

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Service Activity

Adoption recruitment activity is now reported by ACE

Overall children’s performance:

	2017/18	2018/19
Number of children adopted	29	36
Number of children placed with adopters	34	30

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

In summary, during 2018/19:

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

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

30 children – were matched with prospective adopters

30 children – were placed with adopters

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

Recruitment, Preparation and Assessment of adopters

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

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

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

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

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

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

Family Finding

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

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

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

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

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

Interagency placements

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

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

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

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

Foster to Adopt

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

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

During the Ofsted focused visit in February 2019, foster to adopt was identified as an area of strength in Coventry’s practice. This demonstrates a close working relationship between Coventry City Council and ACE which promotes early permanence for children when this is the right plan for them.

Disruptions

In the previous 12 months, 4 children have experienced placement disruption. Each child has had a disruption meeting, which has been independently chaired with the aim of understanding the sequence of events leading up to the disruption in line with compliance. This information has been used to inform individual care planning. In response to the findings Coventry City Council and ACE have developed an action plan, which includes new practice guidance and several training events.

3. Service Performance

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

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	547 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	249 days
A3 Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)	14 months	41.1%

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

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

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

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

There are a number of children who are 'more difficult to place' for whom adoptive families have been secured. Five children from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds have been adopted. This represents 2% as a proportion of all children leaving care in 2018-19. The Adoption Scorecard data shows that 17% of BME children left care through adoption between 2015/18.

A tracking system that includes the monitoring of pre-proceedings, care proceedings and progress of post-placement orders is now embedded between Children's services and ACE. This system has been effective in early family finding for unborn

children. Placing them in foster to adopt arrangements, where possible. This has led to 10 children being placed in their forever families without unnecessary delay.

The number of placement orders secured in the last 12 months is 28, which is a slight reduction on the previous year of 31. This is in line with national trends where authorities are seeing more Special Guardianship Orders made by the courts.

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 6 foster carers wishing to adopt children in their care this year. These adoptions, which are excellent outcomes for children, impact upon data performance. Despite this Coventry will continue to promote such outcomes as being in the best interests of children.

Overall, service improvements have made it more likely that adopted children will achieve good 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 ACE adoption support team offers a range of support for adopters by providing therapeutic interventions to families. This is either in a group setting or on an individual basis as the need arises.

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

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

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

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

ACE held their first adoption fun day for their adopted children and families in February 2019, 400+ adopters and children attended this event held at Stoneleigh Park, with a further fun day to be held in February 2020. ACE have also held

adoption picnics in the summer of 2018, with this being repeated for the summer of 2019, where adoptive families across the region including Coventry are invited to attend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adoption Support Fund

The use of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), a central government funding stream, has provided essential therapeutic support for adoptive families. The ASF has enabled therapeutic services to be delivered to adopted children and their families to stabilise placements through, for example, improving relationships, reducing child to parent violence and improving engagement with learning. A range of therapeutic interventions has been funded including DDP, Theraplay, Sensory Integration therapy, therapeutic parenting work and life story work.

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

5. Adoption Panel Report

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

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

	1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019
Prospective Adopter Assessments	96
Adoption Placements (matches)	104
Plan for adoption (relinquished child)	3
Adopter Resignations noted	0

Adoption Disruptions brought to panel	5 (4 from Coventry)
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Panel Membership

The central list panel members over the year were:

Independent Chair

Independent member and Vice Chair x 2

Independent members x 3

Medical adviser

Elected member

Social work representatives x 4

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

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

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

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

Further training throughout 2019 will expand panel members' understanding of the principles of DDP. This will inform how panel members frame questions at the adoption panel.

Panel advice at reviews of waiting adopters has been well established and was well received. Adopters and social workers have been able to use panel advice to update Prospective Adopters Reports and better evidence adopters' experience and capacity with a view to making a match. On one occasion, Panel did not recommend a proposed placement of a child with prospective adopters. The Panel's reasons

were accepted by the ADM. Panel was appropriately challenging and child centred in its focus throughout the year.

Feedback to presenting social workers

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

Feedback to panel

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

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

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

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

6. Service Plan 2019-2020

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

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

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

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