2019/2020

ANNUAL REPORT

ADOPTION AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP LEADERSHIP BOARD

BOARD OVERVIEW

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) was established in 2014 to provide leadership to the adoption system and drive improvements in performance. In 2017 the Board expanded its remit to include previously looked after children subject to a special guardianship order.

The members of the ASGLB in 2019/20 were:

Name	Organization	Position
Andrew Chistie	ASGLB	Chair
Rachel Dicksinson	ADCS	President
Charlotte Ramsden	ADCS	Chair of Health, Care and Additional Needs Policy Committee
Sue Armstrong-Brown	Adoption UK	Chief Executive
John Simmonds	CoramBAAF	Director
Maggie Jones	CVAA	Cheif Executive Officer
Fran Oram	DfE	Director of Children's Social Care, Practice and Workforce
Sophie Langdale		
	Family Rights Group	Chief Executive Officer
Cathy Ashley	Grandparents Plus	Chief Executive Officer
Lucy Peake	LGA	Chair of the Children and Young People's Board
Cllr Susue Charles		
	CAFCASS	Director of Strategy
Teresa Williams		Judicial Observer
Mrs Justice Judd		
Julie Selwyn		

The Regional Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Boards (RASGLB) are comprised of Director of Children's Services (DCSs) of local authorities and Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) leaders from the respective region. The chairs for these Boards meet with the ASGLB chair via teleconference to discuss the regional trends in adoption and special guardianship, and feedback an on-the-ground view of the topics being discussed at main board.

The Adoption Reference Group (ARG) is comprised of adopters who discuss issues affecting adopters and feedback from their networks.
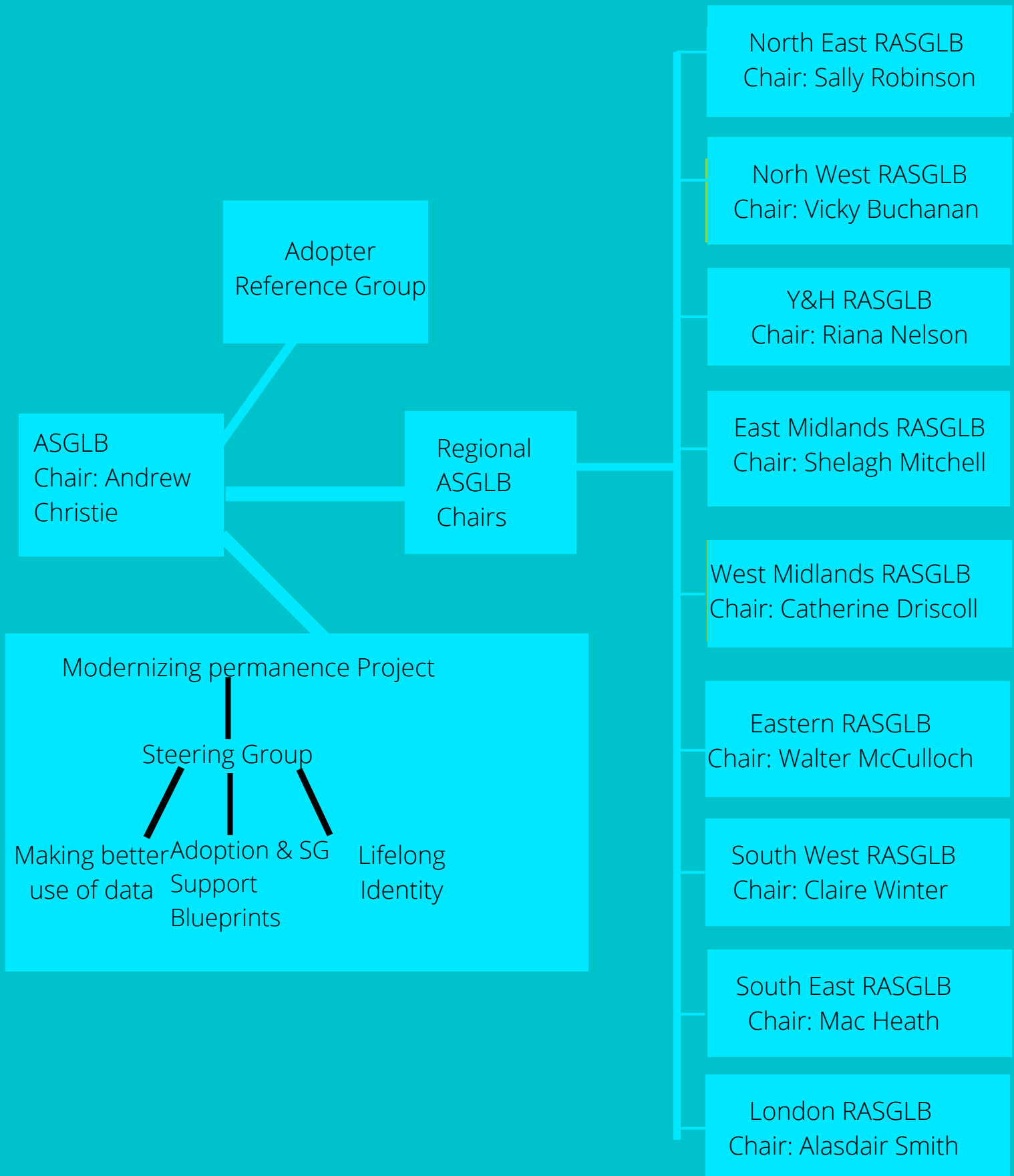
Both the ARG and RASGLB chairs meet the week before the main board and their discussions are fed back to the board. An organogram of the board structure can be found on page 4.

In addition to the sub boards, the ASGLB also has working groups that discuss and implement projects that the Board is undertaking.

Currently, this includes working groups to undertake the Board's main project: The Modernising Permanence Project.

Organogram

Adopter Reference Group

ASGLB
Chair: Andrew Christie

Regional ASGLB Chairs

Modernizing permanence Project

Steering Group

Making better use of data

Adoption & SG Support Blueprints

Lifelong Identity

North East RASGLB
Chair: Sally Robinson

Norh West RASGLB
Chair: Vicky Buchanan

Y&H RASGLB
Chair: Riana Nelson

East Midlands RASGLB
Chair: Shelagh Mitchell

West Midlands RASGLB
Chair: Catherine Driscoll

Eastern RASGLB
Chair: Walter McCulloch

South West RASGLB
Chair: Claire Winter

South East RASGLB
Chair: Mac Heath

London RASGLB
Chair: Alasdair Smith

MODERNISING PERMANENCE

Development of Data

When it comes to data regarding the adoption system, there is now rich national data regarding the front-end of the adoption system. This means that practitioners and policy makers have a clear view of what's happening in terms of children going into care. But there are big gaps in the data that hamper the work that practitioners and policy makers are doing to improve children's social care: there is a lack of data on the post-adoption landscape, impeding our understanding of outcomes of children who are adopted; and there is even less data when it comes to special guardianships. This has hindered the work of the ASGLB, especially since the Board expanded its purview in 2017 to include Special Guardianship. The Board's data on adopter and child journeys to the point of final order was rich, but didn't inform on the performance of the post-adoption system, or the SGO system as a whole. Following a Board away day, it was agreed that the ASGLB needed to clarify what needs to be known from the current research and data available. The ASGLB created the data project as a part of the modernising permanence work to evaluate the current data collection against the Board's objectives and identify where and how the collection could be improved to aid the board's work. A task and finish group, led by Theresa Williams, worked to define the scope, identify key stakeholders, existing data sources, what information the board needed, gaps and make proposals to fill the gaps. As of March 2020, the Board has held three workshops with practitioners. The focus of each workshop respectively were: permanency planning, securing permanency data, and maintaining permanency. The aim of the workshops was to determine what we should be measuring and what data is already collected in relation to these measures. The next steps are to build a data model based on the workshops, and return to the board with a proposal for the next steps of the project.

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Adoption and Special Guardianships Support Guides

Another key thread of the modernising permanence project has been the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Guides. The purpose of this work is to help agencies think about the support services they provide and identify good practice. The Adoption Support Guide has been completed, and the next steps are for the Board to agree on the best format to publish the blueprint in. Currently the thinking is to release it online. The Special Guardianship Support Guide is still being completed but is following the same structure and format as the Adoption Guide. Both Support Guides are being developed in parallel with an audit of adoption support commissioned by the RAA leaders group. In 2020 the Board's key priorities will be to upload the Support Guides onto a suitable web platform and promote their use.

Lifelong Identity

The third key focus area for the Modernising Permanence Project is Lifelong Identity. There is increasing evidence that deficiencies in addressing this aspect appropriately are contributing to a significant number of issues faced by adopters, foster carers, and special guardians. There is vast regional variation on the quality of life story work, and evidence has shown that the more you capture the child's journey early on, the more the child will benefit from it in the long term. The purpose of this work is to identify what good lifelong identity work looks like and improve practice and help professionals develop expertise, resulting in more stable placements. The Board held a roundtable in October 2019 with practitioners and stakeholders from across the sector. The discussion centred on three main aspects that the group felt needed to be considered: life story work, contact, and preparation, training, and support. The group also identified the perspectives that the work needed to be centred on: the child, the new parents/carers, the birth family and social workers/other professionals. The discussion highlighted that there is a lot of work already being done across the sector on this, and that a quick win for this work would be to identify and signpost advice, research, and practice guidance that already exists. Following the round table, the group produced a paper with solutions to the issues highlighted in the discussions. The solutions were set out with stakeholders who could be included in the work and the level of complexity:
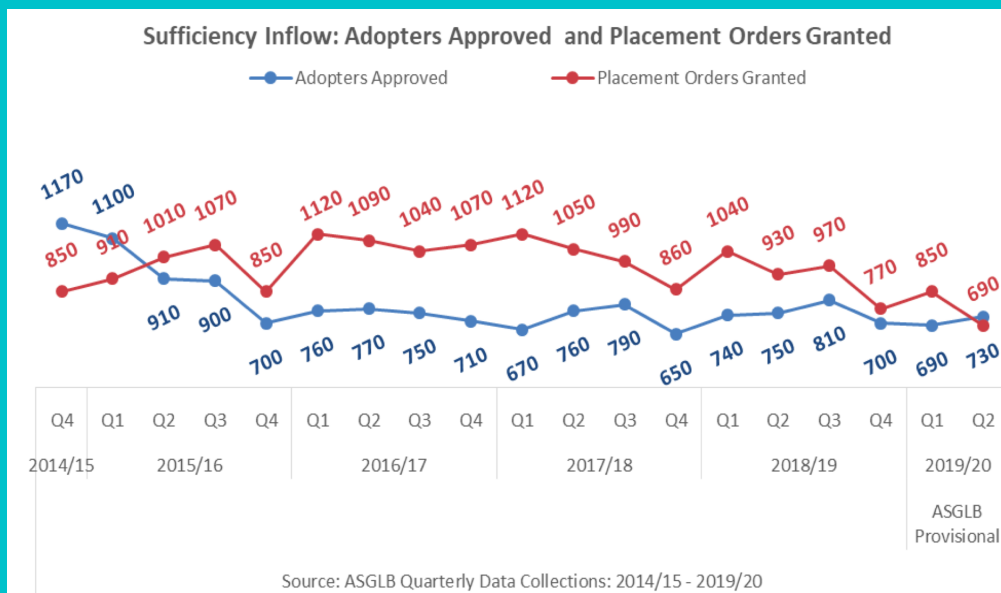
Solution	Who	Complexity
Test the inclusion of more information on contact in adopter preparation training to see how it impacts on the rate of adopter approval	RAA's	Medium
Develop and implement consistent preparation training for special guardians	LAs	Medium
Adoption and SG Guides include support for life story work, contact and cultural identity	ASGLB	Low

The next steps for this work is to ensure more input from Special Guardians and care leavers and focus on workforce development. At the meeting of the modernising permanence working group in January 2020 it was agreed that this thread of the project needed to be a top priority.
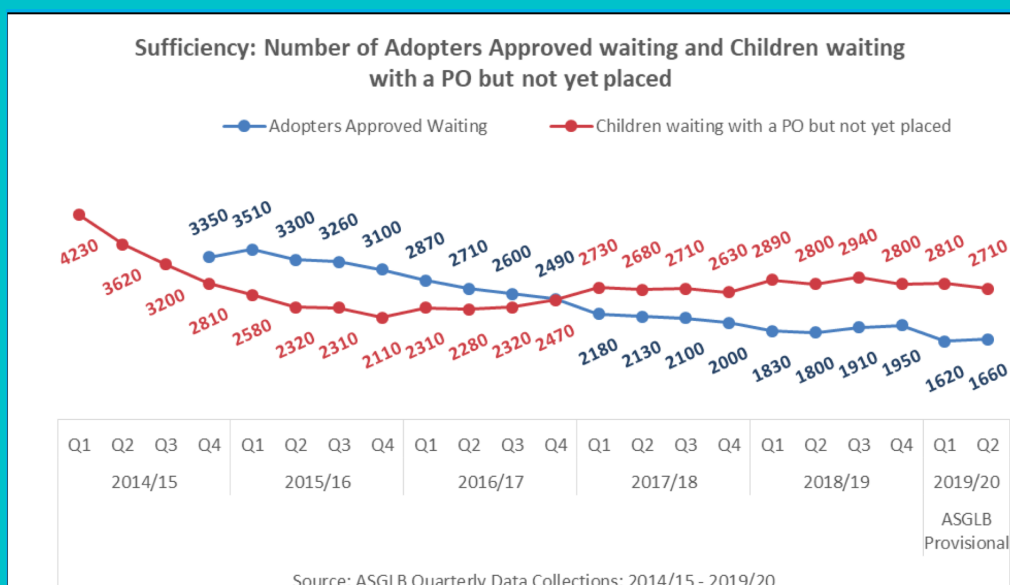
SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

Adopter Sufficiency

The Adopter Sufficiency thread of the system performance work has been focused on reducing delays for children by monitoring recruitment data and working with national and regional stakeholders, this work has been discussed frequently at board meetings. The data collected by the secretariat gave the board an early indication of a shortfall in adopters being recruited. There has been a recent trend that shows a decline in adopters being recruited that the board was focused on reversing. The ASGLB's Q1 and Q2 2019/20 data showed that recruitment is now matching the number of placement orders granted, as shown below.
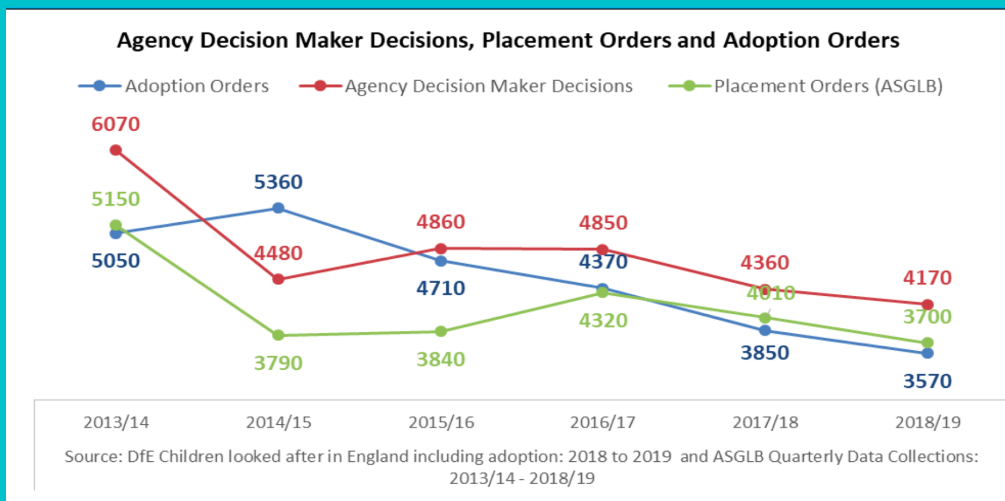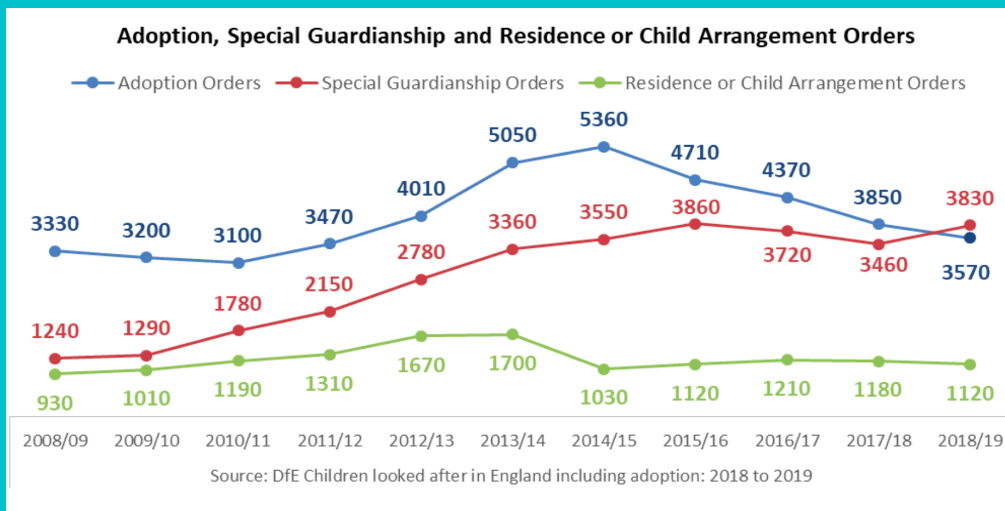

However, there is a growing cohort of children waiting to be placed which is a concern for the board and the number of adopters available is still too low.

The main Board and regional boards will continue to monitor the data for any changes to this trend.

Permanence orders
The ASGLB are also monitoring system performance through the lenses of permanency orders, by reviewing DfE-published data and working with stakeholders to understand trends. This latest data collected by the Board secretariat has highlighted some concerning trends. The number of placement orders is declining, as highlighted by the charts below.

Adoption, Special Guardianship and Residence or Child Arrangement Orders

Legend: Adoption Orders · Special Guardianship Orders · Residence or Child Arrangement Orders

Year	Adoption Orders	Special Guardianship Orders	Residence or Child Arrangement Orders
2008/09	3330	1240	930
2009/10	3200	1290	1010
2010/11	3100	1780	1190
2011/12	3470	2150	1310
2012/13	4010	2780	1670
2013/14	5050	3360	1700
2014/15	5360	3550	1030
2015/16	4710	3860	1120
2016/17	4370	3720	1210
2017/18	3850	3460	1180
2018/19	3570	3830	1120

Source: DfE Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019

Agency Decision Maker Decisions, Placement Orders and Adoption Orders

Legend: Adoption Orders · Agency Decision Maker Decisions · Placement Orders (ASGLB)

Year	Adoption Orders	Agency Decision Maker Decisions	Placement Orders (ASGLB)
2013/14	5050	6070	5150
2014/15	5360	4480	3790
2015/16	4710	4860	3840
2016/17	4370	4850	4320
2017/18	3850	4360	4010
2018/19	3570	4170	3700

Source: DfE Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019 and ASGLB Quarterly Data Collections: 2013/14 - 2018/19

However the data shows that the proportion of best interest decisions that are converted to placement orders has not changed significantly over recent years, so it does not seem that the decline is due to courts' decisions.The Board will continue to collect this data and monitor the situation.

Coronavirus Response

In addition to these two priorities, in the last part of the year the board has worked on the response to Covid-19. The April ASGLB meeting along with the ARG and RASGLB meetings were cancelled to ensure that members could focus on front line work. The ASGLB also has been working with the DfE, the RASGLB chairs and RAA leaders to discuss how the crisis is affecting front line work and how the Board can help.

In June, all three boards held short meetings to discuss the effects of the Coronavirus crisis . The main issues discussed were feedback on the ASF Covid-19 scheme, court delays, and the transition back to schools in September,

Assessment and Preparation of Special Guardians

In 2017, the ASGLB expanded its remit to include Special Guardians. Following this, a task and finish group was created, consisting of RASGLB chairs, providers of SGO and adoption support, special guardians, policy advisers, and representatives from other interested groups. The task and finish group met several times throughout 2018 and 2019 to examine the engagement of issues pertaining to family's subject to special guardian orders.

Following these meetings, the group generated some policy recommendations for the ASGLB to pursue. These were:

- Understanding inequalities between different routes to permanence
- Sustaining lifelong identity and understanding lifelong impact
- Supporting birth families
- Developing the workforce
- Understanding special guardianship

Throughout 2019/20, the ASGLB has incorporated this work into the larger work of the Board. The lifelong identity strand of the modernising permanence work includes consideration of the particular challenges that special guardians face when it comes to birth parent contact.

Furthermore, following the addition of stakeholders in SGO to the board's membership, the ASGLB receives regular updates on the experiences of SGs and trends in SGOs and the support they are receiving from authorities.

Supporting the Establishment of Regional Adoption Agencies

In June 2015, the Department for Education announced a proposal to create Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) in order to combat the fragmentation of children's social care. The expectation was that RAAs would improve life chances of children by speeding up matching, improving adopter recruitment and adoption support and reducing costs. The program was established in late 2015. The goal was to ensure that all local authorities would be part of an RAA by 2020. The ASGLB has made one of its priorities to assist and support with the establishment of RAAs. Throughout 2019/20, the Board has received regular updates on the development of RAAs and the work of the RAA leaders group, both from members of the RASGLB and Board members representing the RAA leaders group. The Board has received regular updates from the RAA leaders group on the impact that RAAs who have gone live have had, the schedule
for the go live dates by quarter and lessons learned by the RAAs who are currently in operation. In July 2019, the ARG and RASGLB spoke about the on the ground effects of the RAAs.
Their feedback included:

· Concerns that parents were not being properly informed about RAA transition, and many families didn't feel confident about where to go for information and support
· In the run-up to RAA transitions there was less recruitment activity and communication
· Some ARG members felt that RAAs weren't forming structures and processes with input from adopters
· Results varying from region to region, with some RAAs proving to be very effective in creating regional cohesion, while the creation of some RAA's has caused confusion and impacted service delivery.

The Chair fed back these concerns to the RAA leaders group and main board members, and the ASGLB has monitored this to ensure progress was made on these issues. RASGLB members and ARG members both reported progress in terms of commitment to improve performance and a good grasp across agencies of what the areas of improvement were at the next board meetings.

In the July 2019 main Board meeting, the ASGLB heard from analysts at Ecorys who presented interim findings from their evaluation of the RAA programme, which echoed the feedback from the ARG and RASGLB.

Post Order Support

Virtual School Heads

In the latter part of 2018, Virtual School Heads (VSH) responsibilities were extended to cover previously looked after children. The Board has been interested in the implementation and impact of this on adopted children and children subjected to a special guardianship order.

At the October 2019 Board meeting, Lynsey Burridge (NAVSH) reported on the impact of this change, a year after its implemntation. The key points from this discussion were:

The implementation of Virtual School Heads (VSH) has been an important focus of the Board, as well as the ARG and RASGLB.

· The main concern among respondents is around uncertainty in relation to continued funding for the role which has prevented long term planning

· The proportion of adopted children being excluded from school are similar to that of looked after children, but levels are much higher for children in special guardianships, and this needs to be considered in the guidance

· There is an ongoing need for adopted children to be registered on the school census and it is important that there is a continued push on this, especially as schools will miss out on allocated money if they are not counted.

· There is an ongoing concern about schools adhering to priority admissions rules

·There is a need for accountability with the money for the VSH, as the situation has become a postcode lottery

· Expectations regarding VSHs need to be managed, as they have a stronger focus on providing guidance rather than individual casework for previously looked after children