



Cabinet Member (Children and Young People)

Time and Date

10.00 am on Thursday, 7th October, 2021

Place

Diamond Rooms 1 and 2 - Council House

Please note that in line with Government and Council guidelines in relation to COVID, there will be reduced public access to the meeting to manage numbers attending safely. If you wish to attend in person, please contact the Governance Services Officer indicated at the end of the agenda.

Public Business

1. **Apologies**
2. **Declarations of Interests**
3. **Minutes** (Pages 3 - 4)
 - (a) To agree the minutes of the meeting held on 15 July, 2021
 - (b) Matters Arising
4. **Coventry City Council Annual Adoption Report** (Pages 5 - 88)
Report of the Director of Childrens Services
5. **Coventry City Council Annual Fostering Report** (Pages 89 - 104)
Report of the Director of Childrens Services
6. **Corporate Parenting Board - Activity Report 2020-21** (Pages 105 - 114)
Report of the Director of Childrens Services
7. **Outstanding Issues Report**
There are no outstanding issues
8. **Any Other Business**
To consider any other items of business which the Cabinet Member decides to take as a matter of urgency because of the special circumstances involved.

Private Business

Nil

Julie Newman, Director of Law and Governance, Council House Coventry

Wednesday, 29 September 2021

Note: The person to contact about the agenda and documents for this meeting is Usha Patel, Governance Services Tel: 024 7697 2301

Membership: Councillor: B Gittins (Deputy Cabinet Member) and P Seaman (Cabinet Member)

By invitation Councillor P Male

Public Access

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<https://www.coventry.gov.uk/publicAttendanceMeetings>

Usha Patel

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Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Cabinet Member for Children and Young People held at
12.00 pm on Thursday, 15 July 2021

Present:

Members: Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member)

Employees (by Directorate):

J Gregg, Director of Children's Services
L Harris, Children's Services
C Sinclair, Law and Governance

Apologies: Councillor B Gittins
Councillor P Male

Public Business

1. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2021 were agreed as a true record.

Matter Arising

In respect of Minute 10/20 (The House Project), it was reported that the launch for the House Project would be taking place the next day, 16 July 2021, and the Cabinet Member, Councillor Seaman would be attending.

3. Early Help Annual Report 2020/2021

The Cabinet Member considered the Early Help Annual Report for 2020/2021.

The report provided an overview of the Family Hub service in Coventry from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 and detailed how Coventry Children's Services had delivered the Early Help offer through the Family Hub Model, including information on key achievements and milestones in the development of the Family Hub service, as well as challenges and next steps which will informed priorities for the forthcoming 12 months.

Details of how the Family Hubs responded to the COVID19 pandemic, how services were delivered and what help and support children, young people and their families were offered including the Family Hub core offer. The report also set out data on the number of families who had been supported.

The Cabinet Member noted that work to develop and implement the Early Help Strategy 2020-2022 for Coventry continued to be a priority and remained the focus of the Early Help Strategic Partnership.

The Early Help Offer delivered to children, young people and their families was continually being refined and developed as a result of feedback from children and their families and partner agencies. The annual plan provided an opportunity to consider those representations from individuals and informed the future development of services delivered as well as the Hub environment and accessibility.

The report outlined the progress made in the Troubled Families Programme (now known as Supporting Families) and detailed work to develop practice as identifying next steps and priorities for the forthcoming year.

Family Hubs had continued to work collaboratively with key partners to support children and families most in need of help. The impact of the pandemic had increased food poverty and the report covered the ongoing work to respond to the need in the City. A partnership between the Family Hubs and the Coventry food network was formed and an emergency food hub had been established to further support the local community.

Other achievements discussed at the meeting included a programme developed to deliver early intervention to reduce first time entrants into the criminal justice system, which was a collaboration of Family Hub Youth Workers and Police Community Support Officers delivering a short programme of intervention to young people identified as low risk of criminal exploitation.

Following consideration of the report and presentation at the meeting, the Cabinet Member thanked officers for their excellent work in the particularly difficult circumstances of the pandemic, for adapting in a positive way and for ensuring that everyone got the right support when they needed it.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People endorse the progress of Early Help work across Coventry for 2020/21, including partnering arrangements with the wider partnership.

4. **Outstanding Issues Report**

There were no outstanding issues.

5. **Any Other Business**

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 12.25 pm)



Public report

Corporate Parenting Board
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

30 September 2021
7 October 2021

Name of Cabinet Member:

Children and Young People Cabinet Member - Cllr P Seaman

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Director of Children's Services

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title:

Coventry City Council Annual Adoption Report

Is this a key decision?

No - although the proposals affect more than two electoral wards, the impact is not expected to be significant.

Executive Summary:

The Annual Adoption Report is required by National Minimum Standards, which are applicable to the provision of adoption services. The National Minimum Standards form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 in relation to the conduct of adoption agencies and adoption support services. It is crucial that the adoption performance in Coventry is examined on an annual basis to ensure that children who are adopted get the best possible outcomes.

Recommendations:

Cabinet Member is requested to:

- 1) Analyse and endorse the work completed in this area of work.

List of Appendices included:

Coventry City Council Annual Adoption
Report ACE Annual Report
Annual Adoption Panel Chair Report.

Background papers:

None

Other useful documents

None.

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No.

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

Yes –Corporate Parenting Board, 30 September 2021

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Coventry City Council Annual Adoption Report

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 Each local authority in England is obliged by National Minimum Standards to formally approve the statement of purpose and children's guides, and to review these at least annually. This Annual Report is provided to meet this obligation. Coventry City Council is currently in a partnership arrangement with a Regional Adoption Agency. This is Adoption Central England (ACE). This is a shared services arrangement hosted by Warwickshire County Council. ACE is responsible for recruiting and assessing adoptive families. It is also involved in matching children with adopters in partnership with the child's social worker. ACE is also responsible for administering the Adoption Panel. Therefore, the annual report consists of a report from Coventry City Council regarding children, a report from ACE regarding adopters and a report from ACE written by the Adoption Panel Chair.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 Cabinet Member is requested to:

Analyse and endorse the work completed in this area of work.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 Consultation occurs on several levels with children and adopters. This work is documented within the body of the appendices where appropriate.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 This is an annual report and work will continue in this area over the next 12 months.

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Director of Law and Governance

5.1 Financial implications

- 5.1.1 Costs relating to the children are held within Coventry City Council's budgets, in the LAC and Permanence teams. These are managed through the usual internal budgetary control process and there are no specific financial implications arising from this report.
- 5.1.2 Costs relating to the services provided by ACE are governed via the legal host agreement between Coventry City Council and ACE which includes comprehensive funding arrangements. Any changes to these arrangements must be agreed by the Executive Board, of which Coventry is a member.
- 5.1.3 Coventry City Council's contribution to ACE in 2019/20 was £895,909, a reduction of £27,500 from the previous year. Both 2018/19 and 2019/20 resulted in underspends for ACE. Under the terms of the funding arrangements this must be kept in a ringfenced reserve and a proportion of which must be returned to partners if it reaches a

predetermined level. Therefore, as a result of the underspends Coventry City Council will receive a one-off ACE dividend of £100,000 during the financial year 2020/21.

5.1.4 Financial arrangements are kept under review and monitored closely by the ACE Executive Board, along with finance representatives from each partner authority.

5.2 Legal implications

5.2.1 The National Minimum Standards (NMS), provided by the Department for Education, as of July 2014, set out the standards of service to be provided. The NMS are issued by the Secretary of State, pursuant to ss 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000, and are issued for use by Ofsted, which are then taken into account for the purpose of inspections. The relevant provisions, as set out in Standard 18 of the NMS are:

5.2.2 The adoption agency and adoption support agency has a clear statement of purpose which is available to and understood by staff, volunteers, children, birth parents and guardians, prospective adopters and adopters, and is reflected in any policies, procedures and guidance.

5.2.3 The aims and objectives of the Statement of Purpose should be outcome focussed and, for adoption agencies, show how the service will meet outcomes for children.

5.2.4 The adoption agency /registered person of the adoption support agency formally approves the statement of purpose and children's guides and reviews them at least annually.

5.2.5 The agency's policies, procedures and any written guidance to staff and volunteers accurately reflect the statement of purpose.

5.2.6 Additionally, Standard 25.6 of the NMS provides that the executive side of the local authority, the voluntary adoption agency's/Adoption Support Agency's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members are to:

- receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months,
- to monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users, and
- to satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

The reports contained at Appendices are provided in compliance with the NMS.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan (www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/)?

The service contributes the Council Plan in the following ways:

- 6.1.1 Locally committed- adoption contributes to keeping children safe from harm, particularly in the light of early permanence. It gives children a family where they get the best start in life
- 6.1.2 Delivering our priorities with fewer resources- children are at the heart of the customer journey. Sharing services gives a more cost-effective service. Working with partners

in ACE across the sub- region makes sure that good practice is shared and enhances problem solving. This in turn improves outcomes for children

6.1.3 Managing performance and measuring progress- the Annual Adoption Report documents performance and progress of the service.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

Risks are monitored in real time. This includes care planning for children and an Executive Board that oversees the running of ACE. Ameliorative action is promptly taken in the light of any issues identified.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

This is crucial to the Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities. This report is also reviewed by the Corporate Parenting Board.

6.4 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Equality of opportunity is a key part of adoption work. This is considered in the organisations' reports documented in the appendices.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None.

Report author(s):

Name and job title: Paul Smith- Strategic Lead looked after children.

Directorate: Children's Services.

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Enquiries should be directed to the above person.

Contributor/approver name	Title	Service Area	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Usha Patel	Governance Services Officer	Law and Governance		28 September 2021
Names of approvers for submission: (officers and members)				
Finance: Tina Pinks	Finance Manager	Finance		27 September 2021
Legal: Julie Newman	Director of Law and Governance	Law and Governance		2 September 2021
Director: John Gregg	Director of Children's Services	Children's Services		2 August 2021
Members: Pat Seaman	Cabinet Member of Children and Young People			8 September 2021

This report is published on the council's website:

www.coventry.gov.uk/councilmeetings

Appendices

Coventry Children's Services Annual Adoption Report 2020-21

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Local Authority Update
3. Service Activity
4. Service Performance
5. Service Plan 2020-21

1. Introduction

Each local authority is required by regulation to publish an annual adoption report. This provides an overview of adoption activity and performance for the year 2020-21.

Coventry Children's Services delivers adoption services in partnership with the Regional Adoption Agency – Adoption Central England (ACE), which has been operational since 1 February 2018. This accords with national policy that all local authority adoption services were required to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020.

ACE provides the following services as a local authority shared services arrangement hosted by Warwickshire County Council:

- Recruitment, preparation and assessment of adoptive parents
- Family finding and specific recruitment
- Matching support and post order support to adoptive families for 12 months
- Non agency adoption - the provision of information assessments and court reports
- Assessment of need for adoption support including requests to the Adoption Support Fund
- Direct support to adoptive families including therapeutic interventions
- Training for adopters and support groups
- Independent birth parent support services - Family Connexions
- Training for social workers
- Duty and advice service
- Co-ordination of Adoption Panels across the sub-region.

This arrangement allows for a greater strategic approach to adopter recruitment widening, the potential pool of adopters for children. Adoption support services have been enhanced including the provision of therapeutic interventions that are delivered and coordinated more consistently and effectively across the region.

Coventry's 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 it.

2. Local authority update

In the last 12 months Coventry City Council, alongside other local authorities, has been presented with unparalleled challenges due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Children's Services had to adapt and develop different ways of working with children, families, partners and the courts. In some areas of the service the impact of the pandemic is clearly visible, with delay in progressing specific pieces of work and some children experiencing delay in securing permanence. Despite the challenges, managers and social workers have been creative in how they have maintained contact with children and progressed plans where possible.

- *Continue to build on the number of children placed in foster to adopt placements*

Coventry has continued to promote foster to adopt placements, with three children being placed in the last year.

- *All children to receive life story books and later in life letters within 10 days of the celebration hearing*

All children who were adopted received life story books and later in life letters. Work continues to make sure all children get these in the expected 10-day period.

- *Social workers to undertake bespoke training to improve the quality of children's life story books. Team managers to complete training on how to quality assure children's life story books*

Team managers and social workers completed a workshop on the quality of life story books. A more detailed training is planned to take place next year.

- *To improve the A2 indicator of the timeliness of a placement order being made and a match with an adoptive family*

The yearly A2 indicator has improved from the previous year, reducing to 357 days. This is outside of the national target and the service has a plan to continue to build on this year's improvements.

- *To ensure the new operating model for looked after children and permanence service reduces the time taken for children in their adoption care planning*

A new operating model came into effect in June 2020. The service has experienced some instability and inconsistency due to a change in team managers and social workers, and the challenge of recruiting experienced social workers across the region. Despite this challenge the new service structure has already begun to impact upon children's timescales for securing permanence. The A1 and A2 measures for the last twelve months have reduced despite some delays for children in the court process. To meet the increased demand in this area, Coventry City Council has increased the number of teams from 4 to 6 and has 5 dedicated adoption workers. This has proven to be successful in moving children into timely permanent placements.

3. Service activity

Adoption recruitment activity is reported by ACE.

Overall children's services performance:

	2019-2020	2020-21
ADM decisions that a child should be placed for adoption	40	36
Placement orders granted by the court	28	24
Matched with prospective adopters	25	30
Number of children placed with adopters	25	28
Adoption applications submitted	21	33
Number of children adopted	31	19
Children placed with adopters at period end	19	29
Number of children with placement order awaiting match	23	13
Number of children subject to an adoption plan change	5	13
Number of adoptive placement disruptions	0	1

In summary, adoption work across the city has been significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Pressures within the judiciary has meant that children are not progressing to adoption as quickly as would be anticipated. Court delays have meant fewer placement orders being made and less children being adopted. However, the impacts of the court challenges appear to be starting to resolve as adoption applications have increased and there are more children placed with adoptive families. Coventry has been the most successful local authority in the ACE region for matching children with families.

In the last year Coventry experienced a higher number of babies being relinquished at birth than what would be usually anticipated. Further analysis will be completed to understand the reasons for the significant increase and how best the local authority can respond to the needs of this group of children.

This year has seen an increase of 61% in the number of children whose plan for adoption has changed. Coventry Children's Services always keeps children's plans for permanence

under review and does not allow children to drift. This has resulted in the changes of care plans for some children. To understand the needs of our children an audit was completed. This demonstrated that for some children subject to concurrent planning, concluded in alternative permanent outcomes. Four children's plans were changed, and they returned to live with birth parents, as risks had reduced, and evidence of change had been sustained. Three children also secured permanence with family members and a foster carer through a special guardianship order. These is excellent outcomes for these children. For the remaining six children, complex health and emotional needs resulted in no adopters being identified. These children's plans have changed to long-term fostering with proposals to link them long-term to their current carers.

One child experienced disruption in an adoptive placement. An independent disruption review was held and concluded the potential adopters were unable to meet the needs of the child due to their perception of challenging behaviours. The analysis of the child's circumstances afforded a better understanding of subsequent placement needs. Learning from all disruptions is disseminated across the service so social workers understand how best to make adoption placements work for all children.

As a local authority Coventry successfully placed 3 children in foster to adopt placements, with all children securing their permanent home at the earliest opportunity.

4. Service Performance

National Performance Indicators	Government Target	Coventry Three Year Average (2017-2020)	Coventry performance 2019-20	Coventry 2020-21
A1 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)	426 days	665 days	663 days	599 days
A2 - 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)	122 days	331 days	367 days	357 days
A3 - Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)	14 months	32.9% (36/85 children)	30.9% (29 of 94 children)	42.4% (36/85 children)
A10 - Average time in days between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster carer applications		461 days	This is a new measure	440 days (450 days 2019-2020)

A20 - Average time in days between entering care and placement order		280 days	This is a new measure	256 days (288 days 2019-2020)
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The timeliness of children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family has improved from the previous year. Coventry's performance remains above national targets. However, the timescales are affected by a cohort of children who have a plan for adoption, that has been ongoing and still being pursued as it remains the most appropriate permanence plan. Coventry will always prioritise positive outcomes for children despite impact on performance targets.

For the first time the annual adoption report has included the A10 and A20 indicator, which provides a more accurate picture of children's progress in the last twelve months. The A10 indicator recognises outlier indicators, particularly where children who have been in placement and adopted by their foster carers. In 2019-20 the A10 indicator was 503 days. This has been reduced to 440 days in last twelve months. When compared to the A1 indicator of 599 days for the year, it is evident there is a significant improvement in the timeliness of children moving in with their adoptive families, enabling earlier security and stability for children.

The A20 indicator measuring the time a child entered care to a placement order being granted, in 2019-20 was 288 days. This again has been reduced to 256 days, further evidencing that practice is improving, and children are securing earlier permanence.

The proportion of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive families has increased from 32.7% to 42.4%. (A3 indicator).

For 7 of the 19 children made subject to an adoption order by the court in 2020-21, took less than the government target of 426 days between the children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This is an improvement on the previous year.

All the adoption measure indicators demonstrate that permanence planning is becoming timelier, leading to children experiencing stability and security at an earlier stage of their care journey.

Good practice examples

During the pandemic there has been some examples of good social work practice that has provided children with positive outcomes.

1-Two siblings were adopted separately but live within a short distance of each other. Adopters facilitate regular family time ensuring the children continue to have a sense of their identity and birth family.

2-One child had been placed with foster carers from three days old. He has subsequently been adopted by his foster carer's grandson, enabling to remain within the same family from his birth.

In 2020-21 ten children were adopted by their foster carers. These children have experienced placements that have provided them with consistent people in their lives, affording them long-term attachments, with security and stability and ultimately a sense of identity, all of which provides excellent outcomes for children. Coventry will continue to explore all avenues of permanence that are in the best interests of children.

Of the 19 children adopted 9 were defined as 'hard to place' children. Social workers have been tenacious in pursuing adoption and achieving positive outcomes.

There are several children who are 'hard to place' for whom adoptive families have been secured. Four children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds were adopted last year. This represents 21.1% as a proportion of all children being adopted in 2020-21.

Children's Services is consistently looking to improve practise in identifying early permanence. Social workers and team managers have attended seminars and webinars to ensure foster to adopt placements are at the forefront of children's care planning. The service has also employed an additional social worker with a focus on supporting social workers in completing child placement reports.

5. Coventry City Council Service Plan 2021-2022

In partnership with ACE the local authority plans to improve and develop its adoption practise in the following key areas:

- Develop collaborative working across Children's Services to for effective pre-birth, pre-proceedings and care proceedings to ensure timely permanence is achieved for all children
- Ensure fostering to adopt is considered for every child where appropriate and a rationale for decision is recorded
- Ensure family finding information is recorded on the child's file which explains rationale for the choice of family for the child. This will make sure children understand their journey if they return to their files in later life
- Ensure team managers continue to have access to adoption scorecard data to enable regular monitoring and review of children's progress
- Develop an understanding of why there is a higher number of relinquished babies, to ensure processes meet the needs of these children improve the timeliness of the A2 indicator of a placement order being granted and a match with an adoptive family give social workers bespoke training to improve the quality of children's life story books. Team managers to complete training on how to quality assure children's life story books Create learning workshops for social workers to develop skills in writing child placement reports

Lisa Walsh

Operational Lead

Looked after children and permanence service

15 June 2021



Adoption Central England

Annual Report 2020-2021



Adoption Central England Annual Report 2020-2021

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). The service was joined by Herefordshire Council on 1 July 2019. 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 third annual report providing a summary of activity and developments within ACE that covers the 3-year period up to 31 March 2021. It can be read alongside the ACE Adoption Panel Annual Report 2020-2021.

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. ACE has been at the forefront of this development as a demonstrator site with an overarching aim to *'provide an innovative and relationship focussed 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'*.
- 2.2 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.

2.3 ACE works in close partnership with the local authorities and other services to:

- To ensure that a wider pool of prospective adopters is ready to meet children's need to be loved, nurtured, protected, and understood,
- To ensure that adopters understand, accept, and can meet children's needs and provide a secure relationship within which they can thrive,
- To increase the levels of adoption for children waiting to be adopted,
- To reduce the length of time those children wait to be adopted,
- To improve/ensure attachment and trauma informed post adoption support services to adoptive families.

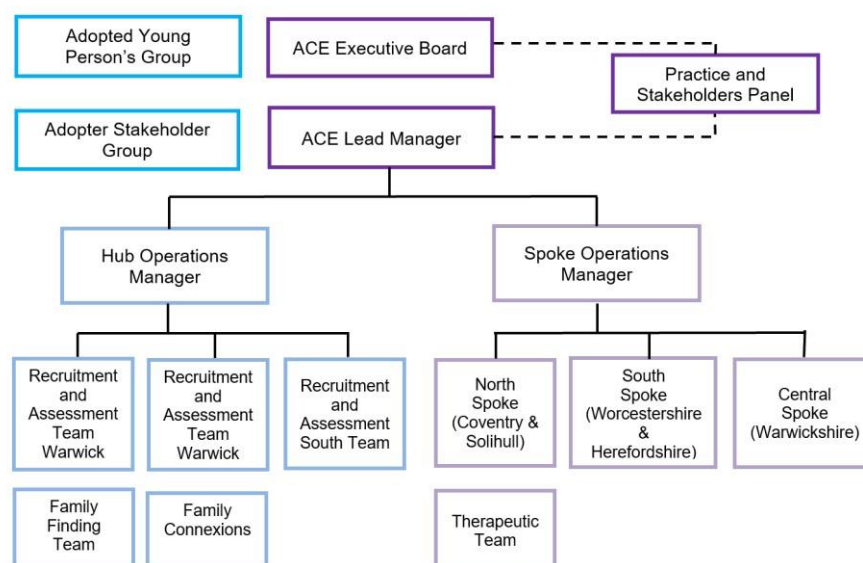
2.4 In March 2018 the ACE Executive Board supported the recommendation that ACE should become a service underpinned by **Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP)**. This approach ensures that relationships and emotional connection are at the heart of services and all aspects of the organisation are informed by DDP principles. In January 2021 ACE became the first adoption service to be DDP certified.

2.5 Since 1 November 2019 ACE has delivered the regional adoption support service for birth families – **Family Connexions**. Other services provided include non-agency (stepparent) adoption information, counselling and court assessments and birth records counselling for adopted adults.

2.6 The work of the regional adoption agency has been significantly affected by the coronavirus pandemic throughout 2020-2021 that has resulted in staff members working from home and delivering most services online. Key training including the adopter preparation groups have been transformed into 5 facilitated online learning modules. Assessing social workers have completed adopter assessments with the minimum level of home visiting and adoption panel meetings have been online, capped at three business items, held twice weekly. The families who receive services through spoke teams have had mixed experiences through the year, where some children have been more settled without the pressure of formal education, whereas other families have had considerably more stress requiring flexible social work support in response to their needs through the online medium. ACE was successful in putting into place additional support services funded through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund during summer 2020, that specially met the needs of adopters including the single adopters support service and an expansion of the couples counselling service.

3. Staffing

3.1 The ACE structure is as follows:



3.2 ACE delivers services through a hub and spoke model. The hub activities are concerned with the recruitment, preparation, and assessment of prospective adopters. Staff introduce and model for prospective adopters' information about attachment and developmental trauma and the key DDP principles. The DDP attitude of PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy) is demonstrated throughout this process. 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. In this part of the service there is a dedicated team of family finders who secure adoption placements for children with specific needs.

3.3 The spokes are located within each local authority area. They offer a duty service, undertake assessments of need for adoption support, process and commission therapeutic services through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, work directly with families who require social work services, provide birth records counselling to adult adoptees and complete non-agency adoption assessments for the court. Staff work in ways that focus on maintaining openness with families and enhancing family relationships, safety, and connection. Staff work flexibly across the region and some hub social workers may be based in a spoke where this is appropriate.

3.4 As on 31 March 2021 there are **93** people working in ACE as follows:

ACE Managers	9.03 FTE
Hub social workers	16.68 FTE
Family Finding Team - social workers	2.81 FTE

Family Connexions – social workers	3.13 FTE + 0.81 social care worker
Spoke social workers	20.97 FTE
Therapeutic Team – social workers	2.6 FTE
Family support workers supporting the Spokes	2.43 FTE
Business support and related roles	14.28 FTE
Adoption Panel Advisors – social workers	1.5 FTE

3.5 The service has three small specialist teams:

The **Family Connexions Service** has 3.13 FTE social workers and 0.81 FTE family support worker in three sites across the region. The aim of the service is to offer support and information to significant birth family members when adoption has been formally identified as the plan for the child.

The **Therapeutic Team** delivers therapeutic interventions to families who have high levels of assessed needs, on an individual or group work basis. The workers frequently work alongside other social workers either within ACE or from the local authorities. During 2020-2021 the team adapted their training and other services to deliver an online service and interventions to families.

The **Family Finding Team** is a small group of ACE social workers who work very closely with the child's allocated social workers in efforts to secure adoption for children with specific needs.

3.6 ACE has two adoption social workers employed on a sessional basis who can support the service during periods of high workload and to cover maternity leave.

3.7 The business support functions are supported by a part time data analyst who works closely with the local authorities, and an Adoption Support Fund finance officer who processes all the financial transactions that underpin the provision of therapeutic interventions to adoptive families across the region. Also, since February 2021 the **Contracts Manager** has been in post who supports the arrangements for the **Framework Agreement for Therapeutic Interventions**.

3.8 In the past year the ACE Executive Board has approved the following additional posts:

- Family Connexions - increase social worker capacity by 15 hours, plus an additional 0.5 FSW role in the south.
- 2 FTE Hub SWs added to establishment.

- Part time clinical psychologist, 2-year pilot, funded through ACE reserves.

3.9 In line with ACE aspirations to become a DDP certified service the 80% target has been set for ACE social workers to be trained at DDP Level 1. As on 31 March 2021, 65 social work and related staff had DDP level 1 training (92%). Opportunities exist for some staff to attend DDP level 2 training and to achieve their DDP practicum that will enable them to confidently support their colleagues in the service as it maintains its DDP focus. Further training at level 1 has been commissioned to accommodate the turnover and increase in staff to the service.

4. ACE Performance

4.1 The performance of ACE against the ACE Annual Report 2019-2020 is reported in Appendix 1.

4.2 The performance of the regional adoption service needs to be seen in the context of the overall numbers of children who are coming forward with a plan for adoption. In 2020/21 there was a *decrease* in the number of children with an adoption decision. Whilst there is variation between the local authorities in 2020–2021, **124** children had an adoption decision compared with 144 in 2019-2020.

4.3 Positively of the children with adoption plans 83% (100) have been matched with ACE approved adoptive parents with 29 children, including 9 sibling groups, being placed on an interagency basis where a family has been approved by another adoption agency. This is a slight reduction on the previous year but is consistent with the 3-year average performance for the service.

4.4 At 31.3.2021, 61 children were identified as waiting to be formally matched with adoptive parents that includes 25 single children, 12 sibling groups of two children and 4 sibling groups of three children. Of these children 32 had their adoption panel matching date booked leaving **29** children for whom active family finding continues.

4.5 At the same time ACE had **65** approved adoption households – many would have been provisionally earmarked for matching with ACE children. ACE has a subscription to Linkmaker – a national database that allows approved adopters to consider children from other areas and vice versa.

4.6 To increase potential placement opportunities, during the past year ACE has been developing a collaboration with regional adoption agencies and voluntary adoption agencies in the Midlands forming the **Midlands Together**

Collaboration. The remit of this collaboration is to place more children in the region thereby strengthening partnership working, improving placement timescales, and easing the arrangements for adoption support in the long term.

- 4.7 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,
 - Interagency placements made and number of placement disruptions.
- 4.8 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 as follows:

Measure	Performance 2020 - 2021	3-year average
To place 90% of ACE children with ACE approved adopters.	83%	85%
To move children more quickly to early permanence through the development of fostering for adoption (FfA).	19 placements = 17%	24
To recruit 40 households who are able to meet the needs of older children, sibling groups and harder to place children including fostering for adoption.	54 households (72%)	2-year average 57 households (69%)
To increase the number of households who enquire about adoption through ACE – target 660.	561	605
To approve 125 households.	75	87

To improve the assessment timescales for prospective adopters. (Note: that because of coronavirus stage 1 and stage 2 of the adopter assessment have been combined due to delays in receiving statutory reference checks.)	Average timescale 5.3 months 71% approved within 6 months	5.6 months 69% approved within 6 months
To reduce the number of children who experience an adoption placement disruption.	3 placement disruptions concerning 4 children during 2020/21	2 disruptions a year concerning 3 children per year

- 4.9 This shows that during the year of the coronavirus, ACE in partnership with the local authorities has continued to successfully place children with ACE approved adopters. Adopter approval timescales have slightly improved despite fewer adopters being approved. More families were assessed as being suitable for children in specific groups such as sibling groups, older children and foster for adoption. There were fewer fostering for adoption placements during this period, but this is possibly attributable to the effects of coronavirus on care planning and the court process. Similarly, the reduction in adopter approvals is due in part to pausing the adopter preparation process whilst the training was converted into an online format.
- 4.10 Timeliness of adoption for children is measured against national performance (scorecard) measures. This shows for **87** children adopted during 2020-2021 timeliness had improved and was below the national threshold timescale of 426 days. There was improvement against the previous year's timeliness in respect of timescale between placement order and placement (A2) with 4 local authorities performing on average below the national threshold timescale. However, due to coronavirus and the impact this has had on court processes and the length of care proceedings it is expected that timeliness will be adversely affected in 2021-2022.

	Measure	National threshold	2020-2021 ACE average	2018- 2019 2019- 2020
A 10	For children adopted in the year, average length of time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family	426 days	364 days	429 days 380 days

A 2	The average time between placement order and deciding the match to an adoptive family	121 days	172 days	173 days 199 days
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4.11 Against the key measures set for ACE the following chart provides an overview and commentary:

Area		Update
Adopter recruitment to meet children's needs	↔	550-600 adopter enquiries per year. 2020-21 75 households approved as suitable to adopt. 54 (72%) approved for FFA, B & EM, siblings.
Tracking of children to improve placement timeliness	✓	A10 indicator – entry to care to placement with adoptive family – ACE LAs are close to or below the national average of 426 days with some variation across the local authorities. A2 indicator – PO to match – performance has improved at 172 days, but is above the 121 day nationally set target.
To identify adopters at the adoption decision stage	↔	Engagement in each LA tracking processes. Monthly Matching and Tracking meetings.
Bespoke recruitment for children with complex needs	✓	Dedicated Family Finding Team allocated against 29 children on 31.3.2021.
To embed early permanence – fostering for adoption	✓	72 placements since 2018. 2020-2021 19 placements (17%)
Improve assessment and matching	✓	Improved timeliness and 83% of children across the region are placed with ACE approved adopters.
Improve adoption and special guardianship support	↔	As on 31.3.2021 376 adoptive families receiving an adoption support service. Partnership approach developed across the region for Special Guardianship support.
Upskill the workforce with specialist therapeutic training	✓	DDP certified service since January 2021. The principles of DDP are embedded throughout ACE and in all the work with prospective adopters and families.
Upskill and involve adopters in training and support	✓	Comprehensive pre and post approval training including therapeutic training programmes.
Use modern technology to improve access to services	✓	Accelerated by coronavirus – training, adopter preparation groups and adoption panel functions delivered online and direct/virtual contact with families.

4.12 In summary key performance highlights for 2020-2021:

- Embedding early permanence – fostering for adoption for children continues to be strong with local authorities demonstrating greater confidence in this option for children where rehabilitation is considered unlikely. However, this remains an ongoing area for awareness raising and training. All ACE adopters are required to consider fostering for adoption with the option to ‘opt out’.
- The number of children placed with ACE approved households remains high evidencing that ACE is successfully recruiting adoptive families for children needing placement. More prospective adopters can consider children in specific harder to place groups.
- Despite an apparent reduction in enquiries to adopt the number of households proceeding through the process increased in 2020-2021 at **107** households.
- Adopter approval timescales have slightly improved despite new ways of working being introduced due to coronavirus and impact of online working necessitating additional ‘visits’ to the applicants.
- Adoption placement disruptions were higher than the previous year but overall remain low.
- More adoptive families are receiving adoption support services through ACE, the Therapeutic Team and externally commissioned providers.

4.13 Another area of achievement has been the successful placement of children for adoption including sibling groups of brothers and sisters together. The adoption panel recommended **91** placement matches during this period concerning **111** children. This included 12 sibling groups of 2 children and 4 sibling groups of 3 children. The Executive Board has supported the placement of siblings together by endorsing a proposal to provide a ‘guaranteed settling in allowance’ for ACE adopters of sibling groups to be used flexibly within the first year of placement thereby providing a financial cushion as the household makes the necessary adjustments and changes to their lifestyle.

4.14 Social work practice has been affected by coronavirus as has the operation of the courts that has caused some delays in care planning and proceedings for children being concluded. This has impacted on placement and adoption order timescales and is likely to be a factor in the reduction of children with an adoption decision as court proceedings are protracted.

4.15 Areas for attention during 2020-2021 will be to:

- Sustain and increase adopter approvals – target 100 households.
- Increase adopter enquiry levels to previous levels – target 600 enquiries.
- Reduce the reliance on interagency adoption placements from 17% to 12% of placements.
- Reduce adoption disruptions to below 2% of placements.
- Improve adopter approval timescales.

- Continue to focus on fostering for adoption.
- Continue to attract prospective adopters from under-represented groups and diverse communities.

5. Adoption Support

- 5.1 Adoption support remains an area of importance within ACE. As on 31.3.2021 of the **376** allocated support cases, **169** families were supported at level 3/4 and **207** families at the lower level tiers 1/2 where intervention and support is primarily delivered from an external therapeutic provider.
- 5.2 The service also provides Birth Records Counselling to adopted adults and the significant number of enquiries resulted in **76** applications for counselling. The coronavirus lockdown appears to have prompted more people to re-evaluate their priorities that might explain the heightened number of requests for a service.
- 5.3 Overall there has been a decrease in non-agency adoption notifications in some area probably due to restricted access to court processes during this period.
- 5.4 However, the spokes have observed an increase in adopted young people initiating contact with birth family members through the internet. This has required a facilitated response and the introduction of a **Family Group Conferencing** approach within ACE to manage the varied perspectives of affected parties and agree ways forward.
- 5.5 Some adoptive families have experienced greater challenges with their children during the period of lockdown and anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a rise in adopted young people being admitted into care. ACE developed additional services for families during the period of lockdown that included:
 - Educational support delivered through several webinars by educational psychologist including 30 individual consultations,
 - 50 memberships for Adoption UK,
 - Single Adopters – enhanced services providing support,
 - Couples Counselling – extension of an existing service,
 - Introduction to NVR programme,
 - Therapeutic Team – time limited additional capacity.
- 5.6 Applications to the national Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund have remained high. During 2020- 2021 **443** applications were made securing **£1,223,852** for therapeutic interventions. 335 families (495 children) benefitted. A further **£27,806** funded therapeutic group interventions.

5.7 ACE has also implemented the **Framework Agreement for Therapeutic Providers** during this period that provides added level of scrutiny and assurance to the work commissioned through ACE and delivered to adoptive families. The Framework is to be reopened in June 2021 to extend further the number of providers and choice for families

5.8 The types of support most frequently requested by adoptive families included:

- To help their children settle and build security 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, how to parent therapeutically and work on safety in relationships.

5.9 The Therapeutic Team adapted the following interventions during 2020-2021:

- Therapeutic and Sensory Based Parenting course was re-written and adapted to go online. 5 courses were delivered.
- Non-Violence Resistance (NVR) course was adapted for online delivery and ran once over an 8 week period. This was supplemented by evening support groups.

The team also provided P-CAP, NVR and early intervention support to families on a one to one basis.

5.10 The **Adopters Newsletter** has been produced on a quarterly basis and sent to over 700 households. ACE managers meet with the Adopters Stakeholder Group at quarterly intervals.

6. Services to birth relatives – Family Connexions

6.1 Family Connexions is a relatively new addition to the range of services offered through ACE and birth family members are supported in the following ways:

- 1 to 1 emotional and relational support, offering opportunities to have their experience accepted, understood and to have access to advice during and after the adoption process.
- An explanation of the adoption process.
- Support with the practical aspects of the adoption process, including support with letterbox contact and/or meeting with adopters. Practical guidance is combined with support around emotional impact.
- Advice regarding future life planning including signposting to other universal support services.
- Group sessions for birth parents and extended family members across the ACE region.

- Support with any direct contact or reunification plans requested by the adopted child and their adoptive parents.

6.2 The service is well embedded as at year end 2020-2021 the following number of referrals was received representative of the 5 local authority areas:

Local authority	No. of referrals	No. of families receiving a service on 31.3.2021
Coventry	99	82
Solihull	14	11
Warwickshire	40	102
Worcestershire	55	46
Herefordshire	54	41
Total	262	282

7. Quality assurance and inspection

7.1 ACE has a range of quality assurance arrangements in place that includes:

- Case file auditing by managers introduced February 2021.
- Learning from complaints and representations.
- Robust staff recruiting practices including induction.
- Regular supervision and annual appraisal of all staff.
- Opportunities for staff exit interviews.
- Quarterly performance management reports presented to the ACE Executive Board.
- Feedback to ACE and local authorities on the quality of reports presented to the adoption panel - see Adoption Panel Annual Report.
- Framework Agreement for external providers delivering therapeutic services to adoptive families.
- User feedback through the Adopters Stakeholder Group, training events, adoption panel etc.
- Managerial oversight of reports and countersigning.
- Feedback from local authority partners and other stakeholders through various forums such as the Practice and Stakeholders Group.
- Follow up of all adopter enquirers who do not proceed through the process.
- Timescales for key activities in the adopter journey from enquiry to approval.
- Observed practices.
- The Adoption Support Fund Review Panel.
- Regular reviews of the DDP Action Plan including staff surveys.

7.2 These processes have assured that a quality service is provided, evidenced as follows:

- The Adoption Panel gave adopter assessment reports an average rating of 3.98 out of 5 and no reports required improvement. The majority rated good to outstanding.
- The Executive Board is satisfied with the quarterly performance reports and has agreed suggested changes in format – the local authorities use the data to promote performance improvement within their own areas and contribute to the **Annual Challenge Event** facilitated by ACE.
- There continues to be active and positive contributions from a range of stakeholders and partners invariably through quarterly meetings that overall contribute to robust adoption practices and adherence to the key principles that underpin partnership working.
- The **Adoption Support Fund Review Panel** is now firmly embedded and an example of best practice. The multiagency panel reviews complex adoption families where a fourth or subsequent application to the Adoption Support Fund, for therapeutic intervention, is being requested.

7.3 There have been no OFSTED inspections during this period. The Warwickshire inspection was concluded midway due to the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020.

7.4 The next annual survey to adopters is planned for June 2021. The actions arising from the January 2020 survey were:

To offer more training and support about life story books and talking to children about adoption.	Progressing. Discussions are in progress about offering a 'surgery' type service for adopters.
To have a support strategy in place for adopters who have teens.	Completed. Various services have been developed including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopting Teens training • Maintaining Relationships support through family group conferencing approach re: unsolicited contact • Support via Adopted Young Person's Support Group.
To improve communication about services, support and training using	Completed.

the full range of communication e.g. website, Facebook, newsletters.	Separate information about training is sent via email, Facebook and is include in the newsletter.
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8. Practice Improvements

- 8.1 ACE has extended the range of practice guidance developed and shared with local authority teams. These serve to complement existing procedures and outline approaches to adoption work based on current best practice and research.
- 8.2 Practice guidance produced in this period has been:
- 'Relinquished Babies' that clarifies roles, responsibilities and requirements
 - Guidance for Completion of the Adoption Placement Report
 - Guidance for Child Permanence Report (CPR) for ADM best interest decision matching and placement.
- 8.3 The commissioned training on behalf of the local authorities on **Contact in Adoption** has been delivered on a further occasion to local authority staff on 29 March 2021 and to adoptive parents in lieu of their annual event on 27 January 2021. This is an area for further work in collaboration with the local authorities, requiring a practice shift. Tools have been developed to assist the risk assessment and contact decision-making processes.
- 8.4 ACE has continued work on the **PIF Assessment and Matching Project** that has latterly been led by Barnardo's. The **Adopter Assessment Report** (AAR) has been fully adopted within ACE that is a more accessible format, informed by DDP practice principles that allows the prospective adoptive parents to have a stronger voice within the overall context of the report.
- 8.5 Following the death of George Floyd ACE set up a **Black Lives Conversation Group** that has produced a plan focusing on awareness raising, personal learning and service improvements. ACE has produced diversity statements that will continue to be widely publicised:

Diversity and Inclusion

As an organisation ACE will be inclusive, respecting diversity of individual and family experiences. We will be culturally sensitive and will take time to listen and understand individual and family needs so that we can respond appropriately and sensitively.

Respecting colleagues

We will have a supportive and inclusive work environment. We recognise that the different life experiences of individuals may have resulted in them

experiencing inequalities. Through our working relationships we will value and respect each other's lived experiences in order to understand differences and their impact. We will explore opportunities to be open with each other so that individuals can feel respected, valued and safe.

9. Disruptions

- 9.1 An adoption disruption is where the child has been matched and placed with adoptive parents and where the placement did not proceed to the making of an adoption order. During this period there were 3 adoption disruptions concerning 4 children. One was an interagency placement and 2 were ACE adopters.
- 9.2 Areas of good practice and effective interagency working were noted, however the most significant learning for the agencies was in the following areas:
- Social workers and fostering social workers to attend 'Moving children to adoption' training.
 - Foster carers to attend 'Transitions Training'.
 - Foster carers and adopters have clarity about the nature of their ongoing relationship post placement.
 - Adopter preparation and assessment process to explore (i) intuitiveness towards children (ii) understanding management of regressive behaviours and (iii) the reality of parenting.
 - Adoptive parents have the support of other adoptive parents (buddying and Space2Talk) as required.
 - The transition process ensures adoptive parents have the time to reflect as individuals and a couple about whether the proposed placement is right for both.
 - Social workers ensure that the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) and medical reports are detailed and updated and adoption panel matching paperwork highlights potential regressive behaviour, to clarify any potential additional needs/concerning behaviours and support available.
 - Adoptive parents have access to clinical psychological advice and support in understanding the child's behaviour.
 - To explore the scope to review the format and content of the CPR to better outline the child's needs and impact of past experiences.

10. Complaints, compliments and representations

- 10.1 There was one complaint during this period.

The issues were that Mr & Mrs A were concerned about the lack of information and time taken following the decision not to accept their Registration of Interest (ROI).

- 10.2 The outcome was that 10 areas were investigated, 2 were upheld and one partially upheld. An apology was sent on behalf of the service for their poor

experience. The findings from the complaint were shared with key managers in the service.

11. Staff Development and Support

11.1 The Annual Workforce Development Plan for this period has primarily focused on:

- DDP level 1 training for 24 staff.
- Assessment skills and tools for completing adopter assessment adopter reports.
- MOSAIC – ACE client record system.

11.2 Individual staff members have had access to other training and group supervision sessions are encouraged. Teams and individuals also have regular consultation with a DDP Consultant to focus on incorporating DDP into practice.

12. Overall impact and future plans

12.1 ACE can demonstrate the progress it has made against the 10 areas for improvement outlined above.

12.2 As an established service in the first 3 years of operation ACE has:

- Established its brand identity.
- Achieved certification as a DDP service.
- Put in place policies and procedures and kept these under review.
- Increased the number of children placed for adoption with indications of improved timeliness.
- Embedded early permanence – fostering for adoption.
- 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 including an annual survey.
- 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.

12.3 The service has been delivered within budget and consequently agreement has been given to increased staffing (for a time limited period) and for a second year a financial dividend is to be returned to the local authorities.

12.4 Key areas for development in 2021-2022 are:

Service level plans

- To launch the updated ACE website incorporating podcasts illustrating different areas of the service and experiences and reflecting the ACE ethos.
- To act on the findings of file auditing processes across the service.
- To use recruitment opportunities to establish a more diverse workforce if possible.
- To update the Equality Impact Assessments.
- To appoint a clinical psychologist to the service.
- To progress the BLM action plan.
- To disseminate our learning about the DDP certification process.
- To explore opportunities for adoptive parents to be recruited as trainers within the service.
- To implement measures to gain the views of children and young people about the services received.
- To support measures that change the approach to contact in adoption including Practice Guidance on Contact and to give consideration to skills based training on assessing and implementing contact plans for social workers.

Recruitment plans

- To implement the Adopter Recruitment Sufficiency Plan looking at recruitment from diverse communities, for sibling groups and children with health/developmental needs. To receive 600 enquiries about adoption.
- To recruit 100 household and improve adopter approval timescales.
- To continue to work with the local authorities in reducing delay in placing children from the point that the placement order has been granted by the court.
- To further increase and embed fostering for adoption setting targets for both ACE and local authorities.
- To extend placement choice for children by working with regional partners through the Midlands Together Collaboration.
- To reduce reliance on interagency placements to 12%.

Support plans

- To offer a surgery style service to adoptive parents about 'talking' about adoption and life story books.
- To publish the updated Adoption Support Offer.
- To reduce adoption disruption to below 2% of placements.
- To put in place support through the provision of respite/day care support drawing upon the potential of family and friends.
- To act on the findings of the ACE Annual Adopter Survey.

- To draw together and produce and publish the ACE training programme for adopters that will include a range of training opportunities including webinars and podcasts e.g. Principles of PACE.
- Practices around assessment, support and services where FAS is or maybe evident are enhanced including information for adoptive parents.
- In partnership with other services, to explore how support for families where mental health issues feature can be improved.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1 The most significant achievements during the past year have been the DDP certification and the resilience and commitment of the staff group to continue to provide service whilst coronavirus restrictions have been in place.
- 13.2 This has necessitated a significant amount of ACE work to be adapted for an online format including the adopter preparation and other training materials. Risk assessments have been introduced and staff have needed to orientate themselves to completing assessments online moving towards a hybrid approach when authorised to do so.
- 13.3 Online team and other meetings have been positively received and as the country moves through the stages of 'unlocking' the service is enthusiastic about the possibility of hybrid and agile working in future.
- 13.4 On a final note the service has worked together in response to the Black Lives Matter agenda and has encouraged personal, team and service reflections. ACE will continue to create an inclusive work environment and a service that is welcoming to all sections of the community, and that ensures all children have an equal opportunity of being securely placed with adoptive parents supported in raising them in a multi-cultural society.

Brenda Vincent - Lead Manager
Adoption Central England

Report against the Service Development and Improvement areas for 2019 -2020

Actions	Update
For DDP principles to be implemented in all aspects of the organisation and for this to meet certification requirements.	Completed ACE successfully became a DDP certified service in January 2021 presenting sufficient evidence of how the service had applied DDP principles in all areas of practice.
To review the ACE website incorporating podcasts illustrating different areas of the service and experiences and reflecting our ethos.	Ongoing A project group is overseeing this development that includes a review of other adoption websites and the production of a website specification. Following consultation with the Adopters Stakeholder Group the updated website should be launched by September 2021.
To update quality assurance arrangements embedding file auditing processes across the service.	Completed ACE now has in place arrangements for case file auditing alongside other quality assurance measures including the annual survey to adopters, reports from adoption panel and countersigning requirements.
To support the work arising through the PIF Assessment and Matching project.	Completed This Government funded project resulted in the revised format for the adopter assessment report (AAR) that has been exclusively used in ACE for the past year. Working with the voluntary sector organisations – Barnardo's and Adoption Focus - arrangements are being concluded for Barnardo's to be the license holder and responsible agency for the AAR with ongoing support from ACE.
To use recruitment opportunities to establish a more diverse workforce if possible.	Ongoing Whilst the ACE workforce is representative of workers at all levels from black and minority ethnic groups the service has not attracted male applicants to social work positions to date. However, adoption panel has a more representative membership.

To implement the Adopter Recruitment Sufficiency Plan relating to the recruitment of adopters and as part of this to increase the number of families approved to adopt from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.	Completed ACE approved 75 households during this period and 10 (13%) were representative of the black, Asian and ethnic minority groups. A further 3 households were attracted to ACE through the national adoption recruitment campaign that focused on the Midlands with 2 of these proceeding to stage 2 adopter assessment.
Work with the local authorities to reduce delay in placing children from the point that the placement order has been granted by the court.	Ongoing This is through case tracking meetings and monthly arrangements with each local authority.
Improve adopter approval timescales.	Ongoing The average approval timescale for adoptive parents is similar to previous years at 5.6 months, despite the impact of coronavirus and the new ways of working arising from this. This has been monitored by the ACE Executive Board and an examination of 36 cases showed coronavirus has clearly had some impact on timescales as additional online assessment sessions were required alongside delays in medical references being received. In a further 14 cases ACE staffing, annual leave and holiday periods affected timescales.
To increase and embed fostering for adoption setting targets for both ACE and local authorities.	Ongoing A target of 20% was set and achievement at year end was 17% with 19 children being placed on a fostering for adoption basis during this period. The decision to place on a fostering for adoption rests with the child's local authority.
To improve communication about services, support and training using the full range of communication methods.	Completed Additional publicity is issued to adoptive families about available training courses. The delivery of training has been affected by coronavirus. The service has developed additional training programmes during 2020/2021 on 'Adopting Siblings' and 'Early Placement Days'.
To offer more training and support about life story books and talking to children about adoption.	Ongoing ACE has commissioned training for adopters and local authority social workers on ' <i>Planning and Supporting Contact for children in adoption and long term foster care: Learning from research</i> ' that highlights the important place of life story books. In addition, 2 social

	workers in ACE are currently completing the Diploma in Therapeutic Life Work that will form the basis for offering support to adoptive parents. Responsibility for life story books rests with the local authorities and their importance is raised on an ongoing basis.
To have a support strategy in place for adopters who have teens.	Completed Various services have been developed including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopting Teens training • Maintaining Relationships Support re: unsolicited contact • Support via Adopted Young Person's Support Group.
To explore opportunities to strengthen adoption support through the provision of respite/day care support.	Ongoing Funding has been secured for this development that will have 2 elements – to strengthen the support/training to the network around adopters and to provide a day care respite scheme. Implementation is planned for autumn 2021.
To put in place a Framework Agreement for therapeutic providers of adoption support services.	Completed. The Framework Agreement for Therapeutic Providers came into effect from 1 March 2021.



**Adoption
Central
England**



Report of the Adoption Panel

1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021

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Chairs' Introduction

The year 2020/2021 has been another year of growth for ACE as an agency, as well its Adoption Panel.

Following the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, a decision was made to run adoption panels online throughout the year; the online process received very good feedback from most attendees, and this is continuing. Online panels, mostly at a rate of two per week, gave the agency greater flexibility of panel slots which has helped ensure more timely matches for Coventry, Herefordshire, Warwickshire, Solihull and Worcestershire children. The unprecedented pressures of working under pandemic restrictions have to some degree resulted in a small number of panel slots being unused and therefore cancelled. The online panel processes have been continuously monitored and streamlined to offer continuity and same level of scrutiny across panels; the processes continue to be revised by the Panel Advisers, following extensive feedback from all stakeholders.

Despite the amendments to the adoption regulations in Spring 2020 allowing the quoracy of only 3 Panel members, ACE continued to run panels with the pre-Covid quoracy of 5, a testament to the agency's strong belief in Panel's quality assurance role. Panels running online have helped to maintain the quoracy of the agency's geographically spread central list, covering five local authorities.

Panel Chairs were delighted the agency had deservedly achieved its Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) accreditation earlier in 2021, a result of much work and dedication on all levels. From a Panel perspective, the Panel Chairs, supported by the Panel Advisers and Administrators, are continuing to embed the core values of DDP into everyday Panel practice.

Panel Chairs had an opportunity to join in reflective supervision with clinical psychologist and DDP consultant, Dr Billy Smythe, in February 2021, which proved very productive and is set to become a twice-yearly meeting; this further evidences the thread of DDP in the work of Panel.

As ACE has become more established as a Regional Adoption Agency in its third year, the Panel Chairs welcomed the opportunity of an online meeting with ACE team managers in

December 2020 to reflect on challenges that the pandemic brought about that affected assessment, approval, matching as well as Panel. The quarterly meetings between the Chairs and the Agency Decision Maker /Lead Manager of ACE have continued.

A new format assessment tool was adopted across ACE - the Adopter Assessment Report (AAR), with its emphasis on professional analysis of the applicants' capacity to therapeutically parent children who have experienced loss and trauma.

The employment of a part-time Panel Adviser, to co-work with the existing full-time Panel Adviser, in April 2020 has proved to be a positive move. This also enabled the agency to continue running two panels per week as well as allowed the Panel Advisers to focus on developing the central list by offering a plethora of 'Bitesize' training workshops, run online, on subjects ranging from DDP, adoption support, fostering for adoption, adopters' preparation training, to contact in adoption. These were very well received by Panel members.

Autumn 2020 also saw the employment of a part time Panel Administrator, to support the current full-time Panel Administrator.

Panel Chairs have also welcomed a number of new Panel members to the central list, who include an adopted person and experienced adopters, as well as Panel members from the background of education and social work.

Panel Chairs were saddened at the departure of Eamon Moran, who has Chaired Panels since ACE started but were eager to welcome Stuart Watkins to the role. Stuart brings many years of social work experience on senior levels to the role.

Lastly, it has been noted that the quality of the paperwork coming from the local authorities has significantly improved in most cases, following feedback from Panel as well as support from the agency.

The Panel Chairs look forward to another busy year at Adoption Panel.



Margaret Powell

Panel Chair

on behalf of the Chairs' group: Avriel Reader, Heather Tobin and Stuart Watkins

Context

All adoption agencies are required by law¹ to have an adoption panel, the key role of which is to provide independent scrutiny of the proposals presented by an adoption agency. The panel is asked to determine whether all the issues have been appropriately clarified and whether the proposal is sound, and to make a recommendation to an Agency Decision Maker (ADM) accordingly.

The proposals placed before the Adoption Panel are

- **The suitability of applicants to become adoptive parents, as presented in the Adopter Assessment Report (AAR)**
- **The match between a child or children and approved adopters, as presented in the Adoption Placement Report (APR) with the Adopter Assessment Report (AAR) and Child's Permanence Report (CPR)**
- **The plan that a relinquished child be adopted, as presented in the Child's Permanence Report (CPR)**

The Panel will also consider the renewed approval or termination of approval for adopters who have not been matched with a child after 3 years; and a 'Brief Report', ie the case made by the agency that an applicant or applicants is/are *not* suitable to adopt.

Adoption Panels have the discretion to offer advice to the relevant agency about:

- The approval range for prospective adopters (ie the number, age range and needs of a child or children to be matched)
- The preparation of applicants for Fostering for Adoption
- The arrangements the adoption agency/local authority proposes to make for allowing any person contact with the child

The Government's programme for the regionalisation of adoption services that heralded the creation of Adoption Central England (ACE) has, since February 2018, brought together the work of the adoption panels of Worcestershire County Council, Warwickshire

¹ Principally, the Adoption and Children ACT 2002; Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005; Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (Amendment) Regulations 2011; Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013; Draft 2014 Statutory Guidance; National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2011 and 2014.

County Council, Coventry City Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council into one single panel.

With Herefordshire Council joining ACE in July 2019, the ACE Adoption Panel now considers adoption proposals for children from five local authorities, together with applications made to ACE from individuals and couples, residing in or close to those local authorities, who wish to adopt a child or children.

This is the third full year report of the ACE Adoption Panel since it became a single panel on 1 April 2018.

Developments in 2020-21

1. Covid-19 pandemic and Online Panel meetings

A week before the end of the last reporting period, the Government's response to the Coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools and workplaces, with severe restrictions on the freedom of people to meet in groups introduced. A national 'lockdown' commenced on 23 March 2020, with the expectation that restrictions on gatherings of people would continue at some level for many months to come.

The impact on the work of the agency as a whole of this unprecedented development in national life was considerable, as new ways to carry out key functions – the assessment of adopters, matches for children, support and training to adoptive families - had to be developed rapidly. For Panel, 'lockdown' necessitated the transfer of panel meetings from a traditional, 'boardroom' style format, to the video conferencing platform, Microsoft Teams, that had been introduced to ACE mere weeks beforehand. The meeting planned for 23 March, the day 'lockdown' began, was postponed for a week and the first online Adoption Panel meeting was held on 30 March 2020.

Adoption Panel meetings have been held virtually ever since, and have maintained a quoracy of five members, even though The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, in force between 24 April and 25 September 2020, made provision for a reduced quoracy of three members. At the time of writing, Adoption Panel meetings are held on Microsoft Teams on Monday and Thursday mornings, with a maximum of three agenda items per meeting. Feedback from prospective adopters, social workers, agencies and Panel members in the main strongly supports the continuation of online Adoption Panel meetings. While the ACE Executive Board representing the five local authorities, has endorsed the efficacy, and continued use of video conferencing for the Panel meeting, it is a practice that ACE will also keep under review.

2. DDP accreditation

ACE was awarded Organisational Certification by the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) Institute on 6 January 2020. Betty Brouwer, Chair of the DDPI Board wrote:

The documents that we received gave such compelling evidence of how DDP has been woven into every aspect of the agency as well as clearly articulated plan for moving forward. Congratulations to you and your dedicated staff who have done such incredible work. We are thrilled that your organization has shown such a commitment.

Evidence included in the agency's submission included a reflection on how the Adoption Panel demonstrated the principles of DDP in the way it considered the match for adoption of a four year-old child whose early experiences, health needs and care plan had resulted in the child having no primary attachment figure for a significant period. The discussion of this case in ACE's portfolio of evidence noted the Panel's challenge to social workers to be mindful of the child's ongoing attachment needs and to be proactive in supporting the child's adopter in their therapeutic parenting of this child.

The evidence submitted from Panel also acknowledged Panel Chairs and Advisers' work in encouraging an attitude of 'curiosity' – a key dimension of DDP in its capacity to open up discussion in a non-threatening way. Panel members are encouraged to

phrase questions to both prospective adopters and social workers in ways that support self-regulation, reduce anxiety and elicit fuller responses.

Panel members' growing understanding of DDP was evidenced too in the example of an application to adopt from a couple whose grasp of therapeutic parenting was lacking. This is complemented by a feedback form completed by each Panel member before the Panel meeting in which the member evaluates the evidence of DDP learning and practice presented in the adopter assessment.

3. New Adopter Assessment Report

All Adopter Assessment Reports evidencing suitability to adopt and submitted to Panel in 2020-21 have been presented using a new template format, the product of a Practice Improvement Fund project funded by the Department of Education. Panel members have commented on the improved flow and readability of the format, noting that its arrangement into three sections - Factual, Assessment, Confidential - facilitates the comprehensive gathering of information. The assessment section mirrors the sequence found to be helpful in life story books, ie beginning in the 'here and now', reflecting on the past and looking to the future, and Panel members have fed back to the agency that this helps focus their attention on the matter in hand, ie the suitability of applicants to become adoptive parents. Prospective adopters are invited to reflect in their own words on their journey in the form of a personal statement, while the social worker's reflection on the assessment process is also a valuable addition to the report. It has become standard practice once more to include preparation course trainer feedback in the report, as well as evidence that Fostering for Adoption has been thoroughly explored with applicants, even where they subsequently decide not to include this in their offer.

In collaboration with Barnardo's and Adoption Focus, ACE is in the process of licensing the template for wider use by adoption agencies, while continually keeping under review how the report should reflect developments in practice and thinking. The Panel looks forward to reading evidence of more in-depth discussions with prospective adopters around raising adopted children in a diverse society, as well as the template's formal launch as a fully licensed and reviewed assessment tool.

4. Panel Team

Katie Nabbs joined the Panel team as a part-time Panel Adviser in April 2020 and has taken on oversight of the Central List, managing Panel member recruitment, induction, and appraisals. Kate Cowell continues as a full-time Panel Adviser, with oversight of the quality assurance processes and reporting. The additional Panel Adviser hours have allowed time for the advisers to develop Panel member training opportunities, for the refinement of Panel procedures, for Katie's involvement with the ACE Black Lives Matters working group, and for Kate's temporary secondment to the adoption agency advice role for Solihull MBC and Herefordshire Council.

Full-time Panel Administrator Claire Duncombe has continued to lead on the administration and minuting of Panel meetings, the Panel Newsletter, and expenses, and was joined in December 2020 by part-time Panel Administrator Jacquie Keir. Jacquie assists with the preparation and minuting of Panel meetings.

5. Extended training opportunities for Panel members

As ACE has embraced the possibilities of virtual platforms for training, the Panel Advisers have created a series of short online workshops specifically designed to help Panel members explore adoption themes relevant to their role: see page 17.

6. Panel members' Newsletter

A Newsletter for Panel members was distributed in August and December 2020 and well-received as a way of introducing new Panel members to the team, signposting members to relevant articles and sharing news from the agency. It is planned to make the newsletter a quarterly feature.

Review of priorities, 2020-21

<p>1. To actively promote diversity in the Central List, with particular emphasis on recruiting more male Panel members and members who can offer a perspective of BAME and LGBTQ+ communities as people from those communities are impacted by adoption.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment for Panel members within these underrepresented groups is on-going. There has been a positive response to in-house recruitment campaigns within both ACE Adopters' Newsletter and ACE Panel Members' Newsletter from people from these groups who wish to apply.
<p>2. Related to 1, to help develop Panel members' understanding of, and ability to explore the full range of diversity-related issues that can arise in adoption proposals, being aware of how unconscious bias, prejudice and ignorance can affect decision-making on a personal and structural level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel Adviser has been part of the ACE Black Lives Matter agency-wide working group, ensuring that Panel is represented in all discussions concerning diversity and inclusion across the service. • Panel has completed relevant tasks on the ACE BLM Action Plan, including the delivery of Unconscious Bias training. • Bitesize workshop on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion planned for June 2021 as well as future training session on LGBTQIA+ for Panel members. • The Panel member appraisal process has been adapted to incorporate more time for reflection.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel Advisers attended training on Culturally Sensitive Assessment.
3. To address the constructive criticisms provided by social workers and applicants about the Panel experience, particularly those relating to inconsistent practice between Panel Chairs, time-keeping, the relevance and clarity of questions and the way in which they are asked, the tone and direction of Panel advice, Panel's welcome and respectfulness, and members' careful analysis of reports to avoid unnecessary repetition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback processes show improved time-keeping and an increase in the levels of social worker and adopter satisfaction with the relevance of questions asked at Panel, as well as the virtual format now used. The response rate regarding social worker feedback on the Panel process remains low: this is an ongoing challenge (see Priorities for 2021-22)
4. To further develop Panel members' assimilation of Dyadic Developmental Practice as the approach underpinning Adoption Central England's practice, particularly in post-adoption support. This will be achieved in part by the recruitment of social work members from the ACE spokes, ie professionals with practice experience of DDP as a therapeutic approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online DDP Workshops held on 30 July 2020 and 22 April 2021. DDP-informed supervision for Panel Chairs held on 25 February 2021, with agreement to hold twice-yearly sessions. In-person Panel member event, to include DDP reflective session, planned for 19 July 2021(Covid restrictions permitting). Panel members increasingly comment on evidence of DDP in assessments and support plans. Efforts to recruit post-adoption/DDP level 2 specialist to Panel delayed by workload pressures during pandemic
5. To recruit social workers with specialist knowledge of fostering to better equip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Panel Chair, Stuart Watkins, previously managed a fostering

<p>Panels for more informed scrutiny of adoption proposals that involve foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care. This follows the recommendations of a Warwickshire Serious Case Review involving foster carers who, pre-ACE, adopted and then harmed a child. [This excludes Fostering for Adoption cases in which approved adopters are temporarily approved to foster.]</p>	<p>service and currently sits as independent Chair of an Independent Fostering Agency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewed efforts to recruit fostering social workers to the Central List will continue in 2021-22.
<p>6. To invest in Panel members' personal growth and enjoyment of the role, recognising their generous commitment of time and care to children, adopters and ACE. With greater capacity in the Panel team as a second Panel Adviser is appointed, this will be achieved through a review of how Panel members are recruited, inducted and supported in their roles, leading to a development plan.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel member appraisals restructured to allow time for reflective session with both Panel Advisers, with written feedback provided by Panel Chairs. • Potential of Panel member support group being explored to allow newer Panel members to gain peer support. • An online resource library for Panel members to enhance their knowledge is now well-established with a wide range of articles and guidance. • In-person meetings are planned, to enable Panel members to meet and connect with each other and the ACE Panel team. These meetings will offer opportunities for reflection to help Panel members to make better sense of their role and the recommendations they make.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel Advisers offer/availability for discussion with individual Panel members pre or post Panel with regards to cases or specific issues.
7. Related to 3, to develop more responsive training opportunities for Panel members beyond the mandatory annual training day, through the creative use of spare slots at Panel meetings and virtual training events throughout the year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel member training programme significantly expanded to embrace online learning through a series of 'bitesize' (i.e. 60-90 minute) sessions. Panel members also offered occasional online training through Permanence West Midlands, while opportunities for relevant training provided in-house by ACE's host local authority are also to be explored. Panel Members asked in appraisal about specific training they would like to attend for their own learning and development.
8. To create and use opportunities to work in partnership with social work colleagues from ACE and its constituent local authorities, in order to understand each other's contributions, strengths and challenges in the shared quest to provide loving, safe and permanent families for vulnerable children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quarterly meetings between ACE hub managers and Panel Advisers now established. Agency advice to ADM role now offered to four of the five local authorities. Improved links with named local authority managers (eg one of whom delivered training on care planning) Quarterly meetings between Chairs and ADM at ACE well-established, with a new occasional meeting between hub managers and Chairs also offered.

<p>9. To find ways to keep the child and their welfare at the heart of the Adoption Panel's activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing: further exploration of a 'child's question' in panel meetings will be undertaken once the agency's groupwork with adopted children and young people resumes post-Covid.
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Central List

The Adoption Agencies Statutory Guidance requires that each adoption agency must maintain a 'central 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.

The central list membership stands at 36 active members – ie those who have attended at least one Panel during the reporting period - as on 31 March 2021 (see Appendix A).

ACE said goodbye to Panel Chair [Eamon Moran](#) who stepped down from the role on 21 December 2020 to release more time to concentrate on his challenging role as a foster carer for Gloucestershire Council. Including meetings for Warwickshire's Adoption Service before the creation of ACE, Eamon Chaired 107 Panels in total, always with calm, measured authority, and great wisdom.

Eamon's successor on the team of Panel Chairs is [Stuart Watkins](#). A social worker of 32 years, Stuart's last role before retirement was that of Adoption and Fostering Service Manager for Worcestershire County Council. During his time at Worcestershire, Stuart had management involvement with the DDP-based therapeutic service provided to adoptive and foster families. Still very much a registered and committed social worker, Stuart became a member of Herefordshire's Adoption Panel, transferring to ACE in July 2019, and is also a Panel member at two Independent Fostering Agencies and a trustee at the adoption and fostering charity, Home for Good. He also holds safeguarding responsibilities at a Food Bank and the Methodist Church circuit. Stuart brings a wealth of professional experience to the role, and a warm, inclusive approach to Chairing.

Membership

ACE has welcomed 4 new members of Panel:

- [Catherine Lloyd](#) brings her personal experience as an adopted person to the Panel, together with extensive leadership experience in education, social care and mental health settings. She has worked in direct and advocacy roles with Looked After Children and in post-adoption support and was a member of the Adoption Panel at Oxfordshire County Council. She is a member of the Adopt Thames Valley board where she represents adopted adults.
- [Caroline Stirk](#) has joined the ACE Panel as a social work representative and brings experience gained in a Child Protection Team, as a family finder and assessing social worker, and more recently as a social worker supporting birth parents. Caroline is an adoptive parent to two children.
- [Natalie Baldwin](#) is a social worker with another regional adoption agency. Natalie joins Panel as a social work member, with a wealth of adoption experience, having worked in adoption since 2017 in the role of assessing social worker as well as permanency advisor.
- [Patrick Fox](#) has also joined in the role of independent Panel member. Paddy is a social worker, currently working in a children's complex health commissioning service in Gloucestershire Council. Paddy also brings his personal experience of being an adopted person to Panel.

The representation of males on Panel doubled (from four to eight) since the last report, although from the list of 36 this is still low. Adopted people are also better represented at Panel with the addition of two further new members who were adopted as children. Eleven Panel members are adoptive parents. The Central List is included as [Appendix A](#).

We continue to recruit members from less represented communities and have a commitment to ensuring that our Panel reflects the diverse communities and families with whom we work. We are actively encouraging applicants to join our Panel from Asian, African, Caribbean, and other minority ethnic backgrounds as well as male applicants, applicants with disabilities and members of the LGBTQIA+ communities.

Coronavirus restrictions meant that several Panel members – particularly foster carers, those with school-age children at home, teachers and health professionals – were obliged to withdraw from Panels they would otherwise have attended. Their places were however filled by other members whose personal circumstances allowed them to attend online Panel meetings.

There has been one resignation from the central list during 2020-21 due to health or personal circumstances.

In addition, [Lorraine Cooksey](#), who held the vice Chair role over the past year, resigned from her post at the end of April 2021 due to personal reasons but remains an active independent Panel member. Lorraine brought a wealth of experience to her role as vice Chair, both professional and personal, and we are grateful for her time and commitment. The vice Chair role remains under review.

The core group of Panel members, who are able to sit regularly, demonstrates 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 well-prepared and prompt for meetings and seek to contribute helpful feedback to the agencies. It is also appreciated that Panel members were extremely patient as new Panel processes were established and refined from the end of March 2020 onwards.

Appraisals

Annual appraisals of the Panel Chairs and vice-Chair are conducted by the ACE - Lead Manager together with a Panel Adviser: these were held in August/September 2020. Feedback was invited from Panel members and formed part of the discussion, drawing in members' reflections and observations of working with individual Chairs.

Panel member appraisals take place up to 12 months after the member's start date and in the past year have developed to incorporate alongside the Panel member's self-evaluation, written feedback from the Panel Chairs and a reflective session with one or both Panel Advisers. The appraisal seeks to bring in the guiding principles of DDP – ACE's underpinning approach – as the Panel member's experience and performance over the year and their developmental goals and interests are reviewed.

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, a total of eight Panel member appraisals took place and we continue to conduct annual appraisals as part of our priorities for the year ahead.

Panel Training

The Annual Panel Members' Training Day was held virtually on microsoft teams on 30 September 2020. 31 Panel members attended, plus senior staff from ACE.

The title for the day was '[Adoption Assessments and Unconscious Bias: Thinking about the impact of Personal, Cultural and Structural perspectives.](#)'

Led by Lawrence Kelly from Fostering Skills, the session explored different forms of bias and situations where bias may arise and key social work theory, as well 'group think', and the skills of critical thinking when reading adoption assessments. Lawrence referenced the work of David Howe ('Mentalisation, Mind-mindedness and Empathy') and Dan Hughes ('Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy') before inviting Panel members to reflect both on how they read adoption reports and perceive prospective adopters at Panel.

Overall, the event was positively received and very helpful. Participants' evaluations of the key focus of the day are summarised in Appendix B.

'Bitesize' Series

Following the move to online Panels, and embracing the additional accessibility that virtual platforms offer Panel members in terms of time and location, the Panel Advisers have developed a 'bitesize' programme of online training workshops delivering short, bespoke learning forums covering a range of adoption related topics and subject areas. They have drawn on expertise across the ACE service and partner local authorities to facilitate high quality, interactive workshops with the aim of equipping and informing Panel members with up-to-date adoption practice and policy knowledge.

The first of such workshops commenced in December 2020 and looked at the content of the ACE adopter preparation courses, mandatory for all ACE prospective adopters. The

workshop was delivered by two of ACE's senior social workers who are part of the team leading this particular training module. Due to the success of this format, four further sessions were scheduled for the following four months up until the end of April 2021, the topics for which were: [care planning](#), [fostering for adoption](#), [contact and DDP](#).

As well as proposing and planning bitesize sessions to meet identified need within the Panel member group, the Panel Advisers have encouraged Panel members to suggest specific areas they feel would be useful for their Panel role. The capacity to respond to such requests has been positive in terms of creating learning opportunities and offering a commitment to the professional development of ACE Panel members.

It is proposed that the bitesize training sessions continue to run as an integral part of the Panel training package, with sessions offered every 6-8 weeks for Panel members to dip into as they so wish.

Summary of Adoption Panel Activity

Proposals made to the Adoption Panel are presented in three key reports, which are read in advance by Panel members. The reports are:

- [The Adopter Assessment Report \(AAR\)](#) this report presents a case that the applicants are suitable to adopt and is prepared by an assessing social worker employed by ACE.
- [The Child's Permanence Report \(CPR\)](#): this report makes the case that a child's plan for permanence should be adoption. It is prepared by the child's social worker and will have informed both the decision of the local authority ADM and the family court that adoption is the only plan for the child. The CPR also serves as a life story document for the adopted child and his/her family.
- [The Adoption Placement Report \(APR\)](#): this report presents the case that a particular child should be matched with a particular family and includes a plan describing how the child and family are to be supported. This report is prepared by the child's social worker and the adoption social worker.

Panel meetings in 2020-21

	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
Number of meetings	71	44	42
Platform	Online	In Person ²	In Person
Maximum number of cases	3	5-6	6-7
Cases considered	169	185	184
Cancelled Panels	11 (13%)	6 (12%)	4 (9%)

² Online panels commenced on 30 March 2020, following the implementation of national lockdown measures on 23 March.

a) Suitability to Adopt

At meetings held between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, Panel considered 'suitable to adopt' proposals, representing 77 households.

Families applying to ACE to adopt were drawn from the agency's constituent local authorities:

Adopters' Local Authority	Number of households 2020-21	Number of households 2019-20	Number of households 2018-19
Coventry City Council	13	12	27
Herefordshire Council	3	6	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	6	7	11
Warwickshire County Council	21	33	27
Worcestershire County Council	19	31	20
Non-ACE local authority	15	7	7
	77	97	92

Of the 77 applications presented to Panel:

- **75 families** were recommended to the Agency Decision Maker as 'suitable to adopt'
- **2 families** were *not* recommended as suitable to adopt following a 'Brief Report' from the assessing social worker and agency detailing the reasons why (the 'qualifying determinations').
- All of Panel's recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker were ratified.

Of the 75 positive recommendations:

Profile of Adopters		2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
First applications		56	80	61
Subsequent applications		19	14	22
Detail				
Household	Single adopters	7	8	11
	Heterosexual couples	60	3	-
	Same-sex couples	8	-	-
Ethnicity	White households	64		-
	Asian or Mixed Asian/White households	9		
	Black Caribbean or Mixed Black Caribbean/White Households	1		
	Other ethnicity	1		
Offer	Foster carers	5	8	9
	Willing to consider FFA	26	-	-

Review and Termination of approval

Adoption Central England did not refer to the Panel any reviews or termination of approvals during 2020-21.

³ - denotes data not collected by Panel Team during this reporting year but available on request from ACE.

b) Matches

At meetings held between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, the ACE Adoption Panel considered 91 proposed matches for a total of 111 children.

Child's Local Authority	Number of matches 2020-21	Number of matches 2019-20	Number of matches 2018-19
Coventry City Council	25	22	-
Herefordshire Council	16	8	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	7	8	-
Warwickshire County Council	23	19	-
Worcestershire County Council	20	29	-
	91	86	85

Profile of placement		Number of matches 2020-21	Number of matches 2019-20	Number of matches 2018-19
Number of children	1 child	75	75	-
	2 children	12	7	-
	3 children	4	4	-
Total		91	86	85
Age of oldest child matched	0-12 months	36	-	-
	12-24 months	23		
	2-4 years	20		
	4+ years	12		
Total		91		

Type of adoption	Mainstream adoption	72	55	64
	Fostering for Adoption	15	25	15
	Foster carer Adoption	4	6	6
Total		91	86	85
Ethnicity of children (by placement)	White British	72	-	-
	White and Asian	6		
	Any other mixed or multiple ethnic background	5		
	White and Black Caribbean	3		
	Gypsy, Roma, Traveller	2		
	Any other White background	2		
	Pakistani	1		
Total		91		

c) Plan of adoption for a relinquished child

Child's Local Authority	Number of plans 2020-21	Number of plans 2019-20	Number of plans 2018-19
Coventry City Council	5 ⁴	0	-
Herefordshire Council	1	0	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	0	0	-
Warwickshire County Council	0	0	-
Worcestershire County Council	0	0	-
Total	6	0	4

*

One of five plans of adoption for relinquished children was deferred by the Adoption Panel.

All 5 children for whom Panel recommended a plan of adoption were also matched during 2020-21.

Adoption Disruptions

The Adoption Panel has been informed of three adoption placement disruptions affecting four children during the reporting period. These relate to the breakdown of the placement before the making of an adoption order and are discussed in a separate report prepared by the ACE Lead Manager.

⁴ For one of the five plans, the Adoption Panel deferred a recommendation.

Quality Assurance

"Adoption panels provide quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of the reports being presented to the panel. this includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement"

Adoption: National Minimum Standards, 2014, 17:2

The method by which quality assurance feedback was collated from the Adoption Panel changed in May 2020 from a collective rating discussed at the end of each case to individual Panel members submitting an online form during their 5-day reading period before the Panel meeting.

The Panel feedback forms invite Panel members to rate the quality of the Adopter Assessment Report, the Child Permanence Report, and the Adoption Placement Report. Panel members are reminded to note the positives in a report and to phrase their comments in a constructive and respectful manner.

The '**Adopter Assessment Report**' ('AAR') piloted and evaluated by ACE in autumn 2019, replaced the CoramBAAF 'Prospective Adopter Report' as the agency's preferred assessment template. When reviewing the Adopter Assessment Report, Panel members rate its clarity, length, attention to detail, the extent to which the voices of any children in the home are heard, the sufficiency of the evidence and the depth of the social work analysis. Consideration is also given to the extent to which the core themes of DDP are evidenced in the report: does it describe the agency's preparation of the applicants for therapeutic parenting, and the applicants' understanding? Feedback is provided to the assessing social worker via their manager shortly after the Panel meeting.

Panel members also rate the coherence and detail with which a child's journey to permanence is described in the **Child Permanence Report** ('CPR') while the **Adoption Placement Report** ('APR') is rated for the clarity with which the rationale for the proposed match is presented, as well as the detail and scope of the Adoption Support Plan contained therein.

Aggregated and/or bespoke feedback on the quality of the Child's Permanence Report and Adoption Placement Reports is shared with the agency's constituent local authorities both on request and in six-monthly reports to the local authority Heads of Service. Case-specific feedback is shared with local authority social workers and managers as necessary.

Panel feedback on the quality of the Adopter Assessment Reports

AAR	2020-21 (77 reports)	2019-20 (91 of 97 reports)	2018-2019 ⁵ (35 of 92 reports rated)
Number of reports	77	91	35
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding)	3.98	-	-
Where evidence of DDP informing assessment is satisfactory, good or outstanding	96% ⁶	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	0%	17%	26%
Rated as good or outstanding	61%	57%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good or outstanding	100%	83%	74%

⁵ Feedback process implemented part-way through reporting period, from 26.11.2018

⁶ 47% rated 'good' or 'outstanding'

"Well done, a really good report from an outstanding social worker: very good analysis, very good that N had answers to questions. Hugely helped that she had known adopters for a long time: illustrated the benefit of working relationship."

Report rated 'outstanding'

"Thorough, insightful and warm. Gave me a real sense of knowing the adopters by the time I finished reading."

Report rated 'good'

"Panel are reliant on what is written and while the social worker had done the work and presented well at the meeting, there could have been more written down?"

Report rated 'requires improvement'

Comment

As Adoption Panel members have had to adjust to working in a virtual medium during the coronavirus restrictions in 2020-21, so too have the adoption social workers tasked with carrying out thorough assessments of those individuals and couples who apply to adopt a child or children through ACE. It is not surprising that the number of assessments presented to Panel during a year of pandemic is down on previous years, as not only social workers but applicants themselves have had to adjust to home-working and home-schooling and their enormous impact on people's time and focus. Panel members have been mindful of the pressures placed on social workers to assess not only the strengths of applicants but the vulnerabilities or risks that they may bring, a task made more challenging by being unable to meet in person. While it recognises the convenience and cost-savings of virtual working, the Panel is nevertheless reassured by the agency's practice requirement, introduced in Autumn 2020, that all adopter assessments should be based on at least three assessment visits carried out in the adopters' home.

Managers at ACE have noted that Panel members perceive a significant improvement in the quality of the Adopter Assessment Reports, Panel members have commented on the improved flow and readability of the format, noting that its arrangement into three sections

- Factual, Assessment, Confidential information - facilitates the comprehensive gathering of information. The middle assessment section mirrors the sequence found to be helpful in life story books, ie beginning in the 'here and now', reflecting on the past and looking to the future, and Panel members have fed back to the agency that this helps focus their attention on the matter in hand, ie the suitability of applicants to become adoptive parents. Prospective adopters are invited to reflect in their own words on their journey in the form of a personal statement, while the social worker's reflection on the assessment process is also a valuable addition to the report. It has become standard practice to include preparation course trainer feedback in the report, as well as evidence that Fostering for Adoption has been thoroughly explored with applicants, even where they subsequently decide not to include this in their offer.

Of note in 2020-21 has been the increasing consolidation and evidencing of DDP⁷ in adopter assessments, as the assessing social workers – all now trained to at least DDP Level 1 – have assimilated and explored the approach in their own practice. Panel members have noted in assessment reports an increased focus on the applicants' capacity for therapeutic parenting coupled with good analysis from the now fully-staffed, experienced and motivated assessment team, and congratulate the agency on its achievement of Organisational Certification with the DDP Institute.

The Panel welcomes ACE's expansion of its training programme to include workshops for adopters considering siblings, as well for the very popular workshop for family and friends. It endorses the agency's concern that adopter assessments explore applicants' capacity to parent their adopted child with reference to our diverse, multi-cultural society and looks forward to developments in staff and Panel training, awareness and adopter preparation in the months ahead. Recognising too that 'every child matters', including those already in a would-be adoptive family, the Panel also reiterates its concern that the voices of any children living in the household of would-be adopters are properly heard by the assessing social worker and agency.

⁷ Further information about Dyadic Developmental Practice available at <https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/>

Panel feedback on the quality of matching reports

Child Permanence Report presented by Child's Social Worker	2020-21	2019-20 ⁸	2018-19 ⁹
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding)	3.72	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	9%	36%	42%
Rated as good or outstanding	41%	28%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good or outstanding	91%	64%	58%

Adoption Placement Report presented by Child's Social Worker and Adoption Social Worker	2020-21	2019-20 ¹⁰	2018-19 ¹¹
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding)	3.67	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	5%	35%	42%
Rated as good or outstanding	37%	28%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good or outstanding	95%	65%	58%

⁸ Feedback on 73 out of 86 reports

⁹ Feedback process implemented from 26.11.2018 and pertains to 24 matches

¹⁰ Feedback on 73 out 86 reports

¹¹ Feedback process implemented from 26.11.2018 and pertains to 24 matches

Comment

The figures above show a marked increase both in the number of matching reports rated satisfactory and in those achieving 'good' or 'outstanding'. The Panel recognises the work done by ACE to develop the understanding of children's social workers around good adoption practice, with particular emphasis on the careful completion of the Child's Permanence Report not only for court purposes but as a thorough and accurate account of the child's journey to adoption which will underpin sensitive life story work for years to come. The agency advice role – whereby ACE contributes advice to the local authority decision maker at the point of a child's 'adoption decision – has further strengthened in 2020-21, with four of the five local authorities now regularly seeking ACE advice at an earlier stage in the child's journey than was previously the case. Similarly, where the Panel has serious practice concerns about individual cases, the mechanisms for feeding this back to a senior manager within a local authority have strengthened.

The Panel proposes that there needs to be continued focus on and improvement in the following aspects of matching report to ensure that

- The reasons why a child is to be adopted are thoroughly and explicitly detailed in the Child's Permanence Report, with examples of evidence (gathered from parent and specialist assessments) provided. It is not uncommon for the reasons to be obscured by social work jargon, leaving the reader to guess, for example, what form the 'neglect' of the child took.
- The Child's Permanence Report is updated before matching to reflect the child and their birth family situation since the making of Care and Placement Orders. This should include the final position of the Guardian, the person tasked to represent the child's best interests in court, and whose view is therefore relevant to that child.
- As much background information on a child's birth parents and siblings or half-siblings, including photographs, is obtained.
- The child's identity needs are promoted fully through a reasoned evaluation of contact options. It should not be assumed that simply because adults have not facilitated siblings to meet that those children do not wish to have some form of relationship in future. Social workers should append the Contact Assessment Tool and Contact Plan to their reports.

- The future needs of the child in adoption are explored against their already 'lived' early experiences, including those *in utero*. While a mother's use of drugs during pregnancy receives attention, it is rare to see the same level of exploration around her use of alcohol or the possibility of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder discussed in the CPR, despite research suggesting that 17% of children may have been exposed to alcohol prenatally.¹² Panel would also welcome more observation and analysis of a child's attachment patterns to support the preparation of their adopters and planning for their future needs.
- There is a detailed account of family finding activity, together with a clear rationale as to how and why one family came to be selected as the best match for a child or children. This is particularly pertinent to the choice of family for a Fostering to Adopt arrangement, where the reasons for this *type* of placement are usually explained, but the process and reasons behind the *choice* of a particular family are not.
- The Adoption Support Plan reflects the specific support needs of the adopters and any other children in the family as well as the needs of the child to be placed.
- The Support Plan considers not only the immediate presenting needs of the child but, based on practice wisdom and research, anticipates the highly likely needs of the child as they grow older.
- The profound and life-changing significance of adoption to the child is reflected and respected in the reports, through care taken to proof-read, spell names correctly, avoid cut-and-paste errors and the use of carefully chosen language when speaking both of birth parents and the child's behaviour and presentation.

¹² McQuire, C., Mukherjee, R., Hurt, L., Higgins, A., Greene, G., Farewell, D., Kemp, A. and Paranjothy, S. (January 2019). 'Screening prevalence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders in a region of the United Kingdom: a population-based birth-cohort study. *Preventive Medicine*, 118, 344-351, quoted in Adoption UK Barometer Report, September 2020

Feedback from stakeholders about the ACE Panel

1. From Prospective Adopters

Prospective adopters are invited to complete a short online questionnaire about their experience of attending the Adoption Panel: a new question reflecting the virtual format was included in 2020-21.

Questions to prospective adopters	Approvals 2020-2021 77 cases	Match 2020-2021 91 cases	Approvals and matches 2019-20 185 cases	Approvals and matches ¹³ 2018-19 184 cases
Response rate	51%	42%	24 %	11%
Number of responses	39	38	44	
Attended on first date offered	67%	61%	61%	
None, or very few technical glitches with online attendance	79%	95%	-	-
Panel ran early, on time or less than 15 minutes behind	77%	79%	43%	-
Thought questions were relevant	90%	95%	84%	93%
Overall experience of attending Panel was negative	5%	0%	11%	-
Overall experience of attending Panel was neutral	5%	3%	15%	-
Overall experience of attending Panel was positive	90%	97%	74%	93%
Happy to attend a virtual Panel again, or neutral	95%	100%	-	-

¹³ Paper questionnaire sent to applicants by post

Feedback from prospective adopters on their Panel experience has been extremely positive, with the one outright negative experience described by applicants who were the subjects of a Brief Report to Panel and not recommended as suitable to adopt.

"We felt we had a strong Panel that represented lots of aspects of adoption, even though it was virtual we were made to feel at ease and the questions were very well thought out."

"Panel was carefully planned, and each person was given an opportunity to speak to avoid speaking over each other. The questions to be asked were done in a clear way and gave us time to answer."

"We had a very positive experience with our virtual Panel, very few glitches and everything was explained at every step in a very helpful and friendly manner. Everything was done in such a way to make it as easy as possible for us. Thank you."

Most applicants attending Panel described a positive experience of the virtual platform:

"I found attending Panel less stressful being virtual than in person."

"Online is much better than in person as would be a waste of time for all to travel to sit in a waiting room for ages for a very short meeting."

"Thought the virtual Panel meeting worked well and everyone conducted themselves very professionally."

"Doing Panel via video link from home gave us the chance to relax in familiar surroundings and also took away any fears of not being able to arrive on time for any unforeseeable reasons, eg bad traffic or any other hold-ups."

ACE and its local authority partners have also acknowledged the efficacy of the virtual meeting as a platform for the Adoption Panel function and it was agreed in April 2021 that meetings would remain online on a permanent basis.

Where a small number of applicants shared more equivocal experiences of attending Panel, their comments included:

"The technical hiccups meant we were waiting for over 30 minutes for the recommendation,"

"It was disappointing to see the lack of diversity on the Panel. All 8 people were female, in fact throughout the whole process this time we have not seen a male face at all."

"The Panel was fine in itself; however, we are disappointed that they could not do the matching Panel on the same day. We now have to wait till November before our process can move forward. This delays us meeting our child, and we feel that when adopters are ready, and a specific child has been identified, that the social worker should speed the process up."

Comment

It is acknowledged that technical glitches during online Panel meetings are frustrating for all involved; the Panel Advisers and Administrators, supported to a degree by Warwickshire County Council's IT help desk, continue to try and resolve a range of technical problems for Panel members and attendees, from providing newer iPads, researching Microsoft user guides, advice on optimising broadband performance, and guidance on navigating the features of Microsoft Teams invitations and functions. As Panel members and attendees become more accustomed to online meetings, it is fortunately now rare for a case to be delayed by technical issues alone. All prospective adopters are offered a test meeting before attending Panel, either with a member of the Panel team or more commonly with their adoption social worker, while the Panel Adviser talks each participant through the process of leaving and re-joining the meeting once started.

As discussed elsewhere it is an ongoing priority of ACE as an agency and Panel to recruit people from the diverse communities we serve. It is an ongoing challenge to populate two panels of five members each per week to be properly representative, but that said, most include at least one male.

It has never been necessary to cancel a Panel because it has not been possible to constitute one: rather, six panel 'slots' are made available to the agencies for booking in approvals or matches every week, and extra panels can be convened where there is demand. The Panel has the capacity to consider an approval and match in the same meeting provided the paperwork for both functions is provided on time.

2. From Social Workers

Social workers attending the virtual Panel either to support an approval or match are invited to complete a short online questionnaire about their experience.

	Approvals and matches 2020-2021 169 cases	Approvals and matches 2019-20 185 cases	Approvals and matches 2018-19 184 cases
Number of responses	31	40	25
Response rate (percentage of cases for which feedback submitted)	18%	22%	14%
Case started within 30 minutes of advertised time	87%	67.5%	52%
Thought questions to SW were relevant or extremely relevant ¹⁴	84%	85%	96%
Thought questions to applicants were relevant or extremely relevant	94%	87.5%	100%
Thought Chairing of meeting was 'good' or 'excellent'	87%	-	-
Experience 'better than expected' or 'Excellent/very positive'	77%	-	-

With more than 100 social workers attending the Adoption Panel at some point during the reporting period, for a total of 169 cases, a response rate of 18% is low compared to the responses from adopters themselves. Where asked to rate aspects of the meeting, social workers scored them highly, and offered positive comments such as:

¹⁴ 10% replied that they were not asked any questions

"It was helpful to see response of adopters as to why they chose their child"

"The questions asked of the adopters were relevant as they enabled them to show how the journey has been for them and the positive development that has occurred since starting the process."

"Very welcoming Chair and Panel, putting applicants at ease in a virtual Panel which isn't easy."

"Very pleased with the Panel recommendation"

"This was my first approval Panel and matching Panel and I felt it went well, I felt the Chairperson made the adopters and myself feel welcomed and relaxed. The adopters fed back that they were very happy too."

Some social workers commented on the online experience:

"I couldn't hear the Panel Chair very well (bad Wi-Fi connection?) which made understanding his questions, and everything that he was explaining extremely difficult to understand."

"It would have been good for Panel to have been able to see the adopters unfortunately they could hear us, and we could hear them but could not see them and they were unable to resolve this issue

"The social worker and adopters were not able to communicate in a separate waiting room online - this is an important time to be able to offer support due to anxiety at this time, so would have been helpful to have this facility

A small number of social workers expressed dissatisfaction with the nature of the Panel meeting:

"The adopters were upset as they felt that Panel did not provide any justification/reasoning behind their recommendation that they be approved for only one child, they felt there was a unhelpful comment, "we don't want you to run before you can walk".

“I very much felt from the start of Panel that a decision had already been made before we joined the meeting. Much of this appeared to be based around Panel questioning if the siblings should be placed together rather than focusing on the couple’s ability to meet their needs. I do not feel that any of the information that we offered went any way to changing this decision.”

“I have found that it is more common to share a "list" of reasons that led to the recommendation at the end of Panel. This did not happen here, which made me reflect on what that would mean in terms of the prospective adopters’ experience of Panel. It felt brief, but on reflection I considered that it felt more human and actually it is often difficult for prospective adopters to hear or process any more than the outcome ... My couple did not come away feeling that there was a lack of confidence in the match, but I sensed that more feedback at the end would have been reassuring.”

“I do of course understand and fully support that the process needs to be robust, child focused and considered, and that Panel have a difficult job. However, I do not feel that the information provided in writing or verbally by the social workers who know the families involved and have carried out their own robust assessments was given the weight it deserved in the decision making.”

Comment

ACE, the Panel Advisers and Chairs remain committed to ensuring that the scrutiny function of an independent Adoption Panel is fair, respectful, evidence-based and accountable to the Agency Decision Makers to whom it makes recommendations. Panel members are routinely reminded to consider their online presentation at the start of a meeting, and there is time allowed for a debrief afterwards both as a group and between the Panel Adviser and Chair. Collated feedback, positive and negative, from prospective adopters, social workers and decision makers is regularly shared with Panel Chairs at quarterly Chairs’ meetings, while Panel Chairs and members are invited to offer feedback on each other’s performance in preparation for their annual appraisal. Panel’s credibility

with its stakeholders and the behaviour of its members is also discussed in agency meetings, against the agency's clear aim to demonstrate DDP principles in all its endeavours.

Concerned that a Panel meeting could be vulnerable to accusations of unconscious bias and groupthink, the Panel Advisers sought to encourage self-awareness and critical thinking skills across Panel through their choice of topic for the Panel members' training day in September 2020 – 'Adoption Assessments and Unconscious Bias' - and will also challenge a Panel to justify its thinking behind a particular statement or advice, reminding members of the evidence already contained in reports, that prospective adopters are not required by law to attend, and that Panel's mandate is to consider the strength of the adoption agency's proposal, rather than to carry out its own assessment of applicants or a child.

Moving forward, an aim of the ACE Panel will be to develop further its channels of communication with social worker colleagues across ACE and its partner local authorities, in order to strengthen two-way communication, understand respective roles and together pursue the highest standards of adoption practice. A training module is to developed to support these processes.

3. From Agency Decision Makers

The template used by decision makers at ACE and its five partner local authorities asks

Is the Decision Maker satisfied that the Panel considered the case appropriately?

and invites them to offer feedback on the Panel process, as described in the Minutes of the Panel meeting.

In all cases, the agency decision maker was satisfied with the Adoption Panel's consideration of the proposal placed before it, with many using the feedback opportunity to express appreciation:

Panel highlighted a number of issues that I also recognised and which you addressed. I agree that the report focused too much on X and was not sufficiently child- centred. This has been referred to the appropriate manager in ACE. (Decision Maker, ACE)

The papers and minutes of Panel evidenced appropriate and sensitive challenge in this case, and I am satisfied the Panel thoroughly considered the merits of the match and balanced this against identifiable risks appropriately (Decision Maker, Worcestershire)

There has been a really thorough consideration given by Panel to the match between X and Y and Z with a number of supplementary questions asked, despite good paperwork being provided which gave the Panel a lot of very helpful information. (Decision Maker, Herefordshire)

I am satisfied that Panel was robust and thorough in recommending the match, Panel minutes cover strengths and vulnerabilities and showed a unanimous decision regarding the match. Minutes are clear and concise and evidence discussion. (Decision Maker, Coventry)

I agree that the CPR requires further attention to ensure it is updated to provide all the significant information for the adopters, and for A when he is older. I agree that it is unfortunate that a Team Manager was not present at the Adoption Panel as they are required to oversee and support the completion of this regulated adoption work. I will raise this with the allocated team. (Decision Maker, Warwickshire)

Panel did make comments regarding the quality of the CPRs and the need for them to be updated, proofread and more succinct ... (Decision Maker, Coventry)

I am satisfied that the Panel undertook a thorough examination of the paperwork and I have seen clear evidence of this in the pertinent and considered questions raised at Panel. I am also in agreement with the Panel's observations on the issue of X's name being changed at 15 months old which I will take up with the Local Authority. (Decision Maker, Solihull)

The matching Panel was extremely robust in exploring the motivations and potential vulnerabilities with the social workers. This analytical discussion enabled a thorough exploration of the matching, planning and resilience of the couple, which led to pertinent questions being posed to the adopters. This discussion highlighted the thoughtfulness of the couple, their research-minded approach, their understanding of the uncertainties and their emotional attachment to the sibling group. This thorough approach by the Panel reassured me that the couple were prepared, fully informed of X and Y's needs, so realistic in their commitment to parent them throughout their lifetime. (Decision Maker, Warwickshire)

This was a complex assessment for the Panel to consider and the Panel appropriately picked up on a range of issues that they explored. In terms of

advice regarding the number and age range of children it is important to recognise that children placed for adoption are often operating at a lower age developmentally. Also, they did not explore in depth issues about their parenting capacities and what the couple foresee as the major issues in adopting two as opposed to one child. The social worker is doing further work with the couple subsequent to Panel about this. As correctly noted, careful matching will be important. (Decision Maker, ACE)

Priorities for 2021-22

1. A focus on equality, diversity and inclusion are increasingly evident in both the profile of any panel, and its practice.

This ongoing priority will be evidenced through efforts to recruit Panel members who reflect the diverse communities served by ACE, as well as in awareness-raising, reflection and training opportunities for Panel members, staff, and colleagues across the agency.

2. The voice of the child

The impact of a child's early experiences and their likely experience of their adoptive home is always the focus of Panel's consideration of a match. As the agency develops its groupwork with adopted children and young people, it is hoped that a list of 'child's questions for Panel' can be formulated.

3. Panel's contribution to Adoption Central England's Service Improvement Plan, 2021-22

The key priorities of the ACE Service Improvement Plan relevant to Adoption Panel include:

- (i) increased adopter recruitment
- (ii) improved timeliness of adopter assessments
- (iii) focus on recruiting families for black and ethnic minority children, sibling groups and children with health and developmental uncertainty. Priorities also include the timeliness of placements and embedding early permanence through Fostering for Adoption.

The Adoption Panel will contribute to these goals through its consistent offer of twice-weekly meetings throughout the year, and its willingness to accommodate additional meetings or, at times, a fourth case added to the usual three-case agenda. Panel members' readiness and ability to consider the needs of the priority groups will be the subject of ongoing review, with the possibility of further training in key issues being provided.

4. Adjusting to a post-covid way of working while ensuring the robustness and credibility of the panel role.

This will be evidenced through further learning around, and development of, the potential of virtual platforms on the part of Panel Chairs, members and staff alike, all of whom will continue to review the effectiveness and limitations of Panel meetings held online: it is planned that a joint research project with the University of Worcester will inform this debate. The needs of Panel members to feel part of a team through in-person events will also be considered, with plans for twice-yearly events underway.

5. Further developments in working relationships across the agency and its partner local authorities to facilitate effective quality assurance processes, with the shared goal of ultimately improving outcomes for children whose plan has to be adoption.

This will be evidenced by opportunities for Panel Chairs to meet in person with managers and decision makers, regular reporting mechanisms, the already increasing openings for sharing case-specific feedback before and after Panel, and shared networking and training opportunities with social workers.

6. The recruitment of social worker Panel members with specialist fostering and post-adoption support knowledge to join the Central List.

The presence of professionals with current experience in these two areas will complement the personal or past professional experience of existing members. It is recognised that social worker caseloads may not allow for this additional responsibility, particularly as teams adjust to post-covid ways of working, but further attempts to recruit will be made.

7. Improved feedback response rates from stakeholders, particularly social workers

This remains an area of challenge, and may be a reflection on high caseloads or the methods used (a brief online survey), but further efforts to involve professional colleagues in the shaping of the Panel process will be made and evidenced, it is

hoped, in improved response rates for 2021-22. The Panel Advisers will create a workshop for local authority social workers on the purpose of the Adoption Panel, while also seeking more opportunities to hear from social workers on how the Panel process can be improved.

8. Reporting to Panel on the outcome of matches

This task - relatively easy for a single Panel constituted from a small central list of members and serving a single local authority pre-regionalisation - has proved challenging where Panel line-ups vary widely, serve five local authorities, are held twice-weekly and consider a high volume of cases. Nevertheless, it is recognised that for Panel members a short update on the progress of a match to which they have given much time and care helps to 'complete the circle' and brings its own reward. While recognising the constraints on social workers' time to provide updates for Panel, the Panel Advisers plan to introduce a level of reporting back for some cases if not all.

9. Ongoing consolidation of DDP in Panel practice

This will be evidenced through reflection and training opportunities for Panel members and staff, through member appraisals, and the emphasis on DDP values observed in the chairing of meetings, Panel members' behaviour, discussions and minutes,



Brenda Vincent
Lead Manager, ACE



Kate Cowell
Panel Adviser, ACE

6 July 2021

Appendix A

Central List of Panel Members, as on 31 March 2021

Chairs

Margaret Powell, Independent Chair, adoptive parent, Vice-Chair of a fostering panel and member of the Independent Review Mechanism

Heather Tobin, Independent Chair, member of a fostering panel, adoptive parent and retired senior police officer

Avriel Reader, Independent Chair at ACE and another regional adoption agency, and retired Head of Children's Services, Worcestershire County Council

Stuart Watkins, Independent Chair at ACE, Chair of a fostering panel and Home for Good, retired Service Manager in Adoption and Fostering, Worcestershire County Council

Medical Advisors

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

Dr Emma Thompson, Agency Medical Advisor, Paediatrician, Children, Young People and Families, Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust (membership on hold during pandemic)

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

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

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

Dr Fiona Goodwin, Agency Medical Advisor, Children in Care Team, Herefordshire

Social Work Members

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

Parveen Nagra, Social work member and Post Adoption 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

Cornelia Heaney, social work member, Operations Manager Assurance and Practice
Improvement - Children & Families, Warwickshire County Council

Dr Peter Unwin, social work member, former foster carer and social work academic

Natalie Baldwin, Adoption Social Worker for another RAA

Caroline Stirk, Adoption Social Worker in another RAA, adoptive parent

Independent Members

Andrea Candlish, retired health visitor and regular carer of grandchildren

Charlotte Shadbolt, adoptive parent of four children

Daniela Visram, foster carer, Solihull MBC

David Burgess, foster carer with Solihull MBC (membership on hold during pandemic)

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

Karin Burrage-Pitchford, adoptive parent of three and teacher (membership on hold
during pandemic)

Leanne Warren, adoptive parent and health professional (resigned in October 2020)

Natasha Sutton, adoptive parent and teacher

Nigel Pendleton, adoptive parent and foster carer, Warwickshire County Council

Rob Rogers, adoptive parent, educationalist, clergy and counsellor

Sharon Bent, adoptive parent and retired police officer

Bob Duthie, adoptive parent

Cathie Prickett, adopted person and fostering social worker (membership on hold during
pandemic)

Joanne Russell-Miller, adoptive parent and human resources manager

Elaine Stratford, adopted person and health professional

Mark Bayfield, adoptive parent

Clare McArthur, teacher of children with special educational needs

Patrick Fox, social worker in commissioning for Children's Services, adult services and Approved Mental Health Professional, adopted person.

Catherine Lloyd, adopted person, former leader and advocate in education, social care and mental health settings, panel member and board member for another adoption agency.

Non-voting attendees

Kate Cowell, Panel Adviser (full-time)

Katie Nabbs, Panel Adviser (part-time)

Melissa Rose, Acting Operations Manager, ACE Hub and relief Panel Adviser

Louise Hathaway, Operations Manager, ACE Spokes and relief Panel Adviser

Claire Duncombe, Panel Administrator (full-time)

Jacquie Keir, Panel Administrator (part-time)

Appendix B: Evaluation of Panel Training

1. Annual Panel Members' Training Day, 30 September 2020.
'Adoption Assessments and Unconscious Bias: Thinking about the impact of Personal, Cultural and Structural Perspectives', led by Lawrence Kelly, Fostering Skills.

Asked for their reflections on the day, participants wrote:

- "It reinforced who we are looking for in adopting parents at Panel. It is a defensive decision and can be biased by our unconscious bias."
- **"I thoroughly enjoyed the day, was able to follow presentation and found all information interesting and thought provoking."**
- "We all come to Panel with different backgrounds and as such this means that we all function as a team as we all have important input to the outcome of the Panel."
- **"How bias effects behaviours and decision making in group settings eg Panel and the need to recognise this and challenge."**
- "Consider the mind-mindedness questions in the assessment of a prospective adoptive couple. This was particularly relevant in a recent case where we didn't approve a couple to adopt. These questions would have provided added focus and clarity to our prime concerns."
- **"Likely to affect how I approach the reading for Panel and which parts I read first."**
- "I thought the whole day as fascinating but will reflect upon my own delivery, wording of questions and my own unconscious bias!"
- **"Being more aware of people's risk being on a spectrum and how that impacts on subjective interpretation of cases presented to Panel."**
- "Encourage Panel members in their choice of language/structure of questions during Panel."
- **"Asking less standardised questions and being aware of unconscious bias and being more ready to follow my inclinations in expressing opinions that may not always be accepted by some members of Panel in pre and post discussions."**
- "I will be more mindful when reading Panel documents that my own experiences and values are likely to affect the way I view the applicants/match."
- **"DDP was weaved through the presentation providing an opportunity to be curious regarding what experiences may influence our unconscious bias, and to accept that others may have a differing opinion."**
- "To explore more - own beliefs/values when reading documents and during Panel in presence of applicants."

- **"It's easy to miss something you're not looking for, and easier to see something you expect".**
- "I will be even more determined to keep an open mind throughout the reading of Panel papers. I am more aware that it is possible to fall into the trap of making early judgements and then interpreting information in a way that reinforces that belief."
- **"To keep in mind that assessments should reflect how applicants are to promote the identity issues/needs of all children(not just in transracial placements) as no child should grow up with a false sense of identity or superiority."**
- "The workshop was both relevant to my role as an Adoption Panel member but also as a practitioner SW. I am now more mindful of my decision making & reflective & less on 'automatic pilot'."
- **"Useful to think about how my own views impact on decisions and recommendations I make."**

2. Bitesize session, 2 December 2020: Adopter Preparation Course, led by Alison Pegg and Lisa Lawley, ACE

- "It was really useful to know what training is offered and in what format & how the training ' feeds into' the assessment process."
- **"This was a very useful oversight of adopter training. It helped fill some gaps in my knowledge (e.g. what the string exercise was) which will help when applicants are talking about this in Panel."**
- "At times I couldn't see the slides so it is very useful that these will be made available."
- **"Really helpful session to understand what is being offered as virtual training."**

3. Bitesize session, 29 January 2021: The Care Planning Process, led by Michelle Hargun and Jen Rogers, Worcestershire Children First

- "Thank you so much, the session was so informative, and I learnt so much about the proceedings that lead up to adoption both as an adoptive parent and also as a Panel member. I also think my newfound information will help me explain to my two children when they ask about how/why they were adopted. I can explain the process in perhaps the detail they both need,"
- **"It was also very useful to learn about 'Pause'."**

- “Really informative session. Outline of the care planning process clearly defined for Panel members to understand. Helpful in understanding the pressures in the service and case load demands. Would be beneficial for all members to take the opportunity to review the PowerPoint presentation made available. Thank you for taking time to present to Panel especially given time pressure and workloads.”
- **“A really helpful reminder of a front-line social worker's job, with its many pressures.”**
- “It was good to see systematic planning and progress chasing to move children towards permanency. I hope to see the quality assurance process reflected in CPR's and reduction in delay for children. It was interesting to hear about the Pause project and the multiagency programme . I will read the evaluation of the project from 2017. Thank you for arranging this.”
- **“I now understand how complicated the Care Planning Process is and to have met Jan and Michelle who seem to be managing it so well. I was interested to hear that comments from QA forms are being acted on. I was very interested to hear about the Pause Project and hope to hear how it progresses.”**



Public report Cabinet Member

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

7 October 2021

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People – Councillor P Seaman

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Director of Children's Services

Ward(s) affected:

none

Title:

Coventry City Council Annual Fostering Report

Is this a key decision?

No - although the proposals affect more than two electoral wards, the impact is not expected to be significant.

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to inform the Cabinet Member of the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2020 and March 2021. The performance of Coventry Fostering Service is critical to the delivery of high-quality local placements that can meet the diverse needs of Coventry's looked after children. The report summarises the activity of the service over the past 12 months. It highlights the challenge of adequately recruiting and retaining the number and type of carers who can meet vulnerable children's needs. It also emphasises the challenge of developing, supervising and supporting approved foster carers to meet the often-complex range of needs that looked after children have.

This report identifies the growth in the number of children placed in the internal foster care estate resulting in a decrease in external placements. The report outlines an increase in connected persons fostering arrangements and details the ongoing work of the Fostering Transformation Project.

Recommendations:

Cabinet Member is requested to:

- 1) Analyse and endorse the work completed in this area of work.

List of Appendices included:

Fostering Annual Report 2020-21

Background papers:

None

Other useful documents

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

Yes –Corporate Parenting Board at a date to be confirmed.

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Coventry City Council Annual Adoption Report

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 Each local authority in England is obliged by National Minimum Standards to formally understand analyse and approve the performance of its fostering service in an annual basis. The attached report in the appendix is part of a range of opportunities to do this.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 Cabinet Member is requested to:

Analyse and endorse the work completed in this area of work.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1 Consultation occurs on several levels with children and foster carers. This work is documented within the body of the appendices where appropriate.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1 This is an annual report and work will continue in this area over the next 12 months

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Director of Law and Governance

5.1 Financial implications

	2018/19 £000	2019/20 £000	2020/21 £000
Budget	5,932	5,566	6,321
Expenditure	4,719	5,435	5,843

- 5.1.1 Internal fostering continues to be one of the most cost-effective placements for Looked After Children, as well as providing quality outcomes for Coventry children. Expenditure continues to increase as the service grows and the budget will increase in future years to reflect increased service targets. Resources will also be made available to expand the internal fostering team in line with the increasing number of foster carers.

- 5.1.2 Fostering fees for 2020/21 were increased by 1.5% from 2019/20 levels in order to recognise the impact of inflation and to ensure that our rates remain competitive with those of surrounding local authorities.

5.2 Legal implications

- 5.2.1 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 state that the fostering service Provider must compile a written statement in relation to the fostering service ("the statement of purpose") which consists of —
- (a) a statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service, and
 - (b) a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements) provided by the fostering service.

5.2.2 The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the Chief Inspector, place a copy on their website (if they have one), and make copies available, upon request, to —

- (a) any person working for the purposes of the fostering service,
- (b) any foster parent or prospective foster parent of the fostering service,
- (c) any child placed with a foster parent by the fostering service, and
- (d) the parent of any such child.

5.2.3 Under Statutory Guidance the fostering service must compile a Statement of Purpose, which sets out the aims and objectives of the service as a whole, and the services, and facilities which are provided (including the provision of any “parent and child arrangements”). The statement must be reviewed and updated as necessary, but at least annually and published on the provider’s website (if they have one), with a copy provided to Ofsted. The statement of purpose is placed on the Coventry City Council website and can be accessed through the link:

https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/31786/fostering_service_statement_of_purpose

6. Other implications

None

6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan (www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/)?

The fostering service contributes to the Council plan in the following ways:

- Locally connected: foster carers keep children safe and contribute to them getting the best start in life. In addition, by developing the skills of foster carers this will improve outcomes for children. By keeping children local, with local foster carers, this means that a multi-agency package of support to be developed for each child more easily
- Delivering our priorities with fewer resources: by developing a robust fostering service, this means less reliance on more expensive external placements.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

Any risk is being managed through robust leadership and management within the service and review by an internal Placements Board. This provides robust challenge to the delivery against the targets set for the service, in examining the increase in foster carer households and occupancy of approved beds. This in turn reports to the Children’s Services Leadership Team and Lead Member as appropriate.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

Increasing the numbers of internal foster carers and children placed internally will reduce the need for more costly external placements and enable looked after children to be placed closer to their home. This will mean better outcomes for looked after children in Coventry. This is crucial to the Council’s Corporate Parenting responsibilities. This report is also reviewed by the Corporate Parenting Board.

6.4 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

Promoting equality of opportunity is a key part of the fostering service. This is considered in the report documented in the appendix.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None

Report author(s):

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Enquiries should be directed to the above person.

Contributor/approver name	Title	Service	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Usha Patel	Governance Services Officer	Law and Governance		28 September 2021
Names of approvers for submission: (officers and members)				
Finance: Tina Pinks	Finance Manager	Finance		28 September 2021
Legal: Julie Newman	Director of Law and Governance	Law and Governance		28 September 2021
Director: John Gregg	Director of Children's services	Children's Services		6 September 2021
Members: Cllr P Seaman	Cabinet Member for Children and Young People			8 September 2021

This report is published on the council's website:

www.coventry.gov.uk/councilmeetings

Appendices

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Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2020 - 2021

The purpose of this report is to inform the Cabinet Member about the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2020 and March 2021.

The performance of Coventry's Fostering Service is critical to delivery of high-quality local placements that can meet the diverse needs of Coventry's looked after children.

The report summarises the activity of the service over the past 12 months. It highlights the success of the service in increasing both the number and the proportion of looked after children who are placed with foster carers approved by Coventry City Council. It also highlights the ongoing development of the work of the connected persons teams.

Coventry City Council is committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible and children become looked after, it is preferable that they are placed within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible this will be within a foster placement approved by Coventry rather than through commissioning an external placement. Through guidance on delegated authority, there is a recognition that foster carers should be empowered to take on the day-to-day tasks of parenting in the same way as any good parent would

Foster care is subject to legislative and regulatory guidance through, The Children Act 1989, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Fostering services: national minimum standards 2011. It is further regulated through the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations published in 2010. The regulatory framework for fostering sets out the minimum standards expected to ensure that the care provided by foster carers is adequate to ensure that those children placed within fostering placements are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.

Fostering placements are referred to as either mainstream or connected persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream refers to a range of households who apply to become foster carers for children not known to them. Mainstream foster carers include those offering both long-and short-term care and those who provide short breaks (respite) care. Mainstream carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children throughout the age range.

The Fostering Service sits within Children's Services as part of the Looked After Children service. It is comprised of 6 teams and has responsibility for the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers and the assessment and support of special guardians.

A sixth team was created in September 2020 as a result of the growth in the number of mainstream foster carers. This team is responsible, alongside two other teams, for the supervision and support of mainstream foster carers. Each foster carer is allocated a supervising social worker and, following the growth of the service to meet this increased supervisory workload a growth in management capacity was required. Alongside the growth of both social work and management capacity, additional support was provided to meet the increased workload through 3 new children and family workers and growth in professional support to the service.

In addition to the social work teams there is a Recruitment and Development Officer and a Panel Advisor both of which report to the Operational Lead.

The Fostering Transformation Project

The Fostering Transformation Project began in April 2016 and was concluded in March 2021. The project was part of the wider Children's Services transformation plan and had the overarching target to increase the proportion of looked after children placed with foster carers approved by

Coventry. This both enables more looked after children to be placed within or close to Coventry and to decrease the reliance on more expensive externally commissioned placements. The Transformation Project targets were updated and extended in both February 2019 and April 2020 with the target for 31/3/21 to have 286 occupied internal mainstream placements. Whilst the Transformation Project has now concluded there are continued growth targets for the service as part of the placements mix strategy. The current agreed target is for there to be 306 occupied internal mainstream placements by 31/3/22.

The number of children placed in internal mainstream placements rose from 259 on 31/3/19 to 266 on 31/3/21. This is a 5th annual rise in this number from a baseline of 149 in April 2016. This number was below the targeted growth for the year. This reduction in the speed of growth was largely attributable to the impact of the Covid – 19 pandemic.

At the end of March 2021, there were 747 looked after children. Of these 747 children 542 children were placed in foster care of which 382 were placed with Coventry foster carers compared with 357 at the end of March 2020. This equates to 70% of those children in foster care. 160 children were placed with independent fostering agencies which is a slight rise from the 147 in these placements on 31/3/20. Of the total number of looked after children 51.1% are placed with Coventry foster carers. This is the same proportion as 31/3/20 and maintains this improvement in this percentage from a baseline in March 2015 when only 22.8% were placed in internal foster care.

Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals

Marketing and Recruitment activity was adjusted during the year because of measures put in place due to pandemic. These measures meant that some opportunities for recruitment such as community events and festivals did not take place. It also resulted in information and “meet the team” needing to be held via virtual platforms. However, despite these changes marketing and recruitment continued and numbers of enquiries to the service remained strong. Planned recruitment events with Coventry’s Muslim Forum were postponed due to the national lockdowns

The Fostering Recruitment and Development Officer continues to use digital marketing strategies in an innovative and effective way. She also continues to chair a regional fostering marketing forum and host a national forum for local authority fostering marketing leads.

A 4th regional recruitment film project planned for 2020 was postponed due to the pandemic.

Coventry has a strong social media presence established with interactions from media and existing carers. Recruitment activity has included extensive use of social media such Facebook and Twitter. Our online content on the website is regularly updated.

The following table provides statistics for patterns over time in relation to the recruitment of mainstream foster carers:

Mainstream carers	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Approved households	152	170	184	187	196
Number of initial enquiries	387	703	815	609	552
Expressions of interest following enquiry					156
Assessments started at stage 1	186	143	151	91	83
Assessments commencing to stage 2	66	61	58	58	64
Number of households approved	25	31	33	21	23
Conversion rate - enquiry to full assessment	17%	9%	4.4%	9.5%	12% (any contact) 41% (expression of interest)
Conversion rate – stage 2 assessment to approval	38%	51%	57%	36%	36%

Conversion rate enquiry to approval	6%	4%	4.04%	3.4%	4.2% (contact) 14.7% (EOI)
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For this review period the service has included an additional measure to delineate between those people whose enquiry is purely for further written information and those who actively express an interest in applying in becoming a foster carer. Reviewing this information shows that of those who expressed an interest in fostering 14.7% proceeded to full approval.

There was a slight reduction in the number of fostering enquiries in the period between April 2020 and March 2021. Month by month patterns indicate that enquiry numbers fell at a higher rate during the national lockdown periods and then rose during months when restrictions were eased.

Conversion rates between enquiry and assessment and between enquiry and approval have risen.

During the review period, work has been undertaken within the recruitment team to analyse the reasons that applicants drop out during assessment and to ensure that the service progresses applications as efficiently as possible to prevent this.

There was a rise in the percentage of foster carers from a BAME background approved by Coventry City Council from 15% to 16.2%. However, this is still lower than the percentage of looked after children from a BAME background which is approximately 32.5%. There is ongoing focus on this area in our marketing strategy.

There was a rise in the number of new fostering households approved during 2020-21 from the previous year. The recruitment of foster carers remains below target, however and requires ongoing focus

Of those foster carers approved by Coventry 3 households transferred from another fostering agency. One was approved as mainstream foster carers having previously been approved as connected persons foster carers.

Occupancy of Mainstream Placements

Coventry's mainstream foster carers now provide an average of 1.9 approved placements per household. The total number of approved mainstream placements on 31/3/21 was 380. The occupancy rate of approved placements fell from 78% on 31/3/20 to 70% on 31/3/21. In part, this reduction in occupancy was a result of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as detailed later in this report. However, the service retains close oversight of occupancy and regularly reviews supports on offer to foster carers to enable them to develop and grow the range of placements they are able to provide.

Foster Carer Retention

In 2020-21, 14 mainstream fostering households ceased to foster. Two individual foster carers ceased to foster as they separated from their partner. Two fostering households transferred to another agency, one following a concerns process and another moving to foster for the children's trust (IFA) closer to their home.

The retention of foster carers has improved from the previous year. There is regular review of the reasons for carers ceasing to foster and all those who choose to move on are offered an exit interview with a manager in the service.

Reason	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Permanence plan for child (including Staying Put)	0	1	2	4	0

Transfer to another LA fostering service / children's trust (IFA)	0	1	1	1	1
Transfer to an independent fostering agency	0	0	0	0	1
Personal circumstances e.g. separation, bereavement, retirement	19	12	10	12	4
Decided fostering not for them					5
Dissatisfied with quality of service	0	0	0	0	1
Safeguarding (termination)	0	0	0	0	0
Resigned prior to quality of care and safeguarding issues	1	0	2	1	1
Other – including death	1	0	1	0	1
Total	21	13	15	18	14

One carer cited dissatisfaction with the support provided by the service as a reason for them ceasing to foster. This household had previously resigned on similar grounds then returned to foster for Coventry. There were more households who decided that fostering did not suit them and 3 of these had only been recently approved. Work is underway in the service to improve the communication in the recruitment stages to ensure applicants have a clear sense of the task prior to approval.

Connected Persons Fostering

The number of children cared for in a connected persons fostering arrangement approved by Coventry City Council has continued to rise over the past year. There were 98 children being cared for in this way on 1/4/20 and 117 on 1/4/21.

The aim for the majority of these children is that, if they cannot return to the care of their parents, they go on to have legal permanence with their carers via a Special Guardianship Order. Over the past 12 months, the service has focussed on ensuring the supports are made available to foster carers to become special guardians and this has resulted in an increase in the number of children ceasing to be looked after through this route (33 for 2020 -21).

The connected persons teams have also developed a number of bespoke supports to those carers they supervise during the year. This includes a support group, a specific newsletter and a tailored pre-approval training course entitled Skills to Care.

As part of the Coventry Family Valued programme, the initial stages of the assessment of connected persons foster carers will transfer to the connected persons team from being the responsibility of the children's social worker. There will also be an expanding focus on how to improve the support to connected persons carers in order to ensure that wherever possible children can remain in their extended family network.

Support to Foster Carers

The service has continued to focus on the consistency of support given to foster carers through ensuring consistency of the supervisory relationship, regular visiting patterns and that annual reviews of the foster carers' work take place.

A review of the process for foster carer supervisory visits is underway with two focus groups having taken place with foster carers for initial feedback and suggestions.

The service produces a monthly newsletter for all foster carers which includes contributions from a range of contributors including colleagues in health and education.

The Annual Foster Carers' Conference was due to take place in June 2020 and was delayed as a result of the pandemic. The conference took place virtually on 25/9/20. The theme was, "Fostering in the 21st Century". This included both a key note speech and a choice of workshops as well and was attended by around 95 fostering households.

Other events where the service and Council acknowledges the valuable work our foster carers do were also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Sons and Daughters events, the regular welcome events for newly approved carers and the annual foster carer appreciation event could not take place. However, foster carers and their birth children were provided with tokens of appreciation and thanks at regular intervals during the pandemic including a voucher for birth children and Christmas hampers. The Foster Carer Christmas Party took place virtually on 10/12/20 and included a performance from the Coventry City Council Staff choir.

The service provides an 'out of hours' telephone support for foster carers at all times - outside office hours through the fostering service on call rota.

The service runs a monthly support group for connected persons foster carers and special guardians alongside regular social events for those carers and their households.

In March 2021, a revised process for accessing sessional support to enable placement stability was launched. This enables the service to access support from either a practitioner based in the Edge of Care service or from a commissioned service where fostering placements are unstable and additional support from within the service has not proven effective in maintaining these.

The Mentoring Scheme launched in June 2020 with five experienced foster carers who helped the two Mentoring Co-ordinators to design the scheme. Since then there has been ongoing recruitment and the scheme now has 16 mentors, including one from the Next Steps Scheme. The mentors have so far supported 27 other foster carers. This includes 19 newly approved mainstream foster carers and two Next Steps carers, who were linked either just before attending Fostering Panel for approval or shortly afterwards. We have also matched mentors with experienced foster carers, including one connected persons foster carer, to provide support with particular areas of fostering – including managing particular aspects of children's behaviour, the impact of fostering on birth children and dealing with an allegation.

A new induction programme was devised for newly approved foster carers in March 2021. This comprises a rolling programme of 6 workshops to support these carers in developing in their role.

All foster carers approved by Coventry City Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network. This membership includes access to the Fostering Network's independent Advice and Mediation service.

Training and Development of Foster Carers

Foster carer training is provided through the Council's Organisational Development Team. This includes both mandatory courses ensuring that foster carers have the training necessary to undertake their role and more in-depth training for those carers who want to develop particular specialisms or a deeper knowledge of a subject area, for example attachment or caring for teenagers. In order to maximise the training offer to foster carers, wherever possible practitioners from the service facilitate the training for foster carers. During the past year face to face training has been unavailable and so, with the exception of first aid training, courses have taken place virtually. During the year there has also been increased take up of e learning courses by foster carers as an alternative to virtual courses in a group setting.

The Fostering Service contributes to monthly meetings to plan and coordinate the training offer. These meetings also include a foster carer representative.

The Fostering Service has supplemented the training offer for foster carers by providing a range of developmental activities including presentations at support groups and learning resources.

Workshops have also been provided on topics such as adverse childhood experiences and social pedagogy.

The service also continues to run regular refresher training for those foster carers who have completed the mandatory training. Foster carers are expected to undertake this every 3 years in order to keep up to date with their practise.

Preparation and training groups have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. The training, which is delivered by the fostering team, involves foster carers as well as care leavers. These groups have been facilitated virtually throughout the review period due to the pandemic restrictions.

The service continues to support newly approved foster carers in completing the mandatory Training Support and Development Standards (TSD). There is an adapted version of these standards for connected persons foster carers and there is an expectation that any connected person carer completes this within 18 months of approval.

Over the past 12 months, 2 practitioners in the team have undertaken a pilot programme alongside the West Midlands Teaching Partnership exploring the use of social pedagogy for foster carers looking after the children under the age of six years of age. There were six mainstream foster carers and one connected person carer who chose to take part in this project. Participants took part in eight group sessions between December 2020 and March 2021. Sessions were delivered remotely but activities were interactive and materials provided. The group explored key thinkers and models and facilitated reflection on parenting styles. All carers agreed that they found each session beneficial to their practice and made them more reflective about their caring approaches. The findings from this project are due to be published through Coventry University.

The Foster Carer Association / Foster Carer Consultation

All Coventry approved foster carers are members of the Coventry Foster Carer Association although participation is voluntary.

Between March and December 2020, the Foster Carer Association was dormant as the annual general meeting, at which a new committee would be elected, did not take place due to the pandemic. However, members of the previous committee continued to provide peer support to foster carers through hosting a social media group and running support groups for foster carers where restrictions allowed. A new committee was elected in December 2020 and regular monthly meetings resumed virtually. Social events run by the Foster Carer Association have not been possible due to the pandemic.

Foster carers are represented in a variety of ways within the wider children's services including in foster carer training, the corporate parenting board and interviews for new staff members. A foster carer also sits on the governing body of Coventry's virtual school.

Consultations with foster carers take place on a regular basis. This year these have included; a review of the support from the looked after CAMHS service, a review of the commissioned contact centre, a focus group on additional allowances and a review of the arrangements for foster carer supervision. Foster carers were regularly consulted in relation to changes to practice during the pandemic.

Fostering Panel

Over the course of the year, the Fostering Panel met on 40 occasions. This table gives a summary of the cases presented to these panels.

Category	Number 2020/21

Mainstream applications (Form F)	24
Connected Persons applications (Form C)	89
Connected Persons Extension to Regulation 24 – 16 - week temporary approval period	16
Foster Home Reviews	41
Foster Home Review - updates	10
Foster Home Reviews – post allegation	6
Long-Term matching reports	22
Exemptions	7
Changes of Approval	25
Resignations and de-registrations	Total number: 54 Connected Person - SGO granted 22 Connected Persons - other reason Mainstream 16 (including 2 partners who left the household)
Updates / Notifications	14
Appeals to Panel	1 - Mainstream

At the start of 2019, Coventry recruited a new Panel Chair and she remains in post. Coventry's Vice Chair has been a panel member for 12 years and took on the additional role as Vice Chair 8 years ago. Coventry recruited a second Vice Chair at the start of 2020, who has been an independent panel member for Coventry since 2014. A new Panel Advisor was appointed in September 2020.

Due to measures resulting from the pandemic, each Fostering Panel has taken place virtually. This has necessitated some changes to the panel process in particular around the preparation undertaken by panel members prior to the panel.

A panel training day took place in November 2020. Updates were provided on the work of the panel and changes to the fostering service. There were also sessions on substance misuse, disguised compliance, cultural competence and the legal framework for fostering.

Coventry's central list has 28 panel members (including the Chair, Vice Chair and Second Vice Chair). There have been four new panel members recruited in the last year, two external members: one (white British female) with a background in fostering and the other (white British male) with experience in the family courts and the health service. The other

two are social worker representatives within Coventry Children's Services: one social worker (Black British female) and one Team Manager (British Asian female).

The Panel Advisor and either the Panel Chair or Vice Chair has completed 20 appraisals of panel members between September 2020 and April 2021. The Agency Decision Maker alongside the Panel Advisor has completed the panel Chair, Vice Chair and Second Vice Chair's appraisals. The outstanding appraisals are due after new members have completed their first year.

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children observed panel in March 2021 and gave positive feedback from his observations of panel.

The fostering panel has focussed this year on improving the way in which long-term fostering matches include those children whose match is being presented. This has resulted in children being more involved in the panel discussions and the processes around this being altered in order to enable this.

The Panel Advisor has also produced an information leaflet for young children attending virtual panel for their long-term match, to help them understand what will happen in panel.

The Panel Advisor has quarterly meetings with the Agency Decision Maker, Panel Chair and Vice Chairs and Panel Support Officer. Meetings have been booked for the next year, to discuss panel business. This is an opportunity for the ADM to discuss any difference from the recommendation of panel, the Agency Decision Maker decision and the reasons behind this, to update on issues or changes in the fostering service and discuss and agree any necessary changes.

Fostering Schemes

The Next Steps fostering scheme was launched in May 2018 to provide intensively supported fostering placements to those children who might otherwise be placed in a children's home . Five households had been recruited as at 31/3/21. One of them has progressed from mainstream fostering to Next Steps. The scheme's criteria has been amended this year and now allows two placements per household once the Next Steps child has been stable for a period of twelve months. So far one Next Steps carer has taken up this option. The existing five placements supported through the scheme remain stable which has meant significantly improved outcomes for the children placed with Next Steps carers. All prospective Next Steps carers attend a two day 'understanding trauma and challenging behaviour' training course which is also open to mainstream foster carers and staff.

The fostering service also runs an out of hours fostering scheme to provide placements to those children who need these in an emergency outside office hours. There has been active recruitment to this scheme to develop its ability to provide sufficient placements for these children. However, demand for these placements is still greater than availability. A review of the criteria for the scheme was undertaken and changes made in April 2021.

Service Performance

During the past twelve months, the service has continued to focus on ensuring that records of work with foster carers demonstrate the impact that this is having and reflect compliance with the regulatory framework. In August 2020, the recording guidance for the service was updated and workshops were held with all staff to launch this. A new quality assurance checklist was also devised to enable fostering managers to provide consistency in overseeing case records.

Alongside observations of practice and consistent supervision of social workers these measures have improved the ability of the service to review its work.

The fostering service actively participates in both regional and national forums to promote improvements in our support to fostered children. The Operational Lead chairs the West Midlands Regional Forum for local authority fostering registered managers.

An update was made to the children's recording system in August 2020 to enable the service to more effectively monitor and promote long term fostering matches.

The Impact of Covid 19

Throughout the period covered by this report both fostering households and the fostering service have been significantly impacted, like the rest of the country, by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For foster carers this has led to a number of additional pressures including children spending more time in the home, children being educated from home for periods of time and changes to the availability of activities and events. Many children have had changes to their family time arrangements including for some periods this being facilitated through a virtual platform.

A number of fostering households were unable to consider further placements during the period of the pandemic. The reasons for this included risks to household members due to health vulnerabilities, anxiety around the challenge of new placements when access to child care support was reduced and changes to household membership due to lockdowns reducing physical space (for example adult children returning home for a period of time). The impact of this reduction in capacity has varied across the year but has resulted in around 20 fostering placements being unavailable at any given time.

Foster carers have been consulted with both collectively and individually to review the supports provided to them during the pandemic. For lockdown periods, many visits have taken place virtually but where needed face to face visits have been available at all times. The service has ensured that all activities during the pandemic period including fostering and children's social work visits and family time arrangements have been individually risk assessed and that the needs of all fostering household members have been considered within these risk assessments.

Financial Impact

	2018/19 £000	2019/20 £000	2020/21 £000
Budget	5,932	5,566	6,321
Expenditure	4,719	5,435	5,843

Internal fostering continues to be one of the most cost-effective placements for looked after children, on a unit cost basis. Expenditure continues to increase as the service grows, but this is more cost effective as well as providing quality outcomes for Coventry children. The budget will increase as appropriate in future years to reflect increased targets. Additional resources will also be made available as necessary to expand the internal fostering team to support the increasing numbers of foster carers.

Fostering fees for 2020/21 were increased by 1.5% from 2019/20 levels in order to recognise the impact of inflation and to ensure that our rates remain competitive with those of surrounding local authorities.

Future Priorities for the service

- Continuing work to increase the proportion of looked after children placed in an in-house fostering placement.
- Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the children placed in internally.
- Conclude work on improving conversion rates between enquiry and approval.
- Extend the range of in-house fostering provision to include increased availability for parent and child placements and placements for children with complex additional needs.
- Recruit further carers to the in house out of hours rota of foster carers to ensure placements are available as needed outside office hours.
- Continue to review and strengthen the training and development offer to foster carers.
- Develop an academy model to increase and coordinate the support offer for newly approved foster carers
- Undertake Coventry Family Valued work to ensure connected persons arrangements are in place where appropriate and to promote timely permanence in these arrangements.
- Work with Coventry Family Valued Programme to improve support to connected persons foster care and special guardianship.
- Work with commissioning colleagues to improve the quality of assessments that are completed on a sessional basis.
- Conclude update to supervisory visit arrangements.
- Continue to ensure foster carers are consulted about all changes that affect their role.

Report author:

Name and job title:

Katherine Robinson, Operational Lead Fostering

Directorate: People

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Public report Cabinet Member Report

Cabinet member for Children and Young People

7 October 2021

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People - Councillor P Seaman

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Director for Children's Services

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title:

Corporate Parenting Board- activity report 2020-21

Is this a key decision?

No - although the proposals affect more than two electoral wards, the impact is not expected to be significant.

Executive Summary:

This report documents the activity of the Corporate Parenting Board for 2020 to 2021 and the impact it has had to improve outcomes for Coventry's looked after children.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member is requested to:

- 1) Note the content of the report and endorse the work of the Corporate Parenting Board from 2020 to 2021.

List of Appendices included:

The report of the Corporate Parenting Board in 2020-2021 is attached.

Background papers:

None.

Other useful documents

None.

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No.

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

Yes –this report has been considered by the Corporate Parenting Board on 29 July 2021.

Will this report go to Council?

No.

Report title: Corporate Parenting Board- activity report 2020-21

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1** The Corporate Parenting Board is constitutionally required to oversee the outcomes of children and young people who are looked after by Coventry City Council. It is the place where voices of children can be heard about the services they receive, and work goes on with partners to make sure that looked after children in Coventry get the best possible outcomes. This report is the opportunity for members of the public to see these improvements.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1** Note the content of the report and endorse the work of the Corporate Parenting Board from 2020 to 2021.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

- 3.1** Children and young people are an active part of the Corporate Parenting Board. In addition, the Participation Team reports back on the work that children and young people have undertaken with organisations. They are given an opportunity to ask questions of managers and promote their views on how to improve looked after services further. Questions are always given a written reply.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

- 4.1** The work of the Corporate Parenting Board will continue and a work programme for 2021 to 2022 has already been approved.

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Director of Law and Governance

5.1 Financial implications

There are no financial implications as a result of this report.

5.2 Legal implications

There are no legal implications as a result of this report.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan (www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/)?

This work contributes to the Council Plan in the following ways:

- Globally connected- the Corporate Parenting Board looks at how to improve the employment opportunities for looked after children and care leavers. It also makes sure that it facilitates routes into work including apprenticeships for care leavers, paid at the living wage
- Locally connected- The Corporate Parenting Board ensures that educational outcomes for looked after children are improved. It also promotes links with health colleagues to see that children get the best health opportunities they can, which includes their mental

wellbeing. The partnership arrangements available through the Board makes sure that looked after children get the best possible start in life

- Delivering our priorities with fewer resources- the Corporate Parenting Board and its partners work with looked after children and care leavers to develop services that meet their needs. It is part of an innovative system that works together to resolve problems for looked after children.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

There are no identified risks to this work at the current time.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

None

6.4 Equality and Consultation Analysis (ECA)

Children young people and care leavers are key to the Corporate Parenting Board. Their views are canvassed on a very regular basis and contribute to the drive to improve the services they are offered.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

All the key partner agencies take an active part in the Corporate Parenting Board. A One Coventry approach is taken by the Board.

Report author(s):

Name and job title: Paul Smith Strategic Lead- looked after children

Service: Looked After Children

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Enquiries should be directed to the above person.

Contributor/approver name	Title	Service	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Usha Patel	Governance Services Officer	Law and Governance		28n September 2021
Names of approvers for submission: (officers and members)				
Finance: Tina Pinks	Finance Manager			20 September 2021
Legal: Julie Newman	City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer			2 September 2021
Director: John Gregg	Director of Children's Services			19 July 2021
Members: Councillor P Seaman	Cabinet Member for Children and Young People			11 August 2021

This report is published on the council's website:

www.coventry.gov.uk/councilmeetings

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Corporate Parenting Board Annual Activity Report 2020-2021

Introduction

The Corporate Parenting Board is a key feature of making sure that Coventry's looked after children and care leavers get the best possible outcomes. Coventry is proud of its looked after children and wants to take all possible opportunities to celebrate their achievements. The Corporate Parenting Board is an opportunity for young people to engage with Members and staff in Coventry to promote their voice.

Changes in Corporate Parenting Board

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Board has had to operate completely on-line this year. This has brought significant challenges for everyone involved. The Board depends on close and enduring personal relationships, which is impeded by working virtually. Having said this, all members of the Board have demonstrated commitment to making it work throughout the year. Young people have continued to be involved using a hybrid model of engagement.

The Board will continue to operate virtually, but it is the intention for the chair to move to face to face meetings at the earliest opportunity in line with government and Council guidelines.

The Board has remained consistent in its membership this year which has enriched developing relationships. The chair continues to prioritise young people's voices at the Board and look at ways in which the Board and its members can be accountable to them.

You said: we did

The Board has responded to young people this year in the following ways:

- Young people wanted a bigger voice at the Board in a way that made them feel included. As a result of this an inclusion strategy is being developed to be implemented this year

- Young people wanted reports to be made more accessible for them. There is now an expectation that a summary report is accessible for young people for each report presented to the Board
- Young people have requested agenda items that are of interest to them. These were scheduled into the programme
- Young people asked that they present an 'icebreaker' item at every Board meeting. This sets the scene for the meeting and helps develop relationships. This now happens at every meeting
- Young people ask questions about each agenda item. This is of direct relevance to them and the services they experience. Staff get the answers to these questions and present back to young people
- Young people asked for a question and answer session with Board members. This happened in the last Corporate Parenting Board meeting of the year
- Young people asked for a 'young person friendly' website so they can find out about services they can have. This is currently being developed
- Young people asked for information about how to access health services. Health maps are being developed.

Additional activity

The Board has reviewed a wide range of services that looked after children and care leavers experience. During the year the it received and discussed the following areas of work with young people and colleagues:

- The coronavirus pandemic and the way that all services responded to make sure looked after children and care leavers were cared for and supported
- How the child and adolescent mental health service supports the emotional well-being of looked after children and care leavers
- Adoption work with young children
- Education outcomes and how barriers are overcome
- Health issues for looked after children and care leavers. This was particularly with reference to substance abuse and how young people could get support with these issues if they needed to
- The development of the Coventry fostering service
- The city of culture programme and how this has been influenced by looked after children and care leavers.

The Board has also accepted the following reports for information and discussion:

- The exceptional allowances annual report
- The Pathways to Care annual report
- The annual fostering report
- The annual adoption report, including a report from Adoption Central England and the Adoption Panel Chair's report
- The new Belongings Action Plan
- The annual independent reviewing officer report
- Feedback on the care leaver conference
- The development of the House Project.

Overseeing these reports offers the Board the opportunity to obtain a deep insight into services across the whole city, for the complete age range of children and care leavers.

Voice of looked after children

Through the course of the year there has been a focus on promoting the voice of children and care leavers. The Board has the aspiration to be accountable for services to the children and care leavers that it is responsible for. There has been feedback at every meeting from children. This has been through the Participation team that co-ordinates Voices of Care. Care leavers have also had a presence at the Board, facilitated by staff from the through care service.

Although meetings took place virtually, a hybrid approach meant that young people are encouraged to participate. This has been within the covid guidelines that have impacted on the Board this year.

It is hoped that face to face meetings can start soon as guidance allows. This is the preferred arrangement by young people.

Next steps

The plans for the forthcoming year are to make the board even more accessible to young people. This will mean they have a better influence on the services that affect their lives.

Paul Smith

Strategic lead- looked after children

30 June 2021

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