

Annual Report of the Adoption Service 2017-2018 for Coventry City Council

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1. Introduction

This is the Coventry City adoption service report for the period 2017-2018. It provides an overview of adoption activity and performance and includes a contribution from the Chair of the Adoption Panel.

Since the previous report, Coventry City Council has transferred elements of its adoption service to the Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption Central England (ACE), which came into effect from 1 February 2018. This is in accordance with national policy that all local authority adoption services are required to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency by 2020.

The Government's policy is underpinned by a number of aims:

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

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

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

As a local authority shared service based on a hub and spoke model, it will have a wider pool of adopters for children which should impact on the timeliness of placements. A greater strategic approach can be taken to adopter recruitment and adoption support including the provision of therapeutic interventions, which will be delivered and coordinated more consistently and effectively across the region.

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

- Children’s social care redesign has led to children and young people experiencing fewer changes of social worker. This means that one social worker will be allocated to manage care proceedings and oversee adoption work
- Smooth transition of elements of the adoption service to the Regional Adoption Agency – ACE
- Robust and increased tracking arrangements for children pre-birth and post placement order
- An increase in awareness of Fostering to Adopt and operational arrangements to support the increase in Fostering to Adopt placements
- Completed a review of all adopters who were waiting in excess of a year for a placement and many of the adopters have now been matched with children.

2. Service Activity

Overall adoption performance:

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Number of enquiries	128	136	161	183	156
Adopter applications received	49	37	35	38	33
Adopters approved (households)	47	38	20	55 (32 households)	49 (25 households)
Number of adopters matched				23 (14 households)	55 (29 households)
Number of children adopted	52	70	54	48	29
Number of children placed with adopters	68	53	52	40	34
Number of children	38	6	33	55	35

awaiting match					
Number of disruptions	1 child	4 children	6 children	2 children	0

In summary, during 2017/18:

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

31 Children – were made subject to a Placement Order by the court

39 Children – were matched with prospective adopters

34 Children – were placed with adopters

29 Children – were made subject to an Adoption Order by the court.

Recruitment, Preparation and Assessment of adopters

Between 2 April 2017 and 24 October 2017 Coventry’s fostering service received 49 prospective adopter contacts. Between 1 February 2018 (when ACE went live) to 31 March 2018 ACE has received 107 prospective adopter contacts and 51 people (individuals not households) have attended information meetings. Enquiries were followed up with social worker contact and adoption information packs were sent out.

Improvements in the rigour of assessments are ongoing. There has been more use made of 2nd opinion visits, more challenge in supervision and in quality assurance during the panel/Agency Decision Maker (ADM) process. This has included quality assurance of matches with one high risk match in 2017 not recommended at panel and not approved by ADM. This work is continuing under ACE and a joint ACE, Maudsley Hospital and Bristol University project is currently collating research to provide practice guidance on assessment and support of adopters. Stronger and more bespoke support plans are expected in matching paperwork.

More emphasis is placed on the effects of trauma in adopter preparation training. Specific training for those in the adopter's support network was introduced in 2016 and Coventry increased the frequency of sessions in 2017

Family Finding

Family finders are identified for the following groups of children:

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

- Children who have been waiting for some time.

This year Coventry took part in the 'Finding me a Family' programme aired on Channel Four. The production team, Ricochet, worked alongside Coram, who facilitate children's activity days. Coventry was the chosen venue for this event, which took place on 15 July 18. Several adopters participated in the event, and two sets of adopters appeared on the programme. Children from Coventry were not represented at this event, but children from other local authorities attended and there was a potential link for one of the Coventry families.

Three children from Coventry attended an activity day in April 2017, in Northampton: one single child and a sibling group. Unfortunately there was no definitive match for the children, but subsequently they have all been placed for adoption.

Four children attended an activity day in May 2017, in Nottingham: one single child and a sibling group of three. Unfortunately there was no match for the three siblings and their plan subsequently has changed to one of long term foster care. A match for the single child was identified and has since been placed for adoption.

Since January 2015 Coventry has subscribed to Adoption Link. This is a web based search engine. This has been a useful tool for both adopters and social workers as they have been able to search, nationwide for children, and likewise search for families for Coventry children, who may not be able to be placed in the surrounding area, for example. Adopters are also added to Adoption Match. This has assisted with an improvement in the timeliness of adoption matches.

Matching

Coventry has made effective use of the research in respect of sibling adoption and has a good record of placing siblings together. Sibling assessments underpin and support decisions to place brothers and sisters together or apart and maintain contact. Staff and panel members have been trained in sibling assessments. This is reflected in the cohort of children adopted over 2014 - 2017 which included 26 sibling groups.

Case examples: In August 2017, two 4-year olds girls with complex and challenging needs were placed separately for adoption. Although the performance on the adoption score card will show delay, the team had to make sure that these placements were the 'right home' for the children. For one child the family finding was successfully found from an ACE exchange event. For the other child, a number of clinical supervision sessions helped to plan the transition move and after adoption support for the child. This demonstrates a child centred approach in Coventry, where the needs of the children override the need to pursue improved statistical outcomes.

On 31 March 2017, Coventry had 32 adoptive families who had been approved for over 12 months without a match. All of these families have now been reviewed and taken back to the Adoption Panel in line with regulation. Of these 32 families:

- 21 have now been matched or linked with a child/ren
- 3 families have now withdrawn
- 4 families have chosen to wait for a match at present due to family circumstances
- 1 family needs a full assessment due to changed family circumstances
- 3 families wait for a match.

The impact of improved practice in this area has meant that a higher number of children were matched for adoption in 2017/18 (39 children) than in 2016/17 (35 children). However, this has meant that the average number of days between adopter being approved and being matched (for those matched during year) has increased from 103 days in 2016/17 to 297 days in 2017/18. It is anticipated that this will significantly reduce in 2018/19 now that previous delays have been progressed and good practice continues.

Case example: One couple were approved in August 2015 and despite their strong application there seemed to be slow progress towards a match. The couple were matched in December 2017 and they plan to put in their adoption application soon.

An interagency placement occurs when a local authority places a child with an adopter approved by another agency (either local authority or voluntary adoption agency). A fee is paid to cover the cost incurred by that agency in recruiting, assessing, approving and family finding that adopter along with an element of for adoption support. Interagency placements are used for hard to place groups of children. It is anticipated that under the Regional Adoption Agency arrangements there will be a decrease in the use of interagency placement because the number and type of adopters has now increased across the 4 local authorities. There have been 6 (8 children; two sibling groups of two) interagency placements between 1 April 2017 and 31 January 2018 and 4 placements (4 children) between 1 February 2018 and 31 March 2018, since the new ACE arrangements have been in place. There were 10 placements for children from other local authorities placed with adopters assessed by Coventry.

Practice guidance has been issued to staff to raise awareness internally about foster for adoption and an unborn baby tracker has been developed to ensure pre-birth planning is robust. The LAC and Permanence Team co-work with the area social worker for any unborn children where care proceedings may be issued, to support effective pre-birth planning. There are several babies who were identified pre-birth for whom family finding began immediately and 2 foster for adoption placements where the baby was able to be discharged from hospital to their prospective adopters.

Case example: Baby A is a dual heritage female child and was placed in a fostering for adoption placement with a couple of a similar ethnic origin at four days at the time of being discharged from hospital. There were ongoing child protection concerns with her older half siblings who were due to be adopted by their foster carers so a separate placement was required from birth. The Adoption Order has since been granted.

Adopter feedback: This experience was very positive, although nerve-racking at times when dealing with legal matters. Nevertheless, we had a very positive adoption journey with our daughter and are now preparing to share our experience with other prospective adopters.

A workshop on transitions, for a child to be moved from a foster placement to their adoptive family, was held in autumn 2016 for staff, foster carers and adopters, and, as a result of this, playdates pre placement were introduced to help children and foster carers build up trust in adopters. Foster carers are also encouraged to stay in touch with children and adopters post placement.

3. Service Performance

National Performance Indicators	Government Target	CCC Three Year Average
A1 Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)	426 days	522 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)	121 days	204 days
A3 Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)	14 months	43.2%

The proportion of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive families was lower in 2017/18 (94 [34.0%]) than in the snapshot for year-end at 2016/17 (124 [46.8%]). Promisingly, more children were placed for adoption at year-end in 2017/18 (26) than at year-end in 2016/17 (21). For 11 of the 29 children who were made subject to an Adoption Order by the court in 2017/18, it took less than the government target of 426 days between the children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. Overall, the timeliness of children being matched with prospective adopters once a Placement Order has been granted decreased to an average of 141 days YTD in 2017/18 from 170 days in 2016/17.

This increase in timeliness has taken place during a year of substantial changes to the service design and delivery across Coventry's Children's Services and the transition to ACE which is intended to improve practice for all children. The impact, and anticipated benefits, of the Children's Services redesign and regional adoption agency can only be evidenced over time.

There are a number of children who are more difficult to place for whom adoptive families have been secured. This includes an older sibling group that met the 426 day target and an older child whose adoption was quicker than those of a similar age. There has also been an increase in the number and proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children adopted as a proportion of all children leaving care in 2017/18 (11 [4.7%]) than in 2016/17 (5 [2.0%]).

Since re-structure of Coventry's Children's Services, and the transition to ACE, a new tracking system has been implemented. This is robust and has been evidenced by the first fostering to adopt placement within 4 weeks of the new arrangements. This will lead to a more seamless approach for timely placement of children. Coventry Children's Services has a robust tracking system, including trackers for unborn children, pre-proceedings, during care proceedings and post-placement order, to ensure robust and timely care planning takes place to ensure early permanence without unnecessary delay.

Mirroring a national trend, there has been a slowing of the number of Placement Orders being secured. This is as a result of case law that requires local authorities to explore family options in greater detail before considering adoption. However, the number of decisions to progress a plan of adoption remains consistent and Coventry has a robust process for concurrent planning so that time is not lost should adoption become the child's plan.

There have been a number of foster carers wishing to adopt, or pursue a Special Guardianship Order, for children in their care. In 2017/18, 9 out of 29 children were adopted by their foster carer/s. These arrangements have sometimes caused delay to the adoption planning for the child because the foster carer's commitment to the assessment and subsequent completion has not been timely. Practice guidance has

been issued to staff to raise awareness and an adoption workshop was held on 17 April 2018 to ensure that the need for parallel planning in their circumstances is imperative to the child's outcomes.

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

4. Adoption Support Services

The Adoption Support Team offers a variety of activities/support for adopters. Social workers within the team run a bi-monthly 'Coffee Morning' which gives adopters an opportunity to meet with other adopters offering the chance to build friendships and share experiences. This is attended by a regular group of between five and ten adopters and their children (pre-school in term time, all ages in the school holidays).

Each year, in partnership with Warwickshire County Council, an Annual Adoption Fun Day is held. This is always an immensely popular occasion, a well-attended and enjoyable event.

Feedback from the adoptive parent of and four year old boy and a seven year old girl: "The Activity Day always goes on our calendar, as our kids have such a good time. This year we even remembered to join the balloon modelling queue straight away, so we must be old hands! Our son's Spiderman balloon seemed to start a trend. Living out of city, we rarely venture over to Coventry for events, so this is our annual chance to catch up with the team. Our daughter can never believe that all the children there are adopted like her, and she particularly enjoys the craft table. As we piled back into the car with sweets and handfuls of colourful creations, the kids looked ready for bed!"

Whilst the annual adoption day has provided 120 children and their adoptive families with an annual celebration over the past 10 years, recent innovations include Saturday workshops to help the family and friends of adopters understand the effects of trauma and the need for therapeutic parenting, an adopter to adopter mentoring scheme and consultation and clinics for staff supporting families in difficulty.

The service continues to develop a forum to gather views of adopted children and their parents. Coventry runs a monthly event in conjunction with a voluntary adoption agency, After Adoption. This scheme, Talk Adoption, ensures that feedback on

services is obtained and as a result services can be developed to meet the needs of children.

Adopters also have their own self-led support forum. The group hold regular meetings at which they focus on particular topics of interest to them. The forum plan is to meet to consider Attachment and Trauma in the Classroom, Pupil Premium and Transition to School. The Virtual School attended the first session in March 2018 to support the group. Ten adopters attended Adoption UK's conference this year. The theme there was also Attachment and Trauma in the Classroom. Adopters advise social workers that they also utilise online networking groups to explore relevant issues and exchanges of information, using this as a means of garnering additional support.

In February 2017, Coventry's mentoring group was set up in partnership with Warwickshire County Council. Mentors (who are adopters themselves) support adopters who are isolated or struggling with challenging children. The mentors are supervised by a counsellor who attends supervision meetings to give guidance and advice to the mentors. There are four mentors at present with plans to recruit more over the next year.

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

Coventry social workers facilitate Family and Friends Workshops. This year there has been a great deal of interest in attending, which is very positive, as lack of family and friends support has previously been an identified issue in post adoption. The December event was attended by over twenty family and friends of adopters. Issues discussed cover, neglect and abuse, trauma, development, attachment and 'The Wall', which consider the 'gaps' in the foundations of early life that adopted children have experienced.

There are six social workers in the Adoption Support Team and one part time manager. Five social workers, and the team manager have now completed Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) at Level 1. Three social workers attend a bi-monthly regional peer support group which looks to 'develop their DDP skills to get together and share DDP ideas, experiences, dilemmas and questions.' One social worker has completed Theraplay Level 1 training. The continued development of professional practice is invaluable to social workers providing a responsive, educated and knowledgeable service within the Adoption Support Team. The skills base of the social worker team allows their support to sit alongside that of the therapeutic services being provided by psychotherapists/psychologists via the Adoption Support Fund. Adopters are re-assured that their social worker is experienced and knowledgeable, and can be supportive with the challenges that they are facing. Adopters have recognised the professional contribution the social workers have made in supporting them as evidenced in the below adopter feedback.

Adopter 1 feedback: “Just a note to let you know that our daughter has been offered a place at her first choice school, an amazing local comprehensive. That wouldn't have happened without your going the extra mile to get that paperwork in so we can't thank you enough. We have to go through it all again for her brother later this year but thankfully we appear to have the key document for him to hand which should make it easier.”

Adopter 2 feedback: “I want you to know how much I appreciate all that you have done, listening, supporting, making the CAMHS appointment, following up with the SEN officer. You have made a very stressful and difficult time less lonely. I am looking forward to moving on as a family. We have many months/years ahead repairing C's self-esteem and the damage caused however, at least I know he will feel safer now and that is so important. I am hopeful the DDP will go ahead, and am happy to wait for it to start as I know it will be beneficial.”

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

Adoption Support Fund

The use of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), a central government funding stream, has enabled children to be kept with their families. Many families have struggled with the needs of very challenging children/young people and the support of the social worker and therapist has enabled the family to stay together and for improved outcomes to be achieved.

There has been a steady increase in the number of ASF applications since the fund became available in May 2015. During the year 2015/16 11 applications were made on behalf of families in Coventry. This increased to receiving £57,520 for services supporting 37 families requiring specialist therapeutic support in 2016/17. This has further increased to 53 applications and the total funding received was £124,701 in 2017/18.

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

5. Adoption Panel Report

During the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018 there were 24 Adoption Panel Meetings.

The following matters were presented to the Panel for consideration:

	1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018
Prospective Adopter Assessments	19
Adoption Placements (matches)	28
Plan for adoption (relinquished child)	1
Adopter Resignations noted	3
Long term fostering matches	7
Reviews of waiting adopters	10
Adoption Disruptions brought to panel	1 (disruption occurred in 2016/17)

Panel Membership

The central list panel members over the year were:

Independent Chair

Independent member and Vice Chair x 2

Independent members x 3

Medical adviser

Elected member

Social work representatives x 4

The panel met as required on 24 occasions, once a fortnight. Panel required 5 panel members in attendance to be quorate, including at least one independent member and at least one social work representative. There was a reliable core group of members and usually 6 attended. The panel was representative of the diversity of the population. A number of panel members had personal experience of adoption and they brought significant understanding of the needs of children and young people who required adoptive placements. One panel member had personal experience of having been in care and there was also experience in social work, health and counselling. It was thought, however, that the panel would benefit from the input of a younger person with care experience and such an appointment was made in February 2018. This young man will join the ACE Panel as soon as all checks are received.

An existing member was appointed as a second Vice Chair in May 2017. After induction, the second Vice Chair successfully chaired the Panel on 3 occasions in the absence of the Chair.

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

Panel members were invited to staff training on Adoption Disruptions and on Child Permanence Reports held in May 2017. Panel members also attended a Panel members' conference run by the West Midlands Adoption Consortium in October 2017. This included a very useful input on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

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

Feedback to presenting social workers

Panel members were requested to make notes on the quality of the paperwork provided for panel's consideration.

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

Feedback to panel

Feedback questionnaires are given to applicants and carers on the day of attendance at panel. Feedback has been generally very positive regarding the panel process. Prospective adopters felt they were well prepared for panel and that questions were appropriate and sensitively asked. There has been feedback that

panel occasionally runs behind schedule causing delay for those attending which raises the anxiety of prospective adopters.

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

All presenting social workers were requested to complete questionnaires on their experience of attending Panel. In the event of concerns being raised, these are fed back to the next panel for reflection. There has been feedback that questions raised by panel are appropriate and that the experience is useful and informative for social workers. People occasionally wait for some time before their case is heard and this is something the panel is aware of. It is important to remain focused and time conscious. Comments on the temperature of the waiting room and the response from staff at reception desk have also been addressed. The Panel was moved to a new meeting room in Broadgate House in December 2017. The meeting room is much brighter and a waiting room is also provided.

Fostering for adoption

4 prospective adopter households were recommended with advice that they could consider Fostering for Adoption placements over the year and Panel queried the limited use of such placements. It appears that Fostering for Adoption is not always considered in the early permanence planning for children whose circumstances might lend themselves to such an arrangement. The Panel Advisor raised this with the ADMs and with the LAC/Permanency Team with a view to Fostering for Adoption being considered more routinely in early interventions.

Regionalisation

The Panel was informed periodically by the Panel Advisor on the progress of the regional adoption agency (ACE).

Panel members were invited to a consultation event regarding regionalisation developments in August 2017 and were invited to give feedback regarding the future organization of panels. Panel members expressed concern at the limited consultation and the new terms and conditions proposed. There was particular concern over the Panels being required to hear many cases at each meeting in shorter time frames. Panel members highlighted concern that this would impact on the ability of the Panel to challenge effectively and would discourage genuine participation of attendees. Individual members fed back their concerns to ACE leadership and these issues have also been taken up by the Panel Advisor with some compromise being reached.

Meeting with Managers and Agency Decision Maker

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

Feedback to the Service

The Panel Advisor presented Learning from Coventry Adoption Panel to staff and managers across the service at presentations in December 2017 and January 2018. In January 2018 the Panel advisor raised the need for service wide training on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and this is being now being considered by Training and Development. Further pointers for good practice in writing CPRs and APRs were produced by the Panel Advisor in March 2018.

Chair's Comments

The Panel worked very well over the year. It provided an important check and balance when considering the assessments of prospective adopters and adoption placements for Coventry's looked after children. It considered an adoption plan for one child.

The Panel has grown in confidence in its role and was able to challenge and support practice over the year. It played a part in promoting longer transitions for children moving from foster care to adoption and advocated and supported the use of play dates prior to moves.

This is the last annual report regarding the work of Coventry's Adoption Panel per se as it will no longer meet from April 2018. The Panels run by ACE will take its place. I believe it has been a very effective Panel with members who showed great commitment and consideration in supporting the adoption outcomes for Coventry's children.

6. Service Plan 20218-2019

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

- Continue to foster strong, effective working relationships with ACE colleagues

- Effective pre-birth, pre-proceedings, care proceedings and post-placement order tracking to ensure timely permanence is achieved for all children, including those who are subject to an adoption plan
- An improvement in the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) performance which is the nationally set government targets for adoption practice
- Further analysis of the ALB data to ensure that learning from children whose adoption took longer than the national average targets is collated and disseminated with the aim of improving the time taken between obtaining a Placement Order and matching panel
- To build upon the identified successes of the tracking process and increase the number of children placed in Fostering for Adoption placements
- Robust review and tracking of all children subject to a placement order to ensure family finding is undertaken with the urgency that is required
- Robust Adoption Support Plans including management oversight
- All children receive good quality Life Story Work and Later Life Letters (both of which are received by the adopters within 10 days of the Adoption order being granted).

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

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