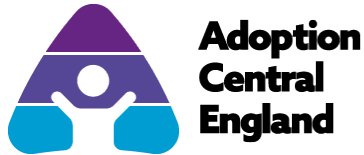Adoption
Central
England

Annual Report 2018-2019

Adoption Central England Annual Report 2018-2019

1. Introduction

1.1   Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and Worcestershire County Council joined with Warwickshire County Council (the host) on 1 February 2018 to form Adoption Central England (ACE). ACE is a local authority shared service and was the seventh regional adoption agency to become operational in the country.

1.2   This is the first annual report that provides a summary of activity and developments within ACE that covers the first 14 month period up to 31 March 2019. It can be read alongside the ACE Adoption Panel Annual Report 2018-2019

2. Background Information

2.1   Following legislation arising from four Department for Education (DfE) policy papers on adoption, the Regionalising Adoption paper published in June 2015 spelt out the government's expectations for all local authorities to be part of a regional adoption agency and 'Adoption: A vision for change' (April 2016) commited to deliver a radical, whole system redesign by regionalising adoption services by 2020.

2.2   ACE has been at the forefront of this development as a demonstrator site that sought to put the voice of adopters at the heart of the regionalisation initiative. The overarching aim of ACE is to *provide an innovative service for children, adoptive families and others affected by adoption. This is by offering lifelong support based on up to date practices and interventions and supported by modern technology.*

2.3   The 10 areas identified for improvement at the outset were:

- To improve adopter recruitment to meet children's needs,
- To have better tracking of children to improve placement timeliness,
- To identify potential adopters for children at the adoption decision stage,
- To have bespoke recruitment for children with complex needs,
- To develop and embed early permanence,

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

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

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

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

3. Main issues

3.1 Use of resources

Staffing

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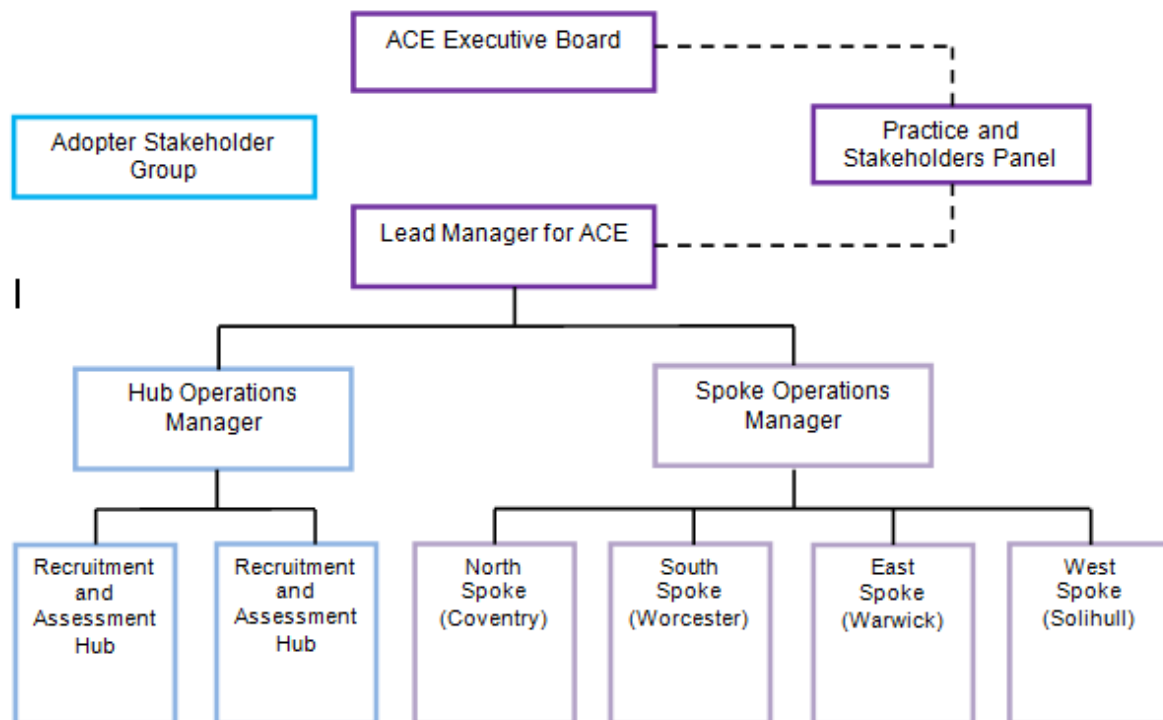
3.1.2 ACE delivers its services through a hub and spoke model with a central referral point based in the hub in Warwick. The central hub is concerned with the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters. The same staff are also involved in matching children with adopters and providing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

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

3.1.4   The ACE structure was funded from the 'as is' adoption service budgets that were amalgamated and allowed for the transfer of support functions from the local authorities into ACE and the host authority. ACE has a staffing compliment of 31.42 FTE social workers and a further small therapeutic team consisting of 2.42 FTE social workers with funding being accessed from the Adoption Support Fund for 1.42 FTE of these posts. ACE has had a high staffing retention level and the main staffing issue has been the absence of male staff in the workforce. Due to workload volumes ACE has also recruited to a pool of adoption social workers who are employed on a zero hour basis – they are able to support the service during periods of high workload and to cover maternity leave.

3.1.5   Since the start of ACE two staff members have resigned and two further have retired. There has been a high level of maternity leave and some sickness absence covered by contingency arrangements.

3.1.6   Working across a wide geographical area has presented some challenges for staff; however a pragmatic approach is taken in order to reduce travelling time as much as possible. Opportunities have been made for whole staff group meetings and training, and smaller groups of staff meet together for group supervision.

3.1.7   A unifying factor has been the decision for ACE to work towards certification as a service underpinned by Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) informed practice. This approach to be used by all ACE staff supports adoptive parents to offer their adopted children a healthy and developmentally corrective experience so that they learn to trust their adoptive parent/s and feel comfortable in their relationships with them. Adoptive parents are helped throughout the adoption process to recognise and meet their child/ren's hidden as well as expressed attachment needs and to provide relationships that help their child/ren recover from trauma and loss and to feel secure.

3.1.8   An 80% target has been set for ACE social workers to be trained at DDP Level 1. There have been further staff training and group supervision opportunities focused on DDP practice and the opportunity to staff to meet with the consultant psychologist who is supporting ACE with this process. Staff have seen this as an investment in them and the model provides a firm basis from which effective services and interventions are provided to families.

3.1.9   All ACE staff have been issued with Warwickshire County Council laptops, ACE email addresses and mobile phones. Through the Liberty telephone system a call can be transferred to any ACE staff member anywhere across the region. So that the service functions as efficiently as possible the use of technology is encouraged and is to be developed further.

Duty System

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

Business Support

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

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

Adoption Panel

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

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

3.2   Partnership working

3.2.1   The importance of partnership working underpins the ACE governance arrangements. The Executive Board is made up of senior managers from each of the local authorities and has been represented by voluntary agency partners – Barnardos and After Adoption during the first year of operation.

3.2.2   The Executive Board is the key decision making body of ACE providing oversight, advice and endorsement of the strategic direction of ACE as reflected in the agreed statement of purpose. It receives performance information, monitors the operations of ACE and determines funding arrangements. It oversees the formulation of the annual service plan and resolves conflicts between competing interests of the parties.

3.2.3   Beneath the Executive Board the Practice and Stakeholders Panel including representations from the local authorities and a range of partner agencies e.g. education, health, aims to develop good practice and joint working between agencies, monitors and reviews ACE functions and resolves any operational difficulties. It provides the avenues for maintaining strong communication links between agencies and stakeholders.

3.2.4   ACE has also set up an Adopter Stakeholder Panel and an adopted young person's support group is in the process of being established with its first meeting planned for 4 May 2019.

3.2.5   ACE managers also meet at intervals with the local authority Heads of Children in Care Services, data analysts, fostering managers and independent reviewing officer managers.

3.2.6   Through these arrangements efforts are made to ensure that ACE key aims are achieved and that children are placed in a timely manner with families who are appropriately prepared and supported (in the long term as necessary) to meet their needs. Examples of best practice are shared and practice guidance has been developed. There has also been discussion and negotiation around aspects of practice which may have differed from the pre ACE era. Clarification about roles and responsibilities has been achieved through the agreed Service Specification document.

3.2.7   ACE has also developed a partnership with Adopt Thames Valley to increase the recruitment of BME families and has had initial discussions with the voluntary partners about the scope to extend adoption support services in future pending decisions regarding the future of the Adoption Support Fund.

3.3   Performance Management

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4   Adoption Support

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Non Violent Resistance – a 5 session programme with 4

> embedding sessions plus individual consultation.
> - Therapeutic and Sensory Based Parenting – a 4 week programme with a follow up session.

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

4. Practice Improvement

4.1 Practice Improvement Fund – Assessment and Matching Project

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

This project is ongoing.

4.2 ACE Website Development

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

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

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

4.3 Practice Guidance

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

has been produced and shared in the following areas:

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

4.4   Promoting Permanence through Adoption training

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

5. Disruptions

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

6. Quality Assurance

6.1   The main quality assurance processes in ACE are through:

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

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

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

6.4   The voice of the child will be heard through the plans to set up an Adopted Young Persons Group that are well underway.

6.5   The Adoption Panel has strengthened its feedback processes and it has been agreed with the local authorities that quarterly feedback will be provided.

7. Staff Development and Support

7.1   An annual Workforce Development Plan is in place that is supplemented by a programme and training on DDP (due July 2019). A clinical psychologist supports ACE in developing its DDP credentials and offers individual and group consultations to ACE staff.

7.2   ACE staff have completed safeguarding training that was well received and focused on 'Monitoring and assessing a child's experience in care'.

7.3   Further training and support is offered through group supervision sessions that are held at regular intervals, and two full service events take place each year.

8. Equality and diversity

8.1   ACE has completed an Equality Impact Assessment and this is updated annually. ACE currently has an all female staff group that includes staff members with direct personal experience of adoption.

8.2   ACE provides all services in an anti-discriminatory manner and has proactively encouraged the recruitment of adoptive families from the black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups. It has started to work with a neighbouring regional adoption agency on an initiative to increase the awareness of adoption in these communities. Planned publicity in The Voice will feature children alongside an explanation about the adoption process.

8.3   ACE has also subscribed to New Family Social and has seen an increase in the number of applications from same sex couples.

9. Overall impact and future plans

9.1   ACE is able to demonstrate the progress it has made against the 10 areas for improvement outlined above. The area least developed concerns special guardianship support where support and some training has been offered by ACE.

9.2   In the first 12 -14 months of operation ACE has

- Established its brand identity
- Consolidated its staff group and has committed to having a DDP informed approach leading towards certification

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

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

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

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

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

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

10. Conclusion

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

Brenda Vincent
Lead Manager – ACE
11 July 2019