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### **Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**

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**Time and Date**

10.00 am on Thursday, 3rd October, 2019

**Place**

Committee Room 3 - Council House

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**Public Business****1. Apologies and Substitutions****2. Declarations of Interests****3. Minutes** (Pages 3 - 6)

- a) To agree the minutes of the meeting held on 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2019
- b) Matters Arising

**4. Adoption Service Annual Report** (Pages 7 - 56)

Briefing Note of the Deputy Chief Executive (People)

**5. Children's Services Improvement** (Pages 57 - 60)

Briefing Note of the Deputy Chief Executive (People)

**6. Work Programme** (Pages 61 - 64)

Briefing Note of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator

**7. Any Other Business**

Any other items of business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of the special circumstances involved.

**Private Business**

Nil

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Martin Yardley, Executive Director, Place, Council House Coventry

Wednesday, 25 September 2019

Notes: 1) The person to contact about the agenda and documents for this meeting is Michelle Rose, Governance Services, Council House, Coventry, telephone 7683 3111, alternatively information about this meeting can be obtained from the following web link: <http://moderngov.coventry.gov.uk>

2) Council Members who are not able to attend the meeting should notify Michelle Rose as soon as possible and no later than 9.00 a.m. on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2019 giving their reasons for absence and the name of the Council Member (if any) who will be attending the meeting as their substitute.

3) Scrutiny Board Members who have an interest in any report to this meeting, but who are not Members of this Scrutiny Board, have been invited to notify the Chair by 12 noon on the day before the meeting that they wish to speak on a particular item. The Member must indicate to the Chair their reason for wishing to speak and the issue(s) they wish to raise.

Membership: Councillors P Akhtar, B Kaur, L Kelly, J Lepoidevin, G Lloyd, P Male, K Sandhu (Chair), R Thay and C Thomas

Co-opted Members: Mrs S Hanson and Mrs K Jones

By Invitation: Councillors K Maton, P Seaman and B Gittins

Please note: a hearing loop is available in the committee rooms

If you require a British Sign Language interpreter for this meeting  
OR if you would like this information in another format or  
language please contact us.

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**Coventry City Council**  
**Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**  
**held at 2.00 pm on Thursday, 19 September 2019**

Present:

Members: Councillor K Sandhu (Chair)  
Councillor P Akhtar  
Councillor G Lloyd  
Councillor P Male  
Councillor D Skinner (substitute for Councillor Lepoidevin)  
Councillor R Thay  
Councillor C Thomas

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson

Cabinet Member: Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

Employees (by Directorate):

People J Essex, K Nelson, J Silverton  
Place G Holmes, M Rose

Apologies: Councillors B Kaur, L Kelly and J Lepoidevin

## **Public Business**

### **11. Declarations of Interests**

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

### **12. Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th July, 2019 were approved.

### **13. Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) Update**

The Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note of the Deputy Chief Executive (People) which provided an update on Coventry Local Area preparation for a SEND Local Area inspection.

In 2016, the Government commissioned OfSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and the CQC (Care Quality Commission) to conduct a five-year cycle of joint inspections, to monitor the progress of local areas in implementing the SEND reforms. The new statutory duties for education, health and care were set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. The first cycle of inspections was nearing completion. The final inspections would happen no later than the Spring Term 2021.

The aim was to “hold local areas to account and champion the rights of children and young people”. In particular, the local area health, social and education services were required to work together to:

- publish a ‘local offer’ setting out the support and provision in the area for children and young adults with special educational needs or disabilities (or both)
- provide accessible information to children and young people, as well as parents and carers, about the services and support available in the local area
- work with children and young people, their parents and carers, and service providers to make sure that any special needs or disabilities (or both) are identified as early as possible
- assess (in co-operation with children and young people and their parents and carers) the needs of children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (or both) who may need an education, health and social care plan (EHCP)
- produce an EHCP for all children and young people who are assessed as needing one (all relevant agencies should cooperate to do this and involve the children and young people and their parents and carers)
- provide children and young people with the support agreed in their EHCP, and regularly review their plans

As at September 2019, 96 of the 152 inspections had been completed and reports published. Forty-eight inspections concluded that a statement of written action (STOWA) was required. This means that the inspectors had found “significant areas of weakness in the local areas practice” in 50% of local areas overall. In 2018/19 a total of 30 inspections took place, 21 of which (70%) required a STOWA.

There were 14 Local Areas across the West Midlands region. Of the 10 inspections conducted so far, six had resulted in a STOWA. One Local Area (Sandwell) had been re-visited’ and it was confirmed that adequate progress had been made and a STOWA was no-longer required. There were four remaining local areas across the West Midlands awaiting inspection: Coventry, Shropshire, Warwickshire and Wolverhampton. These would be conducted one per term between Autumn 2019 and Spring 2021. The Local Area would receive 5 days notice, of the 5 day inspection.

Over the course of the 5-day inspection, inspectors would meet managers and leaders from the area’s education, health and social care services and look at young people’s case files. They would review the support provided by the local area for some individual children and young people to better understand how well the local area meets its responsibilities overall. They would also visit early years settings, schools, further education providers and specialist services.

Working with partners across the Local Area, Coventry remained focused on the continuous improvement of the key statutory areas, specifically the identification of children and young people with SEN (age 0 to 25) across the City; the quality of assessment, the impact of provision and ultimately outcomes in adulthood. Children and young people had told us that they want to enjoy an ‘ordinary life’ which in adulthood includes having full access to community activities, positive

relationships and meaningful paid employment. These principles underpin the SEND strategy 'Lifting the Cloud of Limitation'.

Coventry Local Area had reviewed last years integrated education, health and care self-evaluation for 2019/20, setting out evidenced progress, strengths and areas for further development. The joint self-evaluation continued to focus on the three inspection questions: How well do we identify need, meet need and improve outcomes. The self-evaluation was informed by a comprehensive dataset.

Partners had ensured that when Coventry receive notification of the inspection, all required documentation was available to share with the inspectors and that a logistics and communication plan was in place, evidencing strong governance and partnerships between education, health, social care, Coventry Parent Carer Forum and the young people's shadow board.

The Board questioned the Cabinet Member and officers on the following:

- hidden disabilities
- assessment and appeals
- working together
- data
- funding

Members were encouraged to pass on any resident enquiries to officers to investigate.

**RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board noted the briefing note and requested that:**

- 1) further information be provided regarding the processes for assessing needs**
- 2) financial information be provided in future reports**

#### 14. **Education Performance**

The Scrutiny Board considered a briefing note and presentation of the Deputy Chief Executive (People) which provided information about Education Performance. The data was unvalidated currently and the presentation detailed the publication timetable, headline achievements, OfSTED profile, successes and priorities for Early Years, Primary, Key Stage 4 and 16-18.

The Scrutiny Board questioned the Cabinet Member and officers on the following:

- data
- successes and emerging priorities
- partnership working

The Scrutiny Board, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and the officers discussed the data and the advantages and disadvantages of bringing unvalidated headlines at this time during the academic year.

The Scrutiny Board decided that it was valuable to hear an update at this time even if it couldn't include verified data. Information that was available that could help Scrutiny Members with the benchmarking of progress could be included for example the previous years report and priorities.

**RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board noted the briefing note and presentation and requested that next year there be some benchmarking information such as the previous year's report and priorities included.**

15. **Work Programme**

The Scrutiny Board noted the Work Programme.

The Board noted that the following Members had now been appointed to the Partnership Working Task and Finish Group: Councillor Sandhu, Councillor Lepoidevin, Councillor Lloyd, Councillor Thomas and Mrs Hanson.

The Board discussed the valuable 'Signs of Safety' training.

**RESOLVED that Cllr Sandhu would consider further involvement of the Board with regard to the 'Signs of Safety' training.**

16. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of business.

(Meeting closed at 3.15 pm)



Coventry City Council

## Briefing note

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**To: The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**

**Date: 3 October 2019**

**Subject: Adoption Service Annual Report**

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### **1 Purpose of the Note**

1.1 The Adoption Regulations require the executive to scrutinise the work of the adoption service each year. The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (Scrutiny Board 2) considered the progress of establishing of a Regional Adoption Agency on 21 June 2018. The Board requested that this item be returned for a further review following an operating period to identify outcomes from the new arrangements. The Annual Adoption Report documents the adoption activity in Children's Services for the year 2018/19. This includes a report of the activity of the Regional Adoption Agency of which Coventry City Council is a part.

### **2 Recommendations**

- 1) That the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) note the progress made by Children's Services and ACE in adoption for children in the city.

### **3 Information/Background**

3.1 Coventry became part of a Regional Adoption Agency on 1 February 2018. This is a shared services arrangement in partnership with four other local authorities. The host of the Regional Adoption Agency is Warwickshire County Council. An Annual Adoption Report is required by regulation and has been written jointly between staff from Coventry City Council Children's Services and the Regional Adoption Agency. It documents the progress of adoption in the city for the year 2018/19.

<b>Name</b>	Paul Smith
<b>Job Title</b>	Strategic Lead- looked after children
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Appendix 1 – Annual Report of the Adoption Service 2018-2019

Appendix 2 – Adoption Central England Annual Report 2018-2019

Appendix 3 – ACE Adoption Panel Chair's Annual Report

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# Annual Report of the Adoption Service 2018- 2019 for Coventry City Council

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Service Activity
3. Service Performance
4. Adoption Support Services
5. Adoption Panel Report
6. Service Plan 2019-2020

## 1. Introduction

This is the Coventry City adoption service report for the period 2018-2019. It provides an overview of adoption activity and performance and includes a contribution from the Chair of the Adoption Panel.

Coventry City Council continues to work with the regional adoption agency, where responsibility for some aspects of the adoption service transferred on 1 February 2018.

Adoption Central England (ACE) is the regional adoption agency for Coventry, Solihull, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire that came into effect from 1 February 2018. Herefordshire Council subsequently joining on 1 July 2019. It is a local authority shared service based on a hub and spoke model. The service is hosted by Warwickshire County Council.

National policy dictates that all local authority adoption services are required to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020. This means that Coventry City has made excellent compliance with this requirement.

The Government's policy is underpinned by a number of aims to improve outcomes for children, including:

- Decisions about placements are always made in children's best interests
- Service delivery has, at its heart, innovation and practice excellence
- Social workers are highly skilled professionals who make high quality, evidence-based decisions and do not tolerate damaging delay for children in their care
- Adoption placement matches are made without unnecessary delay
- Adoptive families have access to an ongoing package of appropriate support based on assessment of need

- The voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of what we do.

These aims have underpinned the development of ACE that has a vision to:

*To provide an innovative service to children and adoptive families and others affected by adoption. This is by offering lifelong support based on up to date evidence-based practice and supported by modern technology.*

The shared hub and spoke model between local authorities has enabled greater access to a wider pool of adopters for children, with the aim of improving the timeliness of placements. A stronger strategic approach can be taken and improve adopter recruitment and adoption support. In addition, there will be the provision of therapeutic interventions, which will be delivered and coordinated more consistently and effectively across the region.

Over the past year, the Coventry adoption service has made progress in the following areas:

- Children’s social care redesign has now embedded which has led to children and young people experiencing fewer changes of social worker. One worker will be responsible for progressing the care proceedings to a plan of permanence and oversee adoption work
- Partnership working continues to develop with the ACE
- Systems for tracking are in place for children pre-birth and post placement order to allow for the early identification of children to ACE
- Foster to Adopt placements have improved due to a concerted effort to increase awareness and having operational arrangements such as permanence panel in place
- A review has been completed of all adopters who were waiting more than a year for a placement and many of the adopters have now been matched with children. The outcome of the review for Coventry adopters reported that 2 couples have been taken back to panel for re-approval.

## 2. Service Activity

Adoption recruitment activity is now reported by ACE

Overall children’s performance:

	2016/17	<b>2017/18</b>	2018/19
Number of children adopted	48	29	36
Number of children placed with adopters	40	34	30

Number of children awaiting match	55	35	28
Number of disruptions	2 children	0	4 children

**In summary, during 2018/19:**

28 children were subject of the decision that they “should be placed for adoption”. For 17 children this decision was reversed by the court at the conclusion of care proceedings.

28 children – were made subject to a Placement Order by the court

30 children – were matched with prospective adopters

30 children – were placed with adopters

36 children – were made subject to an Adoption Order by the court.

**Recruitment, Preparation and Assessment of adopters**

In 2018/19 ACE reports that it received 29 enquiries from Coventry households, which led to 27 of those being approved as adopters. The numbers of adopters successfully recruited has enabled 23 households to be matched with Coventry children.

The quality of adoption assessments over the last year has continued to improve. Assessments are consistently quality assured with areas for development identified and with plans to improve aspects of the report, such as analysis. Social workers have undertaken second visits to prospective adopters to gather more detailed information to access a match in greater depth at the earliest opportunity.

ACE is currently completing a piece of research in partnership with Maudsley Hospital and Bristol University to redesign the Adoption Placement Report (APR).

This research will conclude in September 2019. It will support the development and redesign of the APR, to allow for the opportunity of more detailed analysis of parenting capacity including the applicants’ understanding of therapeutic parenting. In addition, a working group incorporating ACE partners will be asked to contribute to the development of the APR.

In preparation training for adopters, emphasis has been placed on the effects of trauma. Specific training for those in the adopter's support network was introduced in 2016 and has continued to form part of the preparation process. The principles of

Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) are featured in all adopter training sessions. In the Autumn, there is a plan to introduce virtual reality training as part of the process.

## **Family Finding**

Family finders from ACE are identified for the following groups of children:

- Sibling groups
- Black and minority ethnic children
- Children who are disabled or have other additional needs
- Children who are aged five or over at time of placement
- Children who have been waiting for some time.

There have been two ACE family finding events where children have been featured along with ACE adopters. This resulted in interest from prospective adopters for selected Coventry children.

ACE continues to subscribe to 'Link Maker'. All Coventry children with a family finder are featured on 'Link Maker'. ACE also has its own internal portal to feature all Coventry children who are waiting to be matched to a family. Alongside the internal portal there is also a 'children who are waiting' booklet which is shared with adopters and discussed during assessment and training. The various matching forums have been successful in matching children with adopters.

Sibling assessments underpin and support decisions to place brothers and sisters together or apart and maintain meaningful contact. Coventry has made effective use of the research in respect of sibling adoption and has a good record of placing siblings together.

## **Interagency placements**

An interagency placement occurs when a local authority places a child with an adopter approved by another agency (either local authority, voluntary adoption agency or another regional adoption agency). A fee is paid to cover the cost incurred by that agency in recruiting, assessing, approving and family finding that adopter along with an element of for adoption support. Interagency placements are often used for hard to place individual or groups of children.

Under the Regional Adoption Agency arrangements there has been decrease in the use of interagency placements because the number and type of adopters has now increased across the 5 local authorities and one partner agency.

There have been 7 (3 children and two sibling groups of two) inter agency placements between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019. Last year 8 interagency placements were made.

To improve matching and placement stability, ACE has developed and shared practice guidance on preparing children for adoption and supporting transitions. This outlines the importance of playdates pre-placement to help children and their foster carers build relationships and trust with potential adopters. Foster carers are also encouraged to stay in touch with children and adopters post placement.

### **Foster to Adopt**

Staff are aware of the importance of completing pre-birth work for babies to have the least amount of placement moves. Collaborative working between LAC and Permanence and area social work teams ensure that pre-birth planning is robust using an unborn baby tracker where care proceedings may be issued.

There are 32 babies who were identified at pre-birth for whom family finding began immediately. 20 of these were identified as potential for being placed in foster to adopt placements. From February 2018 to date, 10 foster to adopt placements were identified, where new born babies were able to be discharged from hospital to their prospective adopters. This is a five-fold increase on last years performance which demonstrates Coventry’s desire to achieve early permanence for children.

### **Disruptions**

In the previous 12 months, 4 children have experienced placement disruption. Each child has had a disruption meeting, which has been independently chaired with the aim of understanding the sequence of events leading up to the disruption in line with statutory requirements. This information has been used to inform individual care planning for each child. In response to the findings Coventry City Council and ACE have developed an action plan, which includes new practice guidance and several training events. Learning from disruptions is used to improve practise and minimise the likelihood of similar events for other children.

## **3. Service Performance**

National scorecards allow local authorities and other adoption agencies to monitor their own performance and compare it with that of others.

<b>National Performance Indicators</b>	<b>Government Target</b>	<b>CCC Three Year Average</b>
<b>A1</b> Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)	426 days	547 days

<b>A2</b> Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days)	121 days	249 days
<b>A3</b> Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)	14 months	41.1%

The timeliness of children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family has increased from the previous year. The increase is because of children who are 'harder to place' being successfully placed with adopted families. This year, 7 of the 29 children adopted had entered care between 2012 and 2015. Examples of children who have been placed include, a sibling group of four girls aged one to eight years were all adopted together by a family. Also, a seven-year-old girl with a significant history of abuse and associated behavioural issues was adopted in a planned way by her foster carers.

For 11 of the 29 children who were made subject to an Adoption Order by the court in 2018/19, it took less than the government target of 426 days between the children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This evidences that Coventry will pursue the best outcomes for individual children, even if this takes a longer time to secure permanence

Overall, the timeliness of children being matched with prospective adopters once a Placement Order has been granted increased to an average of 320 days. Analysis has shown that this increase has been affected by children who are in the 'harder to place' cohort, particularly those who are part of a sibling group. Where children are not part of a sibling group the timeliness of children being matched improves by approximately 50%, at an average of 258 days. This is well within government targets.

ACE has now been established for over 12 months. The proportion of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive families has improved for 2018/19 to 43.4%. Number of children exiting care through adoption is 14.5%. This remains above the national average.

There are a number of children who are 'more difficult to place' for whom adoptive families have been secured. Five children from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds have been adopted. This represents 2% as a proportion of all children leaving care in 2018-19.

A tracking system that includes the monitoring of pre-proceedings, care proceedings and progress of post-placement orders is now embedded between Children's services and ACE. This system has been effective in early family finding for unborn children, placing them in foster to adopt arrangements, where possible. This has led to 10 children being placed in their forever families without unnecessary delay.

The number of placement orders secured in the last 12 months is 28, which is a slight reduction on the previous year of 31.

The number of decisions to progress a plan of adoption remains consistent and Coventry has a robust process for concurrent planning so that time is not lost should adoption become the child's plan.

There have been a number of foster carers wishing to adopt children in their care, although the numbers are lower than the previous year. In 2018-19, 6 children had their long-term futures secured with their foster carer/s. This compares to 11 children in the previous year. These adoptions, which are excellent outcomes for children, impact upon data performance. Despite this, Coventry will continue to promote such outcomes as being in the best interests of children.

Overall, service improvements have made it more likely that adopted children will achieve good permanence outcomes in the longer term. It is also positive that analysis demonstrates that adoption is considered for all children for whom this is appropriate and progressed wherever possible even if this takes longer than the national target. This ensures all children in Coventry have the most appropriate permanence plan.

#### **4. Adoption Support Services**

The ACE adoption support team offers a range of support for adopters by providing therapeutic interventions to families. This is either in a group setting or on an individual basis as the need arises.

ACE is committed to adopting practices that are underpinned by DDP principles and is working with a clinical psychologist to gain DDP certification. This also provides clinical supervision and advice to social workers and to adoptive families as required. An established Adopter Mentoring Scheme is also in place.

The social workers complete assessment of need and provide support to families on an ongoing basis, ensuring that any interventions funded through the adoption support fund are effective.

The service meets the assessed needs of adoptive families and there is a network of support groups for adoptive families and events for adopted children to meet and engage.

ACE social workers run a bi-monthly 'Coffee Morning/stay and play support groups for under 5's - using Theraplay principles and practice' which gives adopters and adopted children the opportunity to meet with fellow adopters offering the chance to build friendships and share experiences.

ACE held their first adoption fun day for their adopted children and families in February 2019, 400+ adopters and children attended this event held at Stoneleigh

Park, with a further fun day to be held in February 2020. ACE have also held adoption picnics in the summer of 2018, with this being repeated for the summer of 2019, where adoptive families across the region including Coventry are invited to attend.

In March 2019 ACE established their first young person's group, consisting of adopted children from across the region which is supported by social workers from each of the spokes. Fourteen young people between the age of 10-18 attended this group with 2 young people who are 18 years plus. The focus of this group will be to support and develop the service by giving the young people who have been adopted within the ACE region a voice to share their thoughts and views.

The service continues to develop a forum to gather views of adopted children and their parents. The scheme, Talk Adoption, ensures that feedback on services is obtained and as a result services can be developed to meet the needs of children.

Adopters also have their own self-led support forum. The group hold regular meetings. Guest speakers attend and share areas of interest such as attachment, trauma and looking through the lens of child.

Coventry's mentoring group was set up in February 2017 in partnership with Warwickshire County Council and has been continued by ACE. Mentors, who are adoptive parents themselves support all adopters who feel isolated or who are struggling with children who present with some challenges. All mentors are supervised by a counsellor who attends supervision meetings to give guidance and advice. There are eight mentors at present with plans to recruit more over the next year.

Adopters receive quarterly newsletters containing any information about the service, updates of legislation, forthcoming training events (both in-house and external) and any other relevant opportunities.

ACE has delivered family and friends training across the region, which has been accessed by adopters' families and friends living in the Coventry area. During the period 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019, 15 courses were held across the region. Issues discussed cover, neglect and abuse, trauma, development, attachment. The Wall', which consider the 'gaps' in the foundations of early life that adopted children have experienced and how this impact upon feelings, emotions and behaviours.

Since ACE went live in February 2018, there has been the continued commitment to developing the staff group through therapeutic training. 4 social workers have attended Theraplay level 1 training, with the plans for further training to be offered in 2019/2020. Currently there are staff trained in Theraplay level 1 and 2 across the ACE region. In addition to this by July 2019 90% of ACE staff will be trained in DDP level 1 with a further 6 staff having DDP level 2.

The continued development of professional practice is invaluable to social workers providing a responsive, educated and knowledgeable service within the Adoption Support Team. The skills base of the social worker team allows their support to sit



alongside that of the therapeutic services being provided by psychotherapists and psychologists via the Adoption Support Fund. Adopters are re-assured that their social worker is experienced, knowledgeable and can be supportive with the challenges that they are facing. Adopters have recognised the professional contribution the social workers have made in supporting them as evidenced in the below adopter feedback.

In addition to the main staffing group ACE have a small therapeutic team, with social workers trained in non-violence resistance (NVR), Life Story work and Parenting Children through attachment and play (PCAP). The team can deliver support to adopters from across the ACE region.

The continued aim of the team is to provide early intervention which will result in a reduction in the need for a higher level of therapeutic support and timely Adoption Support Fund applications where there is a need identified.

### **Adoption Support Fund**

The use of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), a central government funding stream has provided essential therapeutic support for adoptive families. This extension takes the fund beyond its previous end date of March 2020 and guarantees support applied for and commencing in the financial year 2019/20.

The ASF has enabled therapeutic services to be delivered to adopted children and their families to stabilise placements through, for example, improving relationships, reducing child to parent violence and improving engagement with learning. A range of therapeutic interventions has been funded including DDP, Theraplay, Sensory Integration therapy, therapeutic parenting work and life story work.

There has been an increase in the number of ASF applications since ACE went live in February 2018. During the year 2018/19 11 applications were made on behalf of families in Coventry. At the point of writing publishing report no figures were available for 2018/19.

## **5. Adoption Panel Report**

During the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019 there were 45 Adoption Panel Meetings, 6 of these held in Coventry.

The following matters were presented to the Panel for consideration: This is the whole of the ACE region.

	<b>1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019</b>
Prospective Adopter Assessments	96
Adoption Placements (matches)	104

Plan for adoption (relinquished child)	3
Adopter Resignations noted	0
Adoption Disruptions brought to panel	5 (4 from Coventry)

### **Panel Membership**

The central list panel members over the year were:

Independent Chair

Independent member and Vice Chair x 2

Independent members x 3

Medical adviser

Elected member

Social work representatives x 4

The panel meets weekly and on 45 occasions in the past 12 months. Coventry's panel is held every one in 6 meetings. Panel requires 5 panel members in attendance to be quorate, including at least one independent member and at least one social work representative. There is a reliable core group of members who are representative of the diversity of the population. Several panel members have personal experience of adoption and have brought significant understanding of the needs of children and young people who required adoptive placements. One panel member has personal experience of being a looked after child. There was also experience in social work, health and counselling. It was thought, however, that the panel would benefit from the input of a younger person with care experience, this appointment was due to be live from February 2018, however this appointment is still outstanding.

Panel has three chairs and one vice chair to call on.

Individual appraisals of Central List members took place over the year. Panel members were reliable and committed to attending meetings. Members raised relevant questions and provided advice, in particular, about support for adoptive parents and children, the numbers and ages of children who may be best placed with adopters and the introductory period and follow up contact with foster carers.

Throughout 2018 and currently to date in 2019, Panel members were and are invited to staff training on DDP, the PIF project, transitions and adoption support and support plans.

Panel members although understand DDP, further training throughout 2019 will consider looking at the principles around DDP. This will inform how panel members frame questions in a different way to adopters.

Panel advice at reviews of waiting adopters has been well established and was well received. Adopters and social workers have been able to use panel advice to update Prospective Adopters Reports and better evidence adopters' experience and capacity with a view to making a match. On one occasion, Panel did not recommend a proposed placement of a child with prospective adopters. The Panel's reasons were accepted by the ADM. Panel was appropriately challenging and child centred in its focus throughout the year.

### **Feedback to presenting social workers**

To improve the quality of information presented to panel, presenting social workers are given feedback. The Panel Advisor compiles the feedback, which is passed to the social worker and their manager. Feedback is given on the strengths of the report as well as concerns regarding content and format. Comments are included on issues such as the helpful inclusion of applicants' own written submissions in assessment reports; the need for Child's Permanence Report to include more information about the child's lived experience; the need for more robust APR support plans to include the continuing presence of foster carers in the lives of adopted children; and where Fostering for Adoption may have been appropriate for a child but does not appear to have been considered in the early planning stages this has also been raised.

### **Feedback to panel**

Feedback questionnaires in written and electronic forms are given to applicants and carers on the day of attendance at panel. Overall feedback has been generally very positive regarding the panel process. Prospective adopters felt they were well prepared for panel and that questions were appropriate and sensitively asked. There has been feedback that panel occasionally runs behind schedule causing delay for those attending which raises the anxiety of prospective adopters.

An information leaflet regarding Adoption Panel was provided and was available for applicants and attendees in the waiting room.

All presenting social workers were requested to complete questionnaires on their experience of attending Panel. In the event of concerns being raised, these are fed back to the next panel for reflection. There has been feedback that questions raised by panel are appropriate and that the experience is useful and informative for social workers. People occasionally wait for some time before their case is heard and this is something the panel is aware of. It is important to remain focused and time conscious.

The Panel Chair met regularly with the Panel Advisor over the year.

## **6. Service Plan 2019-2020**

Under the Adoption Regulations, the local authority retains its responsibility for the provision of the adoption service in its area. In partnership with ACE the local authority plans to improve and develop its adoption practice in the following key areas:

- Develop working group between Coventry City Council and ACE colleagues with the focus of building relationships and improving areas of practice including, child's permanence report, matching and transitions.
- To develop joint practice workshops to strengthen practice, improve matching process and preventing placement disruptions.
- Effective pre-birth, pre-proceedings, care proceedings and post-placement order tracking to ensure timely permanence is achieved for all children, including those who are subject to an adoption plan
- An improvement in the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) performance which is the nationally set government targets for adoption practice
- Further analysis of the ALB data to ensure that learning from children whose adoption took longer than the national average targets is collated and disseminated with the aim of improving the time taken between obtaining a Placement Order and matching panel.
- To ensure team managers have access to adoption scorecard data to enable regular monitoring and review of children's progress.
- Develop a tracking system for Coventry children subject to a placement order to ensure family finding is undertaken with the urgency that is required
- Robust Adoption Support Plans including management oversight
- All children to receive good quality Life Story Work and Later Life Letters
- To recruit three children and family workers to complete direct work in the preparation and planning with children around transitions.
- To collate learning from placement disruptions, disseminate to staff and develop an action plan.

The Local Authority engagement with ACE is underpinned by a Hosting and Partnership Agreement and through the governance arrangements and partnership working there is the opportunity to ensure that the best possible outcomes are secured for children in a timely way and that adoptive families receive high quality support when they need this.

### **Report Authors:**

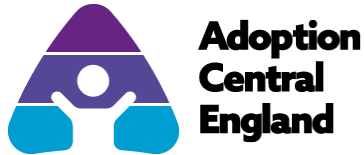
Lisa Walsh - Operational lead for LAC and Permanence

Helen Harper – Team Manager LAC and Permanence



**Adoption  
Central  
England**

**Annual Report 2018-2019**



# Adoption Central England Annual Report 2018-2019

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and Worcestershire County Council joined with Warwickshire County Council (the host) on 1 February 2018 to form Adoption Central England (ACE). ACE is a local authority shared service and was the seventh regional adoption agency to become operational in the country.
- 1.2 This is the first annual report that provides a summary of activity and developments within ACE that covers the first 14 month period up to 31 March 2019. It can be read alongside the ACE Adoption Panel Annual Report 2018-2019

## 2. Background Information

- 2.1 Following legislation arising from four Department for Education (DfE) policy papers on adoption, the Regionalising Adoption paper published in June 2015 spelt out the government's expectations for all local authorities to be part of a regional adoption agency and 'Adoption: A vision for change' (April 2016) committed to deliver a radical, whole system redesign by regionalising adoption services by 2020.
- 2.2 ACE has been at the forefront of this development as a demonstrator site that sought to put the voice of adopters at the heart of the regionalisation initiative. The overarching aim of ACE is to *provide an innovative service for children, adoptive families and others affected by adoption. This is by offering lifelong support based on up to date practices and interventions and supported by modern technology.*
- 2.3 The 10 areas identified for improvement at the outset were:
  - To improve adopter recruitment to meet children's needs,
  - To have better tracking of children to improve placement timeliness,
  - To identify potential adopters for children at the adoption decision stage,
  - To have bespoke recruitment for children with complex needs,
  - To develop and embed early permanence,

- To improve assessments and matching,
- To improve adoption and special guardianship support,
- To upskill the workforce with specialist therapeutic training,
- To upskill and involve adopters in training and support,
- To use modern technology to improve access to services.

2.4 ACE has needed to work in close partnership with the local authorities and other services to:

- Ensure a wider pool of prospective adopters for those children who need a permanent family through adoption,
- Increase the levels of adoption for children waiting to be adopted,
- Reduce the length of time those children wait to be adopted,
- Improve post adoption support services to adoptive families.

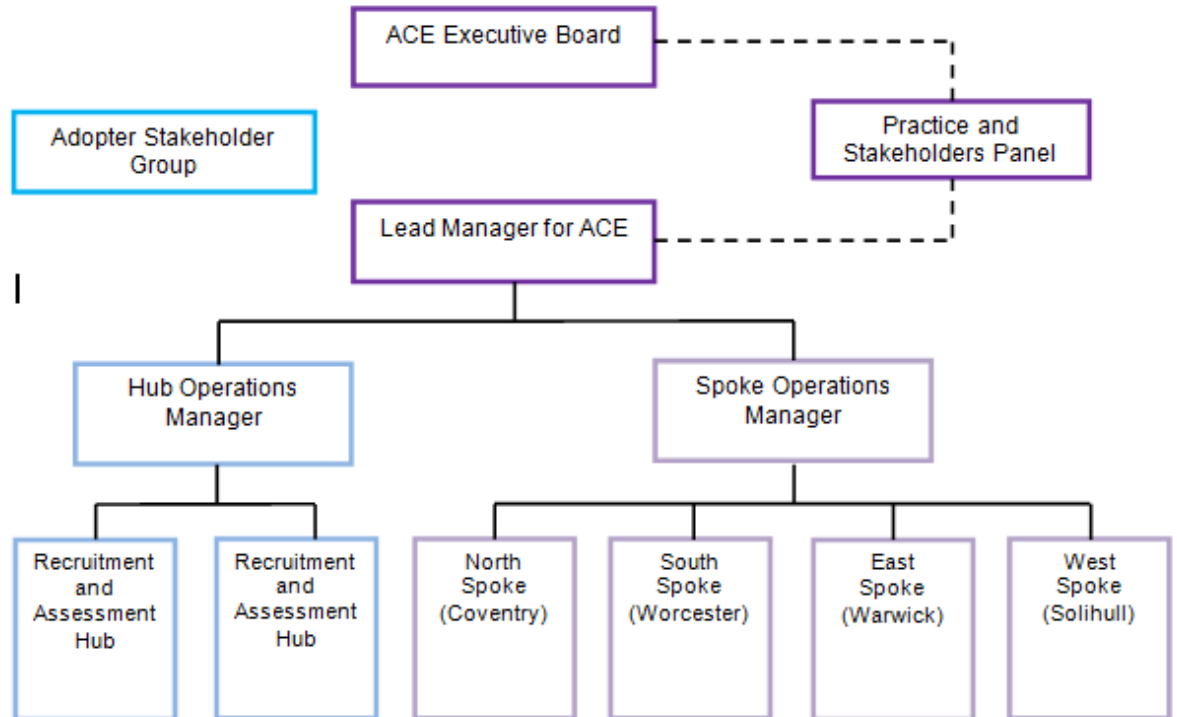
2.5 Additional services provided include non-agency (step parent) adoption information, counselling and court assessments and birth records counselling for adopted adults. Independent Adoption Support Services for Birth Parents are also provided or commissioned across the region.

### **3. Main issues**

#### **3.1 Use of resources**

##### **Staffing**

3.1.1. The ACE structure is as follows:



3.1.2 ACE delivers its services through a hub and spoke model with a central referral point based in the hub in Warwick. The central hub is concerned with the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters. The same staff are also involved in matching children with adopters and providing a level of support for 12 months after the adoption order is granted. The spokes are located within each local authority area and each provides a duty service, undertakes assessments of needs for adoption support, processes and commissions therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund, works directly with families who require social work services, provides birth records counselling to adult adoptees and completes non-agency adoption assessments for the court. Staff work flexibly across the region and some hub social workers may be primarily based within a spoke where this is appropriate.

3.1.3 The Lead Manager was initially seconded for 12 months (since extended) from the host authority and the two operations managers were appointed from existing post holders at that level. The team managers were seconded across from their local authorities and new appointments were made. All non Warwickshire County Council staff are seconded into ACE for an initial 2 year period during which time TUPE would be considered. The structure also required the appointment of the business support manager and the subsequent appointments of the data analyst and the adoption support fund finance officer.



- 3.1.4 The ACE structure was funded from the 'as is' adoption service budgets that were amalgamated and allowed for the transfer of support functions from the local authorities into ACE and the host authority. ACE has a staffing compliment of 31.42 FTE social workers and a further small therapeutic team consisting of 2.42 FTE social workers with funding being accessed from the Adoption Support Fund for 1.42 FTE of these posts. ACE has had a high staffing retention level and the main staffing issue has been the absence of male staff in the workforce. Due to workload volumes ACE has also recruited to a pool of adoption social workers who are employed on a zero hour basis – they are able to support the service during periods of high workload and to cover maternity leave.
- 3.1.5 Since the start of ACE two staff members have resigned and two further have retired. There has been a high level of maternity leave and some sickness absence covered by contingency arrangements.
- 3.1.6 Working across a wide geographical area has presented some challenges for staff; however a pragmatic approach is taken in order to reduce travelling time as much as possible. Opportunities have been made for whole staff group meetings and training, and smaller groups of staff meet together for group supervision.
- 3.1.7 A unifying factor has been the decision for ACE to work towards certification as a service underpinned by Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) informed practice. This approach to be used by all ACE staff supports adoptive parents to offer their adopted children a healthy and developmentally corrective experience so that they learn to trust their adoptive parent/s and feel comfortable in their relationships with them. Adoptive parents are helped throughout the adoption process to recognise and meet their child/ren's hidden as well as expressed attachment needs and to provide relationships that help their child/ren recover from trauma and loss and to feel secure.
- 3.1.8 An 80% target has been set for ACE social workers to be trained at DDP Level 1. There have been further staff training and group supervision opportunities focused on DDP practice and the opportunity to staff to meet with the consultant psychologist who is supporting ACE with this process. Staff have seen this as an investment in them and the model provides a firm basis from which effective services and interventions are provided to families.
- 3.1.9 All ACE staff have been issued with Warwickshire County Council laptops, ACE email addresses and mobile phones. Through the Liberty telephone system a call can be transferred to any ACE staff member anywhere across the region. So that the service functions as efficiently as possible the use of technology is encouraged and is to be developed further.

## **Duty System**

3.1.10 A central duty system has been in operation since 1 February 2018, Monday - Fridays from 9.30 - 4.30. This process allows all work entering the service to be consistently entered onto the MOSAIC client record system that is used across ACE. Where the contact relates to adoption support the call is transferred to the relevant spoke. Both the hub and spoke duty systems are operated by qualified social workers and business support staff and overseen by team managers who have decision making authority.

## **Business Support**

3.1.11 The business support manager has overall responsibility for the business support functions of the service. There is a core of business support officers in the hub who are usually the first point of contact with the public and external agencies. There is a business support officer in each spoke. The business support officers work flexibly according to the needs of the service and have the opportunity to meet as a group.

3.1.12 The lead manager is supported by a personal assistant who also coordinates and supports the ACE governance arrangements.

## **Adoption Panel**

3.1.13 The adoption panel functions of the four local authorities have been brought together since 1 April 2018 and four panels are held most months across the ACE region. Each panel may have up to 6 agenda items at any one meeting. There is one central list of adoption panel members and currently three chairpersons work flexibly across the region to cover the panel meetings. Following the retirement of the previous adoption panel advisers there has been one adviser since October 2018. This has brought consistency to panel business and has allowed for the development and implementation of quality assurance processes.

3.1.14 The documentation and work presented to the adoption panel provides a window on the standard and quality of adoption practice across the local authorities and within ACE. The adoption panel adviser has met with the local authority senior managers, provided reports and feedback and an annual training event with agency decision makers and the panel chairs is to be planned in future.

## **3.2 Partnership working**

- 3.2.1 The importance of partnership working underpins the ACE governance arrangements. The Executive Board is made up of senior managers from each of the local authorities and has been represented by voluntary agency partners – Barnardos and After Adoption during the first year of operation.
- 3.2.2 The Executive Board is the key decision making body of ACE providing oversight, advice and endorsement of the strategic direction of ACE as reflected in the agreed statement of purpose. It receives performance information, monitors the operations of ACE and determines funding arrangements. It oversees the formulation of the annual service plan and resolves conflicts between competing interests of the parties.
- 3.2.3 Beneath the Executive Board the Practice and Stakeholders Panel including representations from the local authorities and a range of partner agencies e.g. education, health, aims to develop good practice and joint working between agencies, monitors and reviews ACE functions and resolves any operational difficulties. It provides the avenues for maintaining strong communication links between agencies and stakeholders.
- 3.2.4 ACE has also set up an Adopter Stakeholder Panel and an adopted young person's support group is in the process of being established with its first meeting planned for 4 May 2019.
- 3.2.5 ACE managers also meet at intervals with the local authority Heads of Children in Care Services, data analysts, fostering managers and independent reviewing officer managers.
- 3.2.6 Through these arrangements efforts are made to ensure that ACE key aims are achieved and that children are placed in a timely manner with families who are appropriately prepared and supported (in the long term as necessary) to meet their needs. Examples of best practice are shared and practice guidance has been developed. There has also been discussion and negotiation around aspects of practice which may have differed from the pre ACE era. Clarification about roles and responsibilities has been achieved through the agreed Service Specification document.
- 3.2.7 ACE has also developed a partnership with Adopt Thames Valley to increase the recruitment of BME families and has had initial discussions with the voluntary partners about the scope to extend adoption support services in future pending decisions regarding the future of the Adoption Support Fund.

### 3.3 Performance Management

3.3.1 The Executive Board receives a quarterly performance management report that outlines performance against key criteria including:

- Overview of children - numbers, adoption decision and adoption orders made and timeliness of actions against national scorecard measures,
- Number of early permanence – fostering for adoption placements,
- Number of children placed with ACE adopters,
- Enquiries about adoption and prospective adopters at each stage of the process
- Timeliness of adopter assessments (stage 2)
- Interagency placements made and number of placement disruptions.

3.3.2 In addition the ACE Business, Performance and Service Improvement Plan sets out targets and includes a wider range of measures and actions to be achieved by the service.

3.3.3 The Progress Report for the Business, Performance and Service Improvement Plan for 2018-2019 reports the following:

- ACE placed 83% of ACE children with ACE approved adopters. The impact of this is that fewer interagency placements (and reduced costs) have been made and more children have been placed for adoption locally and are supported by ACE.
- Children have been placed more quickly due to the availability of more families across the ACE region and the development of Early Permanence – Fostering for Adoption.
- ACE has exceeded its expectation in terms of number of enquirers about adoption and front end processes are working well. There was a stretched recruitment target to approve 134 adoptive households and ACE approved 115 households over the 14 month period.
- Assessment timescales for prospective adopters fell short of the national measure in part due to the initial transitional issues. However notwithstanding this the average timescale was 5.6 months against the national timescale of 4 months.
- ACE recruited and met its target of 40 households for children with specific needs and sibling groups and the Early Permanence - Fostering for Adoption approval level was higher than expected, with the number of interagency placements and placement disruptions being less and lower than national averages.
- ACE has significantly increased the number of adoptive families receiving therapeutic input from the Adoption Support Fund this being to the value of £1.3 million.

- The range of support services provided by ACE has increased or been extended including therapeutic input, mentoring support and training.

3.3.4 The ACE Business, Performance and Service Improvement Plan 2019-2020 sets out priorities for the coming year that include:

- To increase adopter recruitment, the timeliness of assessments with a focus on recruiting families for BAME children and sibling groups,
- To develop the ACE website with a focus on adoption support,
- To embed quality assurance processes across the full spectrum of ACE services,
- With the local authorities to give consideration to the viability of a regional special guardianship support strategy.

There are also intentions to standardise the delivery of a regional wide Birth Parent Adoption Support Service building upon an existing model already available in one local authority.

3.3.5 During this period there has been a 32.5% reduction in the number of children with an adoption decision compared with the previous year. This would benefit from further analysis by each local authority as it could be attributed to a range of different factors including age profile of children looked after, impact of early intervention strategies, the increase in the use of special guardianship or long term foster care and placements with extended family members.

Positively on 31.3.2019 39 children were waiting to be matched with adoptive parents across the ACE region, compared with 91 at the point that ACE went live on 1.2.2018.

3.3.6 Position of waiting adopters and children as at 31.3.2019 was:

- 56 households who had a child placed for adoption but was not yet adopted.
- 77 approved households - waiting but not yet matched with a child although provisional links will have been made for some of these families.

3.3.7 It is the shared aspiration of the ACE local authorities to be in the top quartile of performing adoption agencies against the national scorecard measures. To explore opportunities to improve timeliness an ACE/ Local Authority Challenge Event is to take place. This will also review the tracking processes that ACE has in place with each local authority that tracks and monitors children for whom there is early consideration of adoption and those children with an adoption decision who are waiting for families.

### **3.4 Adoption Support**

3.4.1 Adoption support has been an area of significant growth within ACE with almost 60% of staffing resources directed in this area. Partly this is to ensure local access to support within each local authority, but also in response to high level of need reported by these families where assessment and services are required.

3.4.2 The social workers in the spokes also make the applications to the national Adoption Support Fund that funds therapeutic support to adoptive families. During this period 516 applications have been made and £1.3m has been secured for therapeutic services predominately commissioned through the private and independent sectors. The future of the Adoption Support Fund is uncertain beyond April 2020 and ACE will need to respond to any new arrangements that will be required.

3.4.3 The level of work undertaken by ACE in this area reflects the ongoing challenges and support required by adoptive parents in meeting their children's needs. It is well established that early life adversity has a long term impact on children who can present with a range of attachment and post traumatic disorders. This is coupled with longer term issues of identity and having to come to terms with loss and change. The commitment of ACE to becoming DDP certified will, it is believed ensure that all staff in ACE are equipped and able to support adoptive families effectively.

3.4.4 The types of support requested by adoptive families vary but frequently include requests for advice on strategies:

- To help their children settle within the family
- Talking about and telling their children their adoption story
- Dealing with child on parent violence
- Education related matters
- Dealing with developmental trauma and how to parent therapeutically.

3.4.5 As on the 31.3.2019 there were 356 allocated support cases and 87 families being supported through the duty process, now tier 2 level support.

3.4.6 ACE is working to provide a consistent support offer so that every adoptive family can receive the same level of services irrespective of where they live, standards are in place for responding to requests for support and ACE has put in place a range of training courses and support groups across the region. The Therapeutic Team has also developed two programmes of interventions that have proved to be particularly successful and helpful to families. These are:

- Non Violent Resistance – a 5 session programme with 4

embedding sessions plus individual consultation.

- Therapeutic and Sensory Based Parenting – a 4 week programme with a follow up session.

3.4.7 An Adopters Newsletter is produced on a quarterly basis and ACE managers also meet with the Adopter Stakeholder Group at intervals.

## **4. Practice Improvement**

### **4.1 Practice Improvement Fund – Assessment and Matching Project**

4.1.1 Initiated by After Adoption, a voluntary sector partner, this project had two key objectives. Firstly to secure adoption placements for children who are assessed as *'harder to place'*, and secondly to ensure that adopters *'know themselves better'* so that support can be better tailored to their needs and those of the children placed. Working in partnership with the South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and Bristol University, an enhanced assessment tool (DAWBA) was used for children who have been waiting for placement. This assessment would indicate whether there are underlying indications of mental health needs for which interventions could be delivered. For the adopters the plan, with their consent, is to introduce personality testing and an 'adopter's lab' experience as part of the preparation process. Through this process adopters would better understand themselves as individuals and as a couple and as a consequence would be more informed about the type of child that would best suit them and also those areas where they would benefit from further training or support.

This project is ongoing.

### **4.2 ACE Website Development**

4.2.1 ACE has its unique website that allows the public to request a service and a monthly analytical report is received. It is clear that people revisit the website and its development has contributed to the high level of interest that ACE has received about adoption. It can also signpost users to other services.

4.2.2 Work has progressed on Phase 2 website development where approved and prospective adopters can access a secure zone featuring children waiting for placement, and also the opportunity to register interest in training courses.

4.3.3 This area of the website was launched in February 2019 and is already proving successful.

### **4.3 Practice Guidance**

4.3.1 As an addition to each local authority's existing procedures the practice guidance serves to harmonise approaches to adoption practice across the region and to inform practitioners of best practice. To date practice guidance

has been produced and shared in the following areas:

- Early Permanence – Fostering for adoption
- Preparing Children for adoption
- Name changes for children placed for adoption.

#### **4.4 Promoting Permanence through Adoption training**

4.4.1 ACE has successfully delivered this 2 day programme of training for local authority social workers on two occasions. The course content follows the child's journey and the requirements of permanency planning for children. There is a focus on the importance of the child's permanence report and the matching and placement processes. Sessions are provided on Early Permanence – Fostering for Adoption, and participants hear directly from an adoptive parent about their experiences of the matching process. An introduction to life story work is followed by input on adoption support and the learning from disruptions.

### **5. Disruptions**

5.1 There have been 3 ACE adoption disruptions during the 12 month period. This relates to children who were matched with their adoptive family post 1 February 2018 but where the placement ended prior to the adoption order being granted by the court. An Annual Review of Disruptions Report has been produced. One child had been placed on an interagency adoption basis and the two other placements were with adopters who transferred into ACE. The annual report also considered the learning arising from two other pre ACE approved placements.

### **6. Quality Assurance**

6.1 The main quality assurance processes in ACE are through:

- Regular staff supervision and appraisal,
- Quality assurance of reports by managers,
- Receiving adopter feedback following adoption panel,
- Monitoring and learning from complaints and disruptions,
- Listening to voice of users through the Adopter Stakeholder Group and other communications.

6.2 ACE has received one complaint during this period and as a consequence has needed to review its approach towards employees who are also adoptive parents.

6.3 Initial plans have been developed to hold a service practice audit involving Executive Board members and this will take place during the autumn of 2019.



- 6.4 The voice of the child will be heard through the plans to set up an Adopted Young Persons Group that are well underway.
- 6.5 The Adoption Panel has strengthened its feedback processes and it has been agreed with the local authorities that quarterly feedback will be provided.

## **7. Staff Development and Support**

- 7.1 An annual Workforce Development Plan is in place that is supplemented by a programme and training on DDP (due July 2019). A clinical psychologist supports ACE in developing its DDP credentials and offers individual and group consultations to ACE staff.
- 7.2 ACE staff have completed safeguarding training that was well received and focused on 'Monitoring and assessing a child's experience in care'.
- 7.3 Further training and support is offered through group supervision sessions that are held at regular intervals, and two full service events take place each year.

## **8. Equality and diversity**

- 8.1 ACE has completed an Equality Impact Assessment and this is updated annually. ACE currently has an all female staff group that includes staff members with direct personal experience of adoption.
- 8.2 ACE provides all services in an anti-discriminatory manner and has proactively encouraged the recruitment of adoptive families from the black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups. It has started to work with a neighbouring regional adoption agency on an initiative to increase the awareness of adoption in these communities. Planned publicity in The Voice will feature children alongside an explanation about the adoption process.
- 8.3 ACE has also subscribed to New Family Social and has seen an increase in the number of applications from same sex couples.

## **9. Overall impact and future plans**

- 9.1 ACE is able to demonstrate the progress it has made against the 10 areas for improvement outlined above. The area least developed concerns special guardianship support where support and some training has been offered by ACE.
- 9.2 In the first 12 -14 months of operation ACE has
- Established its brand identity
  - Consolidated its staff group and has committed to having a DDP informed approach leading towards certification

- Put in place policies and procedures and kept these under review
- Increased the number of children placed for adoption with strong indications of improved timescales
- Widened the range of support services available to adoptive families
- Maintained a steady stream of adoptive parents from all sections of the community who can meet the needs of children needing families
- Has consulted and engaged with adopters as key stakeholders with plans to strengthen arrangements
- Has put in place networks of communications with a range of other professionals including IRO and fostering managers and key managers within the local authorities
- Delivered the service in accordance with the governance requirements as detailed in the Partnership and Hosting Agreement that includes an ongoing and detailed risk assessment.

9.3 The service has been delivered within budget by virtue of having a significant underspend in the interagency budget as more children have been placed with ACE adopters.

9.4 Future plans and areas for development in year two will be:

- As a service to achieve DDP certification,
- To establish the Adopted Young Person's Support Group,
- To continue the initiative to increase the number of families approved to adopt from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.
- To develop further the ACE website,
- To embed further quality assurance arrangements across the service,
- To engage in a strategic discussion with the local authority partners on how ACE can support special guardianship developments across the region,
- To support the work arising through the PIF project,
- To arrange a development session for the local authority ADMs, panel chairs and ACE managers,
- To facilitate a performance challenge event to include consideration of the reduction in children with adoption decisions,
- To respond to the requirements arising from the decision regarding the future of the Adoption Support Fund,
- To use recruitment opportunities to establish a more diverse workforce.

9.5 Further the ACE Executive Board has approved the extension of the regional adoption agency to include Herefordshire Council. Influenced by the national agenda consideration is to be given to special guardianship support

arrangements and the service will need to also respond to the future arrangements for the Adoption Support Fund that will be known in autumn.

## **10. Conclusion**

- 10.1 The local authorities have successfully supported the evolution of the regional adoption agency that is a local authority shared service. The first year has witnessed a lot of change including areas of innovation and service development that have improved outcomes for children. This has been successfully achieved through partnership working and other arrangements in place with the local authority Children's Services. The journey will continue in year two under the strategic direction of the Executive Board delivered through ACE staff that have been both committed and enthusiastic about the service and progress so far.

**Brenda Vincent**  
**Lead Manager – ACE**  
**11 July 2019**

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## **ACE Adoption Panel Annual Report April 2018 to March 2019**

### **1 Context**

- 1.1 The regionalisation of adoption services that resulted in the creation of Adoption Central England brought together the Adoption Panels of Worcestershire County Council, Warwickshire County Council, Coventry City Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council into one single Panel.
- 1.2 This is the first full year report of the ACE Adoption Panel since it became a single Panel on 1 April 2018.

### **2 Membership**

- 2.1 The Adoption Agencies Statutory Guidance (updated 2011) requires that each adoption agency must maintain a list of persons whom it considers suitable to be a member of an Adoption Panel. The Panel's business can only be conducted if at least 5 members are present, including the Chair or Vice-Chair and a social work representative.
- 2.2 A number of Panel members serving in ACE's constituent local authorities elected not to transfer to the ACE Central List including the Chair and Vice Chair of Solihull's Panel, the Vice Chair of Warwickshire's Panel, and the Chair of the Coventry Panel.
- In the period April 2018 to March 2019, one social work member, two independent members and one elected member resigned from the Panel.
- In addition, the educational psychologist who had attended Warwickshire Panels was no longer able to continue his role on a non-charging basis.
- The Agency Panel Advisers for Solihull and Coventry both retired in July 2018, and the current Panel Adviser was appointed from 1 October 2018.
- 2.3 Eight new Panel members were inducted on 18 September 2019 that included five adoptive parents and one social worker. Elected member membership did not progress beyond the induction.

The Panel Adviser followed up more than 15 expressions of interest from professionals and adopters interested in joining the Panel, including those responding to a recruitment appeal issued in the March 2019 adopters' Newsletter. One of the chairs is also particularly proactive in attempts to recruit Panel members. However, for various reasons including ineligibility and a change in family circumstances, most have not progressed beyond the information stage.

There continues to be the lack of representation on Panel from adopted people and there are only 4 male Panel members.

- 2.4 As on 31 March 2019, the Central List from which Panels are constituted is attached as Appendix A.
- 2.5 The Panel members who sit regularly demonstrate a high level of commitment and passion for their role, and the recommendations made for prospective adopters and children reflect members' broad range of expertise and experience. Panel members are nearly always well-prepared and prompt for meetings and seek to contribute helpful feedback to the agencies. It is also appreciated that Panel members have been accommodating and patient as new Panel processes are established.

## 2.6 **Appraisals**

Annual appraisals of the three Panel Chairs were conducted by the Lead Manager - ACE during the 2018-19 reporting period.

There was no programme of member appraisals in place during the period April to October 2018 before the current Panel Adviser took up the role. A schedule of appraisals commenced in January 2019 and 7 were completed by the end of March 2019.

## 3 **Summary of Panel Activity**

3.2 The ACE Adoption Panel met as follows during the reporting period:

- 20 Panels in Warwick
- 5 Panels in Coventry
- 8 Panels in Solihull
- 9 Panels in Worcester

In total the ACE Adoption Panels considered **184** items of business during this period.

## Approvals

Panel recommended **92** adoptive parent approvals from which:

- 61 were first-time applications for approval as adoptive parents
- 22 were applications for subsequent approval
- 9 were applications from foster carers

Of the 92 approvals, 22 households (24%) were representative of the BME or LGBT communities, and a further 11 (12%) were single applicants.

The families came from the following local authority areas:

Coventry	Solihull	Warwick	Worcester	Other
27	11	27	20	7

3 reviews of adopter approval took place which included two resignations.

## Matches

Panel considered **85** placement matches for a total of **96** children. Of these matches:

- 20 were single children placed in a family with no other children,
- 13 were 2 children placed together in family with no other children,
- 2 were 3 children placed together in family with no other children,
- 14 were single children placed who were previously living with their prospective adoptive parents under fostering for adoption arrangements,
- 1 match was for two children previously placed under fostering for adoption,
- 6 were single children matched with their foster carers,
- 6 were single children placed with a sibling previously adopted,
- 13 were single children placed in a family where there is a unrelated adopted child,
- 1 match was for two children in a family with other unrelated adopted children,
- 8 matches were for single children in families with birth children.

The children came from the following local authority areas:

Coventry	Solihull	Warwick	Worcester
31	3	32	29

**78** of these children were matched with ACE-approved adopters, and **18** were matched on an interagency basis where the adopters were approved by another adoption agency.

1 match was not recommended by the Adoption Panel. 4 plans for adoption for relinquished babies were also recommended by the Panel.

### 3.3 Disruptions

No disruption reports were presented at a Panel meeting during the reporting period. However, a report by the ACE Lead Manager published in April 2019 described and discussed the learning from the five disruptions occurring during the reporting period. Three of these disruptions related to matches recommended by an ACE Adoption Panel since April 2018. Two children had been placed with prospective adopters who had transferred into ACE and one disruption related to an interagency placement.

## 4 Training and Development

4.1 The Annual Panel Members' Training Event was held at the Saffron Centre, Birmingham on 5 September 2018. Nineteen members attended.

The Agenda for the event included:

- Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) Accreditation for ACE
- An update on ACE and a SWOT analysis exercise
- An update on Assessment and Matching Project
- Proposed Practice Guidance on 'Transitions and Play Dates.'
- Post adoption support offered by ACE

4.2 The Panel Adviser has introduced collated feedback to the Panel from the Agency Decision Makers that is uploaded to the secure portal used by Panel members every 3 months.

4.3 During the year Panel welcomed a number of social workers, health professionals (LAC nurses and paediatricians in training) and new Panel members as observers.

4.4 The Chairs and Panel Adviser continue to provide opportunities for informal discussion and feedback during breaks and at the end of meetings.

## 5 Practice issues

5.1 **Panel Team:** The previous Panel administrator together with the Operations Manager and previous Panel Advisers ensured that, despite the changes brought about through regionalisation, a schedule of Panel meetings was fixed at an early stage, thereby ensuring that the Panel stage



of the agency's work has run smoothly and predictably.

- 5.2 **IT:** Panel members remain highly committed to attending Panel and continue to prepare well, accessing papers via a secure portal operated by Warwickshire (WeLearn). Those Panel members who previously used Modern.Gov software have reported that the functionality of WeLearn is not as effective - while reports can still be commented upon, there is a loss of formatting clarity. Some Panel members have also experienced some difficulties in submitting their expense claims. These 'glitches' are steadily being addressed by members, Panel staff and the Warwickshire IT helpdesk.
- 5.3 **Size of Panel meetings:** Panel meetings can have up to 6 agenda items and this involves a significant amount of pre reading within a week and concentration at the Panel meetings. The minuting of long meetings by one minute taker is very demanding and alternative arrangements have been agreed.
- 5.4 **Logistics:** The continuation of Panel meetings would not have been possible without the flexibility of a number of members to sit on Panels in several locations. Particular recognition is due to Daniela Visram, Charlotte Shadbolt, Lorraine Cooksey, Heather Tobin, Margaret Powell and Eamon Moran whose willingness to travel has made otherwise non-quorate meetings quorate.
- There continue to be logistical challenges to be overcome due to meeting in four (soon to be five) locations. These include the availability of meeting and waiting rooms, access to the buildings, and lack of staff to provide reception for adopters and social workers, in some areas.
- 5.5 **Social work members:** While no Panels have had to be cancelled on the grounds of non-quoracy, there have been challenges in guaranteeing the presence of a social work member at Panel meetings. The majority of Panel meetings in the reporting period were attended by a social work member who, while they had no direct involvement in a case, was employed in ACE. The Lead Manager has raised this with the local authority Heads of Service and efforts to recruit more social work members continue.
- 5.6 **Fostering specialists:** It is ACE policy that there should be a social worker with fostering experience at any Panel considering the match of a child with foster carers or under fostering to adopt arrangements. Arrangements are being made with the local authority fostering services for nominated representatives.
- 5.7 **ACE policies:** There has been a review of the different agency policies for example on e-cigarettes, preparation training for foster carers who adopt, ex-partner references, sharing of medical reports, the inclusion of trainer feedback, and children attending Panel. This is an ongoing process with a

view to finalising the Adoption Panel procedures in the near future.

- 5.8 **Minutes:** The format of the Panel minutes has been standardised during the reporting period. Draft minutes are now sent for an accuracy check to social workers attending Panel as well as to Panel members.
- 5.9 **ADM decisions:** The Adoption Panel makes recommendations to the agencies (local authorities and ACE) and there is a statutory requirement for them to make their decision within 7 working days of receiving the finalised minutes. Currently there is some variation across the local authorities, which is being addressed.
- 5.10 **Chairs' meetings** with the Agency Adviser and ACE Lead Manager and Operations Manager are held on a quarterly basis. In addition, a meeting of the Agency Medical Advisers took place on 10 January 2019.

## 6 Panel feedback on the quality of adoption reports

- 6.1 The present Panel Adviser has developed the feedback process on reports presented to Panel and this has been in place since 26 November 2018. The templates used consider :
- (i) The quality of the Prospective Adopter Report (PAR), and
  - (ii) The quality of the matching reports, i.e. the Child Permanence Report (CPR) and the Adoption Placement Report (APR that includes the Adoption Support Plan).

### Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR) – See Appendix B

Panel members provide a collective rating from very good to outstanding, adequate to good, requires improvement, inadequate. The criteria applied is summarised in Appendix B and relates to 35 reports considered between 26 November 2018 and 31 March 2019.

Overall, Panel felt that general standard of **74%** of PAR's was good, while **16%** required improvement.

Where Panel members positively rated the reports it was noted that there was:

- Clarity and thoroughness, with clear ecomaps and genograms supplied.
- Direct quotations from the applicants themselves to illustrate their learning, reflective capacity, understanding of key themes, response to challenge.
- Evidence that Fostering for Adoption had not only been discussed by the social worker, but that the applicants understood the implications.

- Evidence that the social worker had got to know the applicants well.
- Clearly marked updates of previous reports, appropriately credited.
- Thorough exploration of vulnerabilities together with strong analysis of their significance against strengths and other vulnerabilities.
- Detailed information that obviated the need for questions at Panel, e.g. dates and duration of childcare experience, evidence that any children have been interviewed, feedback from Preparation Course facilitators, finances, arrangements for adoption leave and childcare thereafter, evaluated references.

Panel members felt reports required improvement in the following ways:

- Improving the evidential basis within the reports – this would require more corroborating information and analysis about the prospective adopters parenting capacity and fewer assumptions based upon their reflections of personal experiences.
- Summarising and exploring in more depth the prospective adopters' motivation to adopt and identifying any potential vulnerabilities highlighted during the assessment.
- To reduce the length of some report by editing and improving the detail and analysis in some sections ensuring that the adopter's 'voice' is clear within the report.
- Providing clear evidence of children's views or that they have been consulted by the assessing social worker

This quality assurance process also identified that on occasions key information had not been 'pulled through' into the reports from the client record system (MOSAIC). This is being addressed.

Panel deferred making a recommendation in 3 cases of prospective adopters presented for approval as suitable to adopt. Reasons for deferral included:

- Insufficient evidence of the applicants' understanding of adoption,
- Lack of inclusion of the views of the children about their adoption by family and friends carers,
- Failure to contact the previous partner of an applicant who had also co-parented children in the adoptive family.

ACE is committed to raising standards of assessment and report writing across the board and in 2019-20 is to run a series of workshops for assessing social workers. It is a contributor to a DfE Practice Improvement Fund Assessment and Matching Project and will be piloting and evaluating a new format of the Prospective Adopters' Report later in 2019.

### **Matching Reports – See Appendix C**

#### **a) Child Permanence Report (CPR)**

For the 24 matches presented in the period 26 November 2018 to 31 March 2019, Panel members offered a collective rating - very good to outstanding, adequate to good, requires improvement but adequate for a recommendation, and inadequate. A summary of the Panel's appraisal of matching reports is provided in Appendix C against the agreed criteria.

Overall, Panel members continued to note a wide variation in the quality of the Child Permanence Reports and found that **42%** of those presented required improvement with **58%** being rated as good or adequate to good.

Positive comments of Panel members concerning the quality of CPR's noted:

- Evidence of social worker efforts to gain information from or about birth family members, foster carers or guardians, even if that information has not been provided.
- Evidence of social workers taking time to talk to the people who know the child best.
- Evidence of effective co-working between the local authority social worker and ACE social worker.
- Thorough social histories of the child's birth family.
- Careful consideration of future contact proposals.

CPRs could be further improved by:

- Improving accuracy – e.g. updating legal and medical information, photographs, and chronologies to include details of efforts made to explore a placement within the child's family,
- Improving accountability – e.g. proof reading to reduce grammatical and formatting errors ensuring that the language used is appropriate for the child who can access the report in later life, quality assurance being evident and for all reports to be signed by managers,
- Improving analysis - e.g. to evidence better that contact after adoption has been properly considered, particularly where there are half-siblings.

ACE has worked in partnership with colleagues in the Local Authorities and has devised a two-day training programme '**Promoting Permanence through Adoption.**' This training has been delivered twice to date and includes a module on writing CPR's. Additional support is also available.

#### **b) Adoption Placement Report (APR) and the Adoption Support Plan**

The APR is prepared by the child's social worker and adoption social worker together. Its purpose is to make the case for the proposed placement match, considering the adopters' strengths and the child's needs, and to describe the support to be made available.

Overall, Panel felt that the general standard of the APR was adequate to good or outstanding in **58%** of reports, with the remaining **42%** requiring improvement.

Positive feedback from Panel members about the quality of the APR noted:

- The contributions by adopters,
- Clarity,
- Detailed descriptions of the child,
- Discussion of likely challenges and strategies.

The APR could be further improved by:

- Ensuring accuracy in the reports around the child's ethnicity, financial support and the reasons for any delays in the placement process,
- Having support plans that are more bespoke, focusing more on the child's needs and likely placement challenges, with a long-term perspective of what these might be,
- Providing more information on the process for deciding this particular match for this child,
- Evidencing how the child's attachment needs will affect the placements,
- Improving clarity around contact plans.

The current template used for the APR across the ACE local authorities is difficult to both use and read and there is considerable overlap and confusion between the matching matrix table and adoption support plan table, with some columns running to several pages.

The current format does not invite further analysis of matching considerations or parenting capacity with regard to children placed under fostering to adopt arrangements.

Through ACE's involvement with the PIF Project (see above) there maybe future opportunities to review and improve the matching processes and adoption support plans documentation. Workshops are also in the process of being planned.

- 6.2 Feedback collected at Panel in connection with matching reports is shared with Heads of Service of the local authorities and with the ACE Management Group.

## **7 Feedback from Adopters to Panel**

- 7.1 Adopter feedback on their experience of attending Panel during the reporting period has been collected via a paper form sent with a reply paid

envelope and the Agency Decision Maker's (ADM) letter of notification of their approval as adoptive parents.

The response rate has been modest and 21 paper forms were returned, the majority of which were very positive and from which following themes emerge:

- The majority received an invitation and were given sufficient notice
- 90% answered yes to the question "did you feel you received the support you needed to prepare for Panel
- 18% felt that staff were not helpful in directing them to the Adoption Panel meeting room
- All felt it helpful to meet the Chair before being invited into the meeting and 97% said they were made to feel welcome.
- 93% felt they were given sufficient opportunity to share their views, that they were listened to and that the questions asked were appropriate
- One response stated that the Panel's decision not to recommend a match had come as a shock, noting that the nature of the questions had not reflected concerns and the belief that members had misunderstood details of the reports.
- A number of responses noted poor reception arrangements, waiting times, unhelpful or uninformed staff, and a lack of waiting room and water, suggesting that this contributed to their nervousness. Some suggested that information about what to expect at Panel would have been helpful.

The Chairs and Lead Manager are kept informed of adopter feedback and continued efforts will be made to address issues as they arise. Reception and waiting rooms are challenges related to constraints on staffing and meeting rooms. It is hoped that adopters' waiting times will be reduced by staggering their arrival times to 15 minutes after the Panel discussion begins. It is anticipated that the level of adopter feedback will be increased by the implementation of an online survey to be sent to adopters at the point of ADM decision.

## **8 Feedback from social workers who attended Adoption Panel**

- 8.1 A template seeking feedback was developed by the Panel Adviser and sent to social workers following Panel, from January 2019 onwards.

Social workers were asked to comment upon:

- Panel's timekeeping and response to delay,
- Panel's welcome,
- The relevance of Panel questions posed to them,

- The relevance of Panel questions posed to the adopters,
- Their understanding of the reasons for Panel's recommendations,
- Ways in which the experience of attending Panel could be improved.

**Of 25 responses received between 7 January and 31 March 2018:**

- 12 stated that their case did not start within 30 minutes of the time given
- All but 1 rated the welcome provided by Panel as 4 or 5 ( 5 = very welcome)
- All but one rated the relevance of Panel's questions to them as 4 or 5 ( 5 = very relevant)
- All rated the relevance of Panel's questions to the adopters as 4 or 5 ( 5 = very relevant)
- All stated they understood the reasons for Panel's recommendation
- 7 noted that they had not been reminded of their obligation to inform the adopters of the ADM decision within two working days

Comments about their and the adopters' Panel experience were largely positive, praising the welcome offered, the nature of the questions and the Chair's management of the meeting.

The time allocated to cases, potential and reasons for cases overrunning and feedback about Panel is kept under review through regular summaries of feedback shared with the Panel chairs and ACE Lead Manager.

It will be a priority in 2019- 2020 to reduce waiting and to fine tune further the scheduling of the Panel agendas.

## 9 Chairs' Comments

### 9.1 Eamon Moran chaired 23 Panels between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019:

*It has been a particularly busy and interesting year for the Adoption Panel as ACE has begun to achieve its aim of increasing the scale and timeliness of adopter approvals and matches. We have maintained a clear focus on the core business of making recommendations on the adoption plan for relinquished children, approval of prospective adopters and matching of children with adopters already approved. We have continued to welcome observers to our meetings and these have included student Social Workers, community paediatricians, child psychologists and education professionals - feedback from these visits is generally very positive with the day being seen as valuable experience by all involved.*

*ACE Panel members have consistently brought a conscientious and caring approach to Panel days and have made full use of the impressively wide mix of*



*skills and experience they bring to their role. As ACE practices become more embedded in our work it is rewarding to see that range and experience becoming ever more diverse as panel members move fluidly around meetings in each of the five local authorities.*

*There does remain a gender imbalance in panel membership generally and recruitment of more male panel members should continue to be pursued during the forthcoming year.*

*The recruitment of a single full time Panel Adviser has been a major step forward in enabling us to pursue our goal of consistency and transparency across the five local authority panel locations. The appointment of a new Panel Administrator who brings a wealth of relevant experience to the role is also good news for us all.*

**9.2 Margaret Powell** chaired 9 Panels between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019:

*Panel continues to work well; its quality assurance and processes were recently praised during my interview with the Ofsted inspector during Worcestershire's inspection in June 2019. It is extremely positive to report that no Worcestershire children experienced adoption disruptions in the last 12 months. Disruption report from other ACE areas was available and discussed for common learning points. Generally, the quality of Child Permanence Reports has improved across ACE local authorities, which evidences good working relationship between ACE and the LAs. As before, attempts are being made to recruit panel members from more diverse backgrounds.*

*It would be helpful to panel, in its quality assurance role, to receive more specific adoption support plans, that stipulate precisely what the children's needs are (to include emotional and attachment presentation) and how these needs are going to be supported and by whom. This is vital for a regional adoption agency placing its local authority members' children with adopters - in the interest of clarity, transparency and provision of individual 'tool kit' for families being matched with specific children.*

**9.3 Heather Tobin** chaired 9 Panels between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019:

*I am Heather Tobin MBE, one of the four Chair Persons across ACE since its inception in February 2018. Primarily, I Chair the panels in Coventry and Solihull. My husband and I adopted our then 3 year-old daughter in 2012 and so have personal experience of the adoption process.*

*I achieved 30 years' service with West Midlands Police, attaining the rank of Detective Inspector within the Public Protection arena. Child Protection is within my heart. Since retiring, I have remained within the Public Protection arena, working for a national charity rescuing victims of modern slavery and also a more local charity, providing support and mentoring for the most vulnerable members of our community.*



*I am passionate and totally committed to protecting children, improving their situation and being a small part in achieving a safe, nurturing and happier future for them. I feel very fortunate to be a Chair within ACE. Each panel comprises independent members who have a professional and/or personal reason for being there. Without exception, each member has a genuine desire to contribute to a positive outcome for our extremely vulnerable children.*

*Having chaired a panel where a prospective adopter(s) has been approved and then chairing the subsequent panel for their match to a child(ren) is a source of great pride and immense pleasure to me. I feel very privileged to be a part of the adopter's and child's journey through adoption.*

*I am very proud of the successful approvals and matches with our children over the past year. I know, from personal experience, the utter joy, unconditional love and total commitment that adoption brings and I look forward to the coming year.*

**9.4 Lorraine Cooksey (Vice Chair):**

*The first year of ACE has been an interesting time. Panel members from across the region have worked together to operate in a cohesive way. It is important to note that all panel Chairs have personal experience of fostering and adoption at home and this gives an invaluable insight into the reality of adoption. It is my feeling that this is an important factor that prospective adopters will recognise when attending panel.*

*There is much work to do in the development of support plans and taking the longer term view. This is critical to give families the best possible experience as an adopted person and family. I continue to look forward to working with the agency in future development.*

## **10 Development Plan for 2019-2020**

10.1 This report is based on the first year of the operation of the ACE Adoption Panel. It has been a period of change in terms of administrative processes and key staff, including the Adoption Panel Adviser mid-way through the year.

The quarterly meetings with the Adoption Panel chairs have been constructive and the introduction of quality assurance processes has been invaluable. This with other practices will support improvements in adoption practice and the longer term stability of these placements.

10.2 Year 2 priorities for the Adoption Panel are:

- The integration of Panel members from Herefordshire Council and three new members.
- The re-arrangement of Panel meetings to convene up to 3 in Herefordshire between July 2019 and March 2020.
- To continue Panel recruitment to have a more representative Panel particularly including men and adopted people.
- Recruit more independent social workers and social work members with fostering experience.
- To firmly establish the quarterly feedback arrangements to ACE and the local authorities.
- To finalise the Adoption Panel Procedure incorporating ACE policies.
- To review of the feedback templates, to ensure that constructive and targeted feedback is available.
- To complete Adoption Panel member appraisals within the period April 2019 to March 2020.
- The assimilation of Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) principles into the Panel function, as facilitated by the agency's bid for certification and further training for Panel members.
- Strengthen communication and feedback between the Panel and the agency decision makers through a planned joint training event.
- To provide regular reports from ACE to the Panel to provide context on adoption outcomes, numbers of children waiting, number of adopters waiting, matches in last quarter, disruptions.
- To improve the quality of information to prospective adopters ahead of Panel and their experience of attending the meeting.
- To produce an electronic feedback format for adopters attending Panel.
- To improve the procedures for managing deferrals or negative recommendations.

**Note:** Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) provides a framework for supporting looked after and adopted children to recover from trauma through the parenting and support they receive, supplemented by therapy when appropriate. Based on theories of Attachment and Intersubjectivity, DDP aims to help family members to feel safe and connected through the development of healthy patterns of relating and communicating. Of central importance is supporting parents to manage challenging behaviour whilst also staying emotionally connected with the children. This is achieved by helping parents with day-to-day parenting based on principles of PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy), as well as through therapeutic sessions.

**Kate Cowell**  
Adoption Panel Adviser

**Brenda Vincent**  
ACE – Lead Manager

27 August 2019

## **Appendix A**

### **Central Panel List**

**Margaret Powell**, Independent Chair, adoptive parent, member of the IRM and Vice-Chair of an IFA Panel

**Eamon Moran**, Independent Chair, adoptive parent and foster carer

**Heather Tobin**, Independent Chair, adoptive parent and retired police officer

**Lorraine Cooksey**, Vice-Chair, adoptive parent and education specialist

**Dr Alison Rigler**, Agency Medical Adviser, Associate Specialist Community Paediatrician, Clinical Director, Children, Young People and Families, Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust.

**Dr Emma Thompson**, Agency Medical Adviser, Paediatrician, Children, Young People and Families, Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust

**Dr Lucy Coker**, Agency Medical Adviser, Senior Trust Specialist in Community Paediatrics, South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust

**Dr Viji Krishnamoorthy**, Agency Medical Adviser, Paediatrician, C&W Partnership Trust

**Dr Tanya Thangavelu**, Agency Medical Adviser, Specialist Doctor, Community Paediatrics, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust

**Kindy Sandhu**, Elected member, Coventry City Council (first Panel April 2019; subsequently resigned)

**Emma Wooldridge**, Social work member and Family Finding Social Worker, ACE

**Lisa Ruhback**, Social work member and Post Adoption Social Worker, South Spoke, ACE

**Parveen Nagra**, Social work member and Post Adoption Social Worker, ACE

**Margaret Meredith**, Social work member and Assessing Social Worker, ACE

**Ruth Hunter**, Social work member and Assessing Social Worker, ACE

**Claire Coutts**, Independent social work member, Children and Families Social Worker



**Liz Newman**, Social work member and Team Manager, Stratford Children's Team, Warwickshire Children's Services

**Deborah Roden**, Social work member and Social Worker in Connected Persons Team, Warwickshire Fostering

**Calvin Smith**, Social work member and Service Manager, Warwickshire Children's Services

**Hazel Howard**, Social work member and Team Manager, ACE Hub

**Dr Dan Lake**, Educational Psychologist, Warwickshire Education and Learning (until February 2019)

### **Independent Members**

**Andrea Candlish**, retired health visitor

**Audrey Davies**, adoptive parent and retired fostering panel administrator

**Charlotte Shadbolt**, adoptive parent of four children

**Daniela Visram**, foster carer with Warwickshire County Council

**David Burgess**, foster carer with Solihull MBC

**Janis McBride**, retired head teacher with personal experience of fostering and adoption

**Karin Burrage-Pitchford**, adoptive parent and teacher

**Leanne Warren**, adoptive parent

**Maggie King**, retired adoption social worker

**Natasha Sutton**, adoptive parent

**Nigel Pendleton**, adoptive parent and foster carer

**Rob Rogers**, adoptive parent, educationalist and counsellor

**Sharon Bent**, adoptive parent

### **Non-voting attendees**

**Kate Cowell**, Panel Adviser (full time from 1 October 2018)

**Melissa Rose**, Acting Operations Manager, ACE Hub and panel adviser

**Louise Hathaway**, Operations Manager, ACE Spokes and panel adviser



**Jemma Fordham**, Operations Manager ACE Hub and panel adviser (on maternity leave from September 2018)

**Ruba Aktar**, Panel Administrator (part –time)

**Sue Griffiths**, Panel Administrator (part-time)

**Michelle Rothwell**, Panel Administrator (full-time until February 2019, resigned May 2019)

## Adoption Panel assessment of PARs

- **Timescales for Stage Two assessment:**  
8 met the timescale (i.e. 4 months between notification to proceed and ADM decision)
- **Overall readability:** sense, grammar, accuracy, proof-reading.  
26 were adequate to good or very good to outstanding,  
9 required improvement.
- **Completeness of the report to aid decision-making:**  
23 were adequate to good or very good to outstanding,  
8 required improvement  
4 were inadequate.
- **The quality of the evidence supporting facts and statements:**  
27 were adequate to good or very good to outstanding  
5 required improvement  
3 were inadequate
- **The quality of the social worker's analysis, conclusions and recommendations:**  
26 were adequate to good or very good to outstanding  
8 required improvement  
1 was inadequate

## Appendix C

### Child Permanence Report (CPR) and Adoption Placement Reports

#### Child Permanence Report (CPR)

- **Overall readability of the report** (sense, grammar, accuracy, formatting, presentation):  
14 adequate to good or very good to outstanding  
10 required improvement.
- **Completeness of report to aid decision making:**  
14 adequate to good or very good to outstanding  
10 required improvement
- **Quality of analysis of the child's needs and implications for placement:**  
1 outstanding,  
17 adequate to good  
6 lacking depth but adequate for purpose
- **Evidence of management oversight:**  
11 as insufficient e.g. reports not signed, cut-and-paste errors unchallenged
- **Value of the report to the child as an adopted adult:**  
8 were considered to be an adequate presentation of the child's journey to permanence,  
15 were felt to need updating, correction, proof-reading or editing,  
1 was not fit for purpose.

#### Adoption Placement Reports

- **Overall readability of the report:**  
14 were adequate to good or very good to outstanding,  
10 require amendments.
- **Evidence of family finding:**  
6 reports provided detailed evidence,  
15 were considered adequate but could be improved.  
No family finding was evidenced in 1 case

1 case not applicable.

- **Explanation of why this match is proposed:**

4 reports were considered to lack a clear rationale for matching that child with that particular family.
- **Scope, content and quality of the Adoption Support Plan:**

1 plan was considered good, detailed and thorough,  
23 were considered adequate for panel purposes but needing improvement for the sake of the adopters and child.
- **The rationale and proposals for contact after adoption:**

5 of the reports were considered to provide good detailed proposals.  
17 required further consideration  
2 were rated inadequate.
- **The child's voice and evidence of preparation for adoption:**

1 case, Panel felt that the evidence was strong,  
11 cases the evidence was adequate.  
This criterion did not apply in 8 cases where a child was already placed. In 4 cases panel could see no evidence that a verbal child had been helped to understand adoption or share their views.
- **Evidence that the adopters understanding the match and its implications:**

The Panels considered that all the reports evidenced adopters' having an understanding of the match, but felt that in 14 cases there could have been stronger evidence.
- **Evidence of management oversight:**

Yes in 17 cases,  
Some oversight in 6,  
None was evident in 1 case.
- **Panel administration** (i.e. all reports provided):

1 case had key papers missing,  
3 cases had papers added late.





Coventry City Council

## Briefing note

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**To: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**

**3 October 2019**

**Subject: Children's Services Improvement**

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### **1 Purpose of the Note**

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) of the progress with Children's Services improvement reported to the Continuous Improvement Executive Group on 12 August 2019. The next Continuous Improvement Executive Group will be held on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2019.

### **2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Scrutiny Board (2) are recommended to:
- 1) To note the current progress
  - 2) Identify any further recommendations for the appropriate Cabinet Member

### **3 Information/Background**

- 3.1 Ofsted re-inspected Children's Services on 6<sup>th</sup> -30<sup>th</sup> March 2017, the outcome of the inspection was published on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2017, Children's Services were judged as "requires improvement to be good". Services for Children are no longer inadequate.
- 3.2 The Department for Education (DfE) removed Children's Services from intervention on 13 June 2017, the service is no longer subject to an improvement notice. Supervision and support have been provided by the DfE up to June 2018. This has now ended.
- 3.3 A report on the future arrangements for continuing and sustaining improvements in Coventry was presented by the Independent Chair and the Director of Children's Services at Improvement Board on 3 October 2018. It was agreed that the Children's Services Improvement Board is replaced by a Continuous Improvement Executive Group to retain political and corporate oversight of Children's Services Continuous Improvement.
- 3.4 The Continuous Improvement Executive Group will ensure tighter focus on continuous improvement and Ofsted preparation. The impact of performance will be managed and monitored by the group. This is an interim measure before returning to business as usual in accordance with the revised arrangements for Children's Safeguarding, and subject to satisfactory inspection by September 2020. At this time the Executive Group would cease and oversight transferred to Coventry Safeguarding Children's Partnership and monitored as business as usual. Board members fully supported the revised arrangements and membership of the group.
- 3.5 The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive continue to give public commitment that Children's Services remains a key priority for the Council. This includes prioritising funding for Children's Services to maintain its capacity to improve. The Council, alongside partner organisations continue a relentless focus on securing improvements in services for children, young people and families to ensure they are safeguarded and achieve positive outcomes.

- 3.6 Ofsted's revised framework includes focused visits to local authorities who are judged to be 'requires improvement' the first visit was held on 30-31 January 2018. The visit focused on the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 22 February 2018.
- 3.7 The Ofsted Annual Conversation with regional representatives is undertaken each year, this took place on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2019. The meeting is part of a broader meeting covering education and early years.
- 3.8 A further focused visit was held on 26-27 February 2019. The visit focused on permanency planning and achieving permanency. The letter confirming the outcome of the visit was published on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2019. The next standard Inspection of Children's Services is likely to be between September 2019 and September 2020.

### **Children's Services Continuous Improvement Progress**

#### **4 Children's Services Redesign**

- 4.1 The review of Children's Service redesign is in its final stages. The distribution of case work across the city has been reviewed. Currently this varies within teams. An even distribution will ensure children and young people and families get the Right Help at the Right Time and enable social work to flourish. A new model has been developed to increase management capacity so that managers oversee a smaller manageable caseload.
- 4.2 To implement the changes, posts funded in Help and Protection will be moved to provide additional resources needed in the Looked After Children and Through Care teams. The feedback report and changes will be communicated to trade union colleagues and staff in October 2019.

#### **5 Workforce**

- 5.1 In the first quarter of this year (April – June 2019) the service has recruited 20 social workers; 8 social workers have left during this period. The progression framework launched in January 2019 for social workers to progress via a career pathway, has demonstrated a positive impact with less social workers leaving and more social workers being retained. Reliance on agency staff continues to reduce; as at the end of July 2019 this was 29 compared with 40 in February.
- 5.2 In September a further cohort of 11 Newley Qualified Social Workers (NQSWS) commenced the Social Work Academy for six months, this will be followed by a further cohort of 9 NQSW's commencing in November 2019. The Social Work Academy will revert to business as usual with two cohorts a year from May 2020.

#### **6 Recording Workshops**

- 6.1 Ofsted stated at the focused visit held in February 2019 that children's files did not always contain all relevant documentation to track the decisions making process. This was highlighted as an area for improvement. In response to this several Recording workshops have been held, facilitated by the Principal Social Worker and the Strategic Lead for Help and Protection. A further 5 workshops are planned between August and December. Those staff who have attended have been very positive about the workshops.

#### **7 Back to Basics Programme**

- 7.1 Children's Services Leadership will be launching a 'Back to Basic programme' for staff. The purpose of the programme is:

- To develop skills, knowledge and practice confidence across the key areas of improvement
- To support practitioners to have knowledge, tools and skills to enable good social work practice and early help practice with children and families to thrive; and overall improve the quality and consistency of practice

7.2 The extended Leadership Team agreed a programme of workshops to be delivered between October 2019 and March 2020 on:

- Recording Skills
- Undertaking Assessments and Analysis in Practice
- Direct Work with Children and Young People and their Families and Carers
- Developing Confidence and Skills in Outcome Focused Plans for Children
- Permanency, Care Planning and Legal Literacy

## **8 Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDAC)**

8.1 On 24<sup>th</sup> July 2019, the FDAC bid as part of the Supporting Families; investing in Practice Programme was successfully awarded to Coventry's FDAC team. A public announcement of all successful LA bids was communicated in August. Following the announcement of the award to successful sites, the FDAC national partnership at the Centre for Justice Innovation will actively engage sites in designing and deciding which variations to existing practice are to be tested, working in partnership with What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC). Children's Services is currently awaiting further information from the Department for Education regarding this development.

8.2 Whilst the exact variations are yet to be finalised for Family Drug and Alcohol Courts, the suggestions proposed in the successful expressions of interest will be considered in determining approaches to further test the FDAC model.

## **9 Performance Progress**

9.1 The Leader and Cabinet Member requested an additional meeting in August to review performance progress. The Director (Children's Services) presented a deep dive briefing highlighting success factors; the performance management arrangements in place; current issues, performance and action to be taken for each Critical Performance Indicator. The deep dive provided a helpful insight and understanding of current performance. Overall the 18 indicators highlight a mixed picture, with an upward trajectory on some of the indicators. The deep dive presentation was shared with Executive Group members on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2019, members agreed to a targeted approach to focus on specific critical performance indicators that need to improve to ensure an upward trajectory.

## **10 Sustaining Continuous Improvement**

10.1 A final draft of the Continuous Improvement Plan was shared at the meeting in August. This has been developed further with Leads and partners and includes areas for development identified from the last Ofsted Visit in February and actions that need further embedding from the last plan as well as new actions that the service in conjunction with partners need to undertake in readiness for the next Ofsted Standard Inspection. The final version will be incorporated into the Children's Services Strategic Plan 2019-2022 and shared with Board members at the October meeting before publishing. It will then be presented to this board.

10.2 The Improvement Executive Group will provide oversight and accelerate at pace areas for development that need to improve over the next twelve months.

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Please see page 2 onwards for background to items

<b>20<sup>th</sup> June 2019</b>
Introduction to the Education and Skills Service Introduction to Children's Services
<b>18<sup>th</sup> July 2019</b>
Children's Services Improvement – Continuous Improvement Board report
<b>19<sup>th</sup> September 2019</b>
SEND update Education Performance
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019</b>
Adoption Annual Report Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report – 12 August
<b>28<sup>th</sup> November 2019</b>
Early Years/ school readiness Post 16 transition and NEETS
<b>9<sup>th</sup> January 2020</b>
Early Help Hubs Library Review Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report 22 October and 19 December
<b>13<sup>th</sup> February 2020</b>
Children Missing Education School Performance Information – validated data
<b>19<sup>th</sup> March 2020</b>
Retention of Social Workers – progress on recommendations Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report 25 February
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020</b>
<b>Date to be decided</b>
Education, Sport, and Participation Strategy Secure Provision Serious Case Review Children's Service Executive Group CAMHS One Strategic Plan Partnership working Task and Finish Group Unregulated Children's Homes

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Cabinet Member/ Lead Officer</b>
<b>20<sup>th</sup> June 2019</b>	Introduction to the Education and Skills Service	An overview of the services provided to enable Members to identify work programme items for the coming year	Kirston Nelson Cllr Maton
	Introduction to Children's Services	An overview of services provided to enable Members to identify work programme items for the coming year	John Gregg Cllr Seaman
<b>18<sup>th</sup> July 2019</b>	Children's Services Improvement – Continuous Improvement Board report	An updated improvement plan for next period reported to the Continuous Improvement Board from 23 <sup>rd</sup> May 19 – identifying actions across the 3 priority areas – the report will set the scene for the year and identify other issues for the Board.	John Gregg Cllr Seaman
<b>19<sup>th</sup> September 2019</b>	SEND update	An overview of the joint inspection with Ofsted and CQC of services for children with special educational needs and disabilities.	Kirston Nelson Jeanette Essex Cllr Maton
	Education Performance	A summary of initial results from 2018/19	Kirston Nelson Cllr Maton
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019</b>	Adoption Annual Report	As requested at their meeting on 21 <sup>st</sup> June to provide a further progress report, along with some facts and figures on the current position with adoption	Paul Smith Cllr Seaman
	Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report – 12 August	To report on the information presented to the Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report at their meeting on the 12 <sup>th</sup> August	
<b>28<sup>th</sup> November 2019</b>	Early Years/ school readiness	How both education and early help hubs are supporting school readiness	Kirston Nelson/ John Gregg
	Post 16 transition and NEETS	To look at higher and further education destinations, support to NEETS and	Kirston Nelson Cllr Maton
<b>9<sup>th</sup> January 2020</b>	Early Help Hubs	To cover the recommendations made at the meeting on 14 <sup>th</sup> February 2019 – the dashboard to include those over 19 using the service	John Gregg/ Rebecca Wilshire

SB2 Work Programme 2019-20

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Cabinet Member/ Lead Officer</b>
	Library Review	Members requested to consider a report to the Cabinet Member 3 months after implementation on lone working in libraries	Peter Barnett
	Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report 22 October and 19 December	To report on the information presented to the Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report at their meetings on the 22 October and 19 December	
<b>13<sup>th</sup> February 2020</b>	Children Missing Education	To include children excluded, at risk of exclusion and home schooled	Kirston Nelson Cllr Maton
	School Performance Information – validated data	A report on school performance data using validated data, including LAC and vulnerable groups, as well as gender analysis	Sara Mills Kirston Nelson Cllr Maton
<b>19<sup>th</sup> March 2020</b>	Retention of Social Workers – progress on recommendations	Following up on progress on the recommendations from the T&F group on retention of social workers made by SB2 29 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	John Gregg Lee Pardy-McLaughlin Cllr Seaman
	Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report 25 February	To report on the information presented to the Children's Services Continuous Improvement Board report at their meeting on the 25 February	
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020</b>			
<b>Date to be decided</b>	Education, Sport, and Participation Strategy	Following their meeting on 6 <sup>th</sup> September 2018, Members requested further information on the draft strategy	Sarah Mills Cllr Maton
	Secure Provision	To look in more detail at the provision of secure placements and custody for young people across the region including those arrested and not bailed.	John Gregg
	Serious Case Review	To consider progress on recommendations from a recent SCR	Rebekah Eaves

Date	Title	Detail	Cabinet Member/ Lead Officer
	Children's Service Executive Group	Regular progress reports to be received by the Board after every Executive Group meeting	John Gregg
	CAMHS	A 12 month follow up report on progress requested at the meeting on 4 <sup>th</sup> April 2019 as a joint meeting with SB5	John Gregg
	One Strategic Plan	To consider any Cabinet Reports on the One Strategic Plan	Kirston Nelson Cllr Maton
	Criminal Exploitation of Children (Gangs and Knife Crime) Youth Offending Service/Youth Justice Support for Ofsted	To look at partnership work on preventing violent crime, including police panels, education, children's services, public health, police and schools	Key partners Cllr Maton
	Partnership working Task and Finish Group	To look at more detail at how partners are working together on to protect children and young people	Cllr Sandhu John Gregg External partners
	Unregulated Children's Homes		