just like to say a massive thank you too yourself and the rest of the team at Adopt Thames Valley, for all your hard work in the last 2 days. Given the limited timescale we were given”.
- Mar 2019 – compliment from a special guardian for a social worker based in Oxfordshire regarding a contact hearing; “I just want to send you a thank you for your statement which you put into court. You took great care in securing [our child’s] voice was heard in a manner which secured her wishes. For the supporting manager; “thank you so much for helping to secure funding and acting so quickly to support us getting this resolved”.
- Mar 2019 – compliment from an adopter for a social worker based in Berkshire; “many thanks for your response. I will take time to absorb and reflect upon your wise words”.
- Mar 2019 – compliment from an adopter for a social worker based in Berkshire; “thank you so much for the report and also all of your advice” about contact after adoption.
- Mar 2019 – compliment from an adopter for a social worker based in Oxfordshire; “Thank you so much for your very useful summary. We have both read it several times and will continue to do so, and it helps give us confidence and strength going forward”.

### **Complaints received 2018 – 2019:**

Service users are provided with complaints information by the staff team and are supported to make complaints where they have concerns.

- Adoptive Parent concerned about Adoption Support Fund application and therapeutic support pre and post ATV (Swindon area)

- Adoptive parent concerned about the support provide from placement throughout the children's lives pre and post ATV (Oxfordshire area)
- Out of county adoptive parent concerned about the level of adoption support provided from placement pre and post ATV (Swindon area)
- Birth parent concerned about decision regarding contact with children under a special guardianship order from placement pre-ATV and delays with the letterbox service during period without an administrator post ATV (Oxfordshire area)
- Birth parent concerned about decision regarding contact with her child under a special guardianship order (Oxfordshire area)
- Special guardian concerned about decision regarding special guardianship allowance (Oxfordshire area)
- Special guardian concerned about waiting list for a social worker to be allocated to undertake an Assessment of Need (Swindon area)
- Adopter concerned about the delays with the Letterbox service during period without an administrator (Oxfordshire area)
- Special guardian concerned about decision to provide a placement under section 17 rather than section 20 (Oxfordshire area)
- Adopter concerned about the delays with the Letterbox service during period without and administrator (Oxfordshire area)
- Birth parent concerned that adopters have disengaged from Letterbox contact (Swindon)
- Birth parent concerned that adopters have disengaged from Letterbox contact (Swindon)
- Birth relative concerned about decision regarding contact with her grandchild under a special guardianship order (Oxfordshire area)

*Kate Elliott*

03/05/2019

Kate Elliott  
Joint Team Manager  
ATV Permanence Support Team

Adopt Thames Valley; Permanence Support Team; Annual Report 2018 – 2019  
Kate Elliott (Joint Team Manager)

ASF information provided by Samantha Viner (Joint Team Manager; Permanence Support Team) and Wendy Esterhuysen (Assistant Team Manager; Permanence Support Team)

BRS and Letterbox information contributed by Gill Black (ATV Adoption Panel Advisor)

Parent course and buddy scheme information contributed by Louise Capstick (Parent Trainer)

Data contributions from the whole ATV Permanence Support staff team