

Corporate Parenting Panel

Date: Monday 14 February 2022

Time: 10.00 am

Membership

Councillor Jeff Morgan (Chair)
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Marian Humphreys
Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse

Items on the agenda: -

- 1. General**
 - (1) Apologies**
 - (2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests**
 - (3) Minutes of the previous meeting** 5 - 8
- 2. Children in Care Council - Update** 9 - 14
- 3. Performance Data** 15 - 16
- 4. Warwickshire Adoption Report** 17 - 32
- 5. ACE Annual Report** 33 - 104
- 6. The Vanguard Project (verbal update)**
- 7. Development of the Work Programme for 2020/2021** 105 - 108
- 8. Good News Stories**

Officers to put forward good news stories for children looked after, care leavers or foster carers.
- 9. Any Other Business**

10. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday 21 March 2022 at 10am.

The meeting will be held in Committee Room 2, Shire Hall, Warwick.

Monica Fogarty
Chief Executive
Warwickshire County Council
Shire Hall, Warwick

Disclaimers

Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Members are required to register their disclosable pecuniary interests within 28 days of their election or appointment to the Council. Any changes to matters registered or new matters that require to be registered must be notified to the Monitoring Officer as soon as practicable after they arise.

A member attending a meeting where a matter arises in which they have a disclosable pecuniary interest must (unless they have a dispensation):

- Declare the interest if they have not already registered it
- Not participate in any discussion or vote
- Leave the meeting room until the matter has been dealt with
- Give written notice of any unregistered interest to the Monitoring Officer within 28 days of the meeting

Non-pecuniary interests relevant to the agenda should be declared at the commencement of the meeting.

The public reports referred to are available on the Warwickshire Web
<https://democracy.warwickshire.gov.uk/uuCoverPage.aspx?bcr=1>

Public Speaking

Any member of the public who is resident or working in Warwickshire, or who is in receipt of services from the Council, may speak at the meeting for up to three minutes on any matter within the remit of the Committee. This can be in the form of a statement or a question. If you wish to speak please notify Democratic Services in writing at least two working days before the meeting. You should give your name and address and the subject upon which you wish to speak. Full details of the public speaking scheme are set out in the Council's Standing Orders.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Any member or officer of the Council or any person attending this meeting must inform Democratic Services if within a week of the meeting they discover they have COVID-19 or have been in close proximity to anyone found to have COVID-19.

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Corporate Parenting Panel

Monday 18 October 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Jeff Morgan (Chair)
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Marian Humphreys

Officers

Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer
Shinderpaul Bhangal, Corporate Parenting (Team Leader - Participation)
Ian Donnachie, Children in Care 14-18 years Apprentice
Demi English, Practice Improvement Apprentice
Alisha Howe, Fostering Team Apprentice
Simon Lewis, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Property Management)
Deena Moorey, Virtual School Head
Lis Phillips, Sessional Worker (NW & Bed)
Sharon Shaw, Service Manager - Corporate Parenting Service
Matt Smith, Targeted Support Youth Worker
Jessica Tarn, Practice Improvement Apprentice
Umar Teerab, Family Support Worker

Others Present

Jackie Channell, Head of safeguarding - Warwickshire
Becky Evans, Community Development Officer (North Warwickshire BC)
Jane Grant, Strategic Housing & Communities Manager (Nuneaton & Bedworth BC)
David Wortley, Community advice and support team manager (Rugby BC)

1. Welcome and Introductions

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and round the (virtual) table introductions were made.

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell and Councillor Jerry Roodhouse.

Apologies were also received from Ian Budd, Assistant Director (Education Services), John Coleman, Assistant Director (Children & Families) and Nigel Minns, Strategic Director (People Directorate).

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

2. What is Corporate Parenting?

Sharon Shaw, Service Manager (Corporate Parenting), gave a presentation to the Panel “What is Corporate Parenting?” with the following introduction –

“Corporate parenting refers to the shared responsibility across the council to ensure that children and young people in our care or leaving care are supported to thrive”

The following points were highlighted –

- The Panel noted the key responsibilities in order to be a good corporate parent; for example, seeking the same outcomes any good parent would want for their own child and listening to the views of our children and young people and taking account of them.
- The Panel learnt of the role of Local Authorities in looking after children and young people and noted that all council employees should ask “would this be good enough for my child?”.
- Sharon Shaw introduced the seven Corporate Parenting Principles as per The Children and Social Work Act 2017. The Panel noted the areas where corporate parenting principles are most relevant including education, housing, health and wellbeing plans and local tax collection.
- Sharon Shaw introduced the Panel to the services included in Corporate Parenting providing a brief explanation for each one. Services include. Children’s homes, the asylum team, fostering and leaving care support.
- The discussion moved on to Warwickshire County Council’s Local Offer – a requirement for local authorities to publish information about services offered to care leavers as they transition to adulthood and independent living. Warwickshire County Council’s offer includes financial support, housing, health, education and training. The Panel saw comparisons between WCC’s offer and the offer from Nottingham City Council; it was noted that there are many similarities but areas where both authorities could improve.

Representatives were encouraged by the presentation and given the opportunity to pass any questions via Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer after the meeting.

3. Inclusion of Young People in Corporate Parenting.

Shinderpaul Bhangal, Corporate Parenting (Team Leader) introduced the presentation to the Panel which will show how children and young people are able to influence the council’s services and how improvements can be made to provide a better future for children in care.

Umar Teerab, Family Support Worker stated that children and young people are given the opportunity to express how they are feeling and that it is key they are seen to have a name, and

not just be a case number. It was noted that young people look to officers for help and support, and to be the parent.

Alisha Howe, Apprentice (Fostering Team) spoke to the Panel in relation to the Care Leaver's Charter and The Warwickshire Pledge. The Panel was pleased to note the involvement of children and young people in helping to make decisions that impact their lives.

It was noted that as a result of the pandemic, the Children in Care Council had continued to meet virtually but that in person meetings were now being reintroduced. These meetings are a chance for officers to listen to young people and for young people to feedback, positively and negatively.

Demi English, Practice Improvement Apprentice confirmed that a range of virtual workshops have been held on topics such as Asylum and Carer Leaving services and Online Foster Care Conference. Children and young people were also invited to a recent Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting where councillors were able to listen to the concerns, ideas and priorities.

It was noted that young people had also attended full council and informed elected members of their achievements, such as the Baby Box Project. It was agreed that this shone a very positive light on the children and young people of Warwickshire. Young people will be given a slot at the Senior Leadership Team's Christmas meeting.

Following the recent Young Inspectors sessions, Jessica Tarn, Practice Improvement Apprentice confirmed that they would be meeting with the Minister of Housing to feedback.

The Panel learnt about the success of The House Project in Warwickshire which supports young people leaving care and moving to independent living. It was confirmed that there are plans to expand the project county wide and grow the team.

Matt Smith, Targeted Support Youth Worker confirmed that The House Project is part of a national project and has been running in Warwickshire for three years and is part of the core offer within the council. All young people are successfully managing their tenancies and ongoing support is in place. It is a solution faced way of working and we want it to move forward.

The Chair confirmed he has visited the House project and was really impressed with the young people and the staff; but help is needed to expand across Warwickshire.

Councillor Caroline Phillips asked if loneliness is an issue for young people move into their own properties and what can be done about it. It was confirmed that there is a large group of young people offering peer support and ongoing support from officers. Activities and events are arranged; covid permitting. There is a lot of mutual support from the project – a community of support.

Shinderpaul ended the presentation stating that he hoped the information that has been heard today highlights how important it is that children and young people have their voice heard.

4. Question and Answer Session

Jane Grant, Strategic Housing & Communities Manager at Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council thanked the Panel for the invitation to today's presentation and stated that she had learnt a lot from the young people who had spoken. In relation to the issue of housing supply across the county, with reference to The House Project, Jane confirmed that there is a commitment to support care leavers but it must be noted that there is a national shortage of housing.

A suggestion was made that a collection of data in relation to the shortage of housing would be useful for members of this panel to raise awareness of the acute shortage of housing and how the demand is met. It was agreed that care leavers are one of several priority groups but that Heads of Housing across the county could look at engaging with local housing associations and how they could support young people moving forward.

Sharon Shaw, Service Manager (Corporate Parenting) confirmed that the meeting aimed to identify the right people for the County Council to invite from the district and boroughs to each meeting to provide ongoing support. It was agreed that it would not always be appropriate for housing officers and managers to attend if the Panel were discussing topics such as leisure passes and other support options for care leavers.

Following a question from Jane Grant in relation to other examples of two-tier authorities and how their local offers work, Sharon Shaw confirmed that Worcestershire and Staffordshire are part of the same National Bench Marking forum; and that there is an option to ask questions of other members. It was agreed that this is something that officers can investigate.

Sharon Shaw asked that any expressions of interest in joining the Panel from officers from the districts and boroughs are to be sent via Helen Barnsley, Democratic Services Officer.

The Chair thanked everyone who attended the meeting and for their time and input. It was agreed by all that this meeting was the start of our conversation and not a one off and that we do all need to work together to support young people across Warwickshire.

5. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on 29 November 2021, at 10am.

The meeting will be held at Shire Hall, Warwick.

.....
Chair

Corporate Parenting Panel

Monday 14 February 2021

CiCC & Participation Update

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That the Panel note the work of the Children in Care Council (CiCC), Care Leavers Forum (CLF) and the Participation Team.
- 1.2 That the Panel acknowledge the work that continues to take place with young people during the public health crisis.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 This is a standing item on the Corporate Parenting Panel agenda which updates members on the work of the CiCC and CLF.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 There are no significant financial implications to consider at this stage.

4. Environmental Implications

- 4.1 There are no significant environmental implications to consider at this stage.

5. Supporting Information

- 5.1 This update covers the period from 20th September 2021 to 17th January 2022.
- 5.2 **Warwickshire MHCLG Youth Homelessness Visit - 5th October**

Five young people met with the Homelessness Advice and Support Team (HAST) from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 5th October.

The young people's comments were as follows as presented by HAST in their feedback,

“Young Advisers Comments:

- The high rent in supported housing is a disincentive to working, and if in employment arrears can build up preventing move on – **it was suggested having a reduced rent towards the end of the stay in supported housing to enable a young person to work, save and achieve positive move on.** If a young person is out at work they are using less of the facilities/utilities and support on offer but paying the same.

- The different Allocation Polices in the DB's is confusing – **young people would like these to be clear and consistent.**
- Inspections of supported housing highlighted issues with:
 - Lack of staff training to provide the right advice to young people/gap in young people's knowledge of what is available to them.
 - Loneliness, increased by visitor restrictions.
 - Use of drugs in the premises and feeling unsafe in accommodation.
 - Being unable to work makes it feel both physically and mentally trapping.
- **A rent guarantor scheme available up to the age of 21 for care leavers was suggested.**
- Young Advisers were keen to have their voice heard by Ministers, **please share with them information on the Youth Homelessness Parliament where young people get the opportunity to present directly to the Minister for Housing. To find out more contact tamzin.reynolds-rosser@stbasils.org.uk**

"Can I once again thank all participants on the call on 5th October 2021, it was great to see people again and hear from those for who this was their first time joining. In particular, I want to thank the five Young Advisers; Alisha, Umar, Ian, Liss and Demi, for their thoughtful, honest and very helpful contributions and great to hear how well everyone is doing and I am grateful to Shinderpaul for organising for us." Jill Boak from HAST

5.3 National Advisor for Care Leavers Visit - 19th October 2021

Mark Riddell, National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers, from DfE, visited Warwickshire at Portland House in Nuneaton on 19th October 2021.

Mark Riddell was keen to learn about the progress that Warwickshire had made on the Care Leavers Offer and offered the following feedback post his visit.

"The recommendations are as follows:

1. Housing came across as a particular challenge and the need for more options for care leavers across the county.
2. A set of offers from each partner agency so that PA's and care leavers are clear about what is on offer.
3. To consider expanding your multi-agency approach with key partners so that care leavers can access support in a 'one stop' approach.
4. To review your Council Tax offer in line with the letter sent from MHCLG that asks all LA's to consider an offer up to 25yrs and that the exemption follows care leavers across LA (Local Authority) boundaries.
5. It would be good to see a leisure offer with a Plus 1 to care leavers up to 25yrs.

And finally, how well you have captured the voice of care leavers by engaging them in the co-production of their local offer is testament to your commitment to have an even better offer to care leavers.

Overall, what I heard and saw is a very strong offer to care leavers and I look forward to seeing you again in the new year."

5.4 **Ofsted Inspection of Local Area Children's Service 15th Nov – 26th Nov 2021**

As part of the Inspection meeting were with the Children in Care Council/Care Leavers Form on Weds 25th November and then with care experienced apprentices on Thurs 26th November.

The feedback from Inspectors was as follows,

- the inspectors wanted to pass on their thanks to all the young people they spoke to
- the inspectors said they were a vibrant bunch, and they said they could see how the young people are helping to make a real difference in Warwickshire
- the inspectors relayed back all the area of concerns the young people raised
- the inspectors have seen lots of CIC councils and Care leavers forums and mentioned that our group was really strong.

Participation was also identified as a strength by Inspectors.

A photo album covering 3 years of activities was put together to share with Ofsted Inspectors to help illustrate the scope and range of work undertaken with care experienced young people.

5.5 **Additional Corporate Parenting Panel Meeting - 18th October**

Four young people prepared and delivered a presentation to Districts and Boroughs on "What is Corporate Parenting?"

The purpose of the presentation was to "show how children and young people are able to influence the council's services and how improvements can be made to provide a better future for children in care."

5.6 **Local Offer for Care Leavers - Information Videos**

Two young people created 10+ separate videos on the topics listed below.

- Support from PA's
- Accommodation & Housing
- Education, Employment & Training x3
- Health & Wellbeing
- Relationships & Socialising
- Participation

The videos promote the Care Leavers Offer booklet titled, "What are you entitled to? A guide for Care Leavers."

The videos were sent out weekly, over October, November, December and January to Personal Advisors and separately to care leavers via the leaving care Facebook page.

5.7 CiCC meetings and topics

October – the meeting consisted of updates on projects being run in the Participation Team and up-coming events. The meeting discussed accessing files, how this looks to young people and what their thoughts are on what the process should look like.

November – the meeting took place face to face as a bowling activity in Coventry. During the games young people had the opportunity to give their opinions on some words that are used within the WCC to contribute towards the work we are doing on 'Watch Your Words – Dictionary of Care'.

December - we had another face-to-face CiCC meeting to celebrate Christmas. This included some games, foods, gifts, and prizes!

January - for the first meeting of the new year, January 11th 2022, along with a catch up, we discussed what young people would like to focus on and take to the Service Leadership Team during 2022.

5.8 Myton Park Allotment Update

3 further planting beds have been created by young people. This makes a total of 6 beds. 3 have been functional over the 2021 summer period with young people being keen to be involved. 3 further beds are now ready to be installed for 2022.

Seating benches have been bought and have been painted and decorated by young people. This work was led by a care experienced apprentice.

There is also now a proposal to set up vegetable beds in the grounds of WCC's first residential home in Stratford.

This current project at Myton Offices (Warwick) has given young people experience on how to set up an allotment. These young people have shown a willingness to volunteer in setting up allotment beds at the Residential Home.

The beds at Myton have been cleared and dug over in preparation for the winter and the new growing season from March 2022.

5.9 Sunday Football with UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children) Young People.

This is to report that football has been taken place every Sunday from 25th September to 12th December 2021 with Warwickshire's UASC young people.

The activity has been taking place at Sydney Stringer School in Coventry from 12-1.30pm.

The activity attracts young people from Birmingham, Coventry, and different parts of Warwickshire. Attendance has varied from 25-35 young people.

5.10 Halloween, Care Leavers Week & Christmas Events

Five young people took part in an activity at the Escape Rooms on 29th October to celebrate Halloween.

As part of Care Leavers Celebration Week (25th October – 31st October) the Care Leaving Service and Asylum Team organised trips for young people to Alton Towers, Drayton Manor Park and Weston Super Mare.

Christmas presents and meals were provided by two local charities and 38 were delivered to young people in and around the County on 21st December 2021.

A Christmas meal was prepared for young people who would have otherwise been alone at Christmas on 27th December at Myton Park Offices in Warwick.

5.11 National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum Awards & Full Council Recognition

Liss Phillips was nominated for 2 awards by the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum in October 2021 and won both. The awards were for Best Public Speaker 2021 & Champion of Champions 2021.

It is worth noting that these are the awards that Umar Teerab won in 2020.

Liss Phillips was invited to Full Council meeting on the 14th December to have her awards recognised by the Chair and Elected Members.

6. Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

An update report to be presented to the next Corporate Parenting Panel.

	Name	Contact Information
Report Author	Shinderpaul Bhangal	shinderpaulbhangal@warwickshire.gov.uk 07771513742
Assistant Director	John Coleman	johncoleman@warwickshire.gov.uk
Lead Director	Nigel Minns	nigelminns@warwickshire.gov.uk
Lead Member	Jeff Morgan	jeffmorgan@warwickshire.gov.uk

The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): n/a

Other members: n/a

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855 Children in Care

A decrease of **13 Children in Care** since November 2021

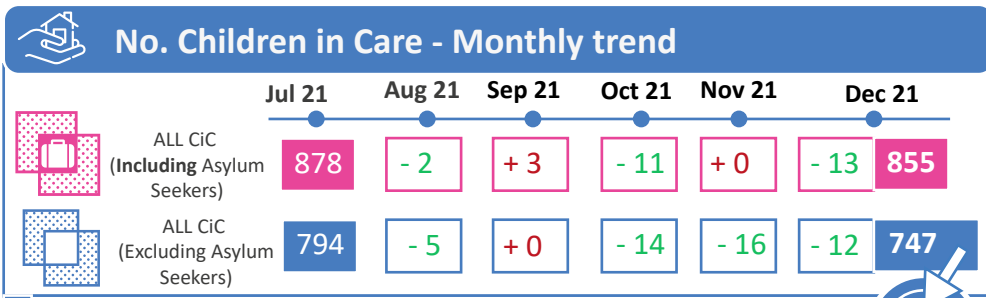
Children in Care Placement Type

WCC Foster Carer (inc Family and Friends carers)
339 children (39.6%); a decrease of 14 children since November

Placed for Adoption
12 children (1.4%) of all CiC at 31 December; a decrease of 2 CiC since 30 November 2021

Agency Foster Carer
215 CiC (25.1%); an increase of 4 children since 30/11/2021

Residential Establishment
84 children (9.8%); an increase of 1 child since 30/11/2021



At 31 December 2021, Warwickshire's Children in Care population decreased by 13 to 855, whilst the no. of CiC excluding asylum seekers also decreased by 12 to 747. 580 CiC target for 2019 / 20 **580**

Legal Status of Children in Care as at 31 December 2021

49.7% (425) of CiC are on a **Full Care Order**; this is a decrease of 0.7% (3 CiC) since 30/11/2021

18.9% (162) of CiC are on an **Interim Care Order**; this is a decrease of 2.4% (6) since the end of November 2021.

3.3% (28) of CiC are on a **Placement Order**; this is the same number as the previous month end.

28.1% (240) of CiC are subject to **S20 Accommodation**; this is a decrease of 2.4% (6 children) since 30 November 2021

Leaving Care Activity Status

As at 31 December 2021, of those Relevant and Former Relevant Care Leavers (aged 16 - 21) ...

- 83.1%** had a contact within the last 8 weeks
- 79.2%** were in suitable accommodation
- 55.8%** were in EET (Employment, Education & Training)

CiC out of county as at 31st December 2021
19.7% (165) of CiC were placed outside the LA boundary and more than 20 miles from where they used to live
NB. Please note that this is a quarterly measure

CiC 'Missing' or 'Away from placement without authorisation'

26 children in care were missing (77 episodes)

During December 2021 there were **77 episodes** of a child missing or away from their placement without authorisation. This related to **26 individual children** with **17 children** having multiple missing episodes during the month.

Gender

61.9% (529) Male

38.0% (325) Female

1 'Indeterminate'

Ethnicity

1/4 (25.4%) of Children in Care (Including Asylum Seekers) are **Minority Ethnic (217)**;

74.6% (677) are of White ethnicity

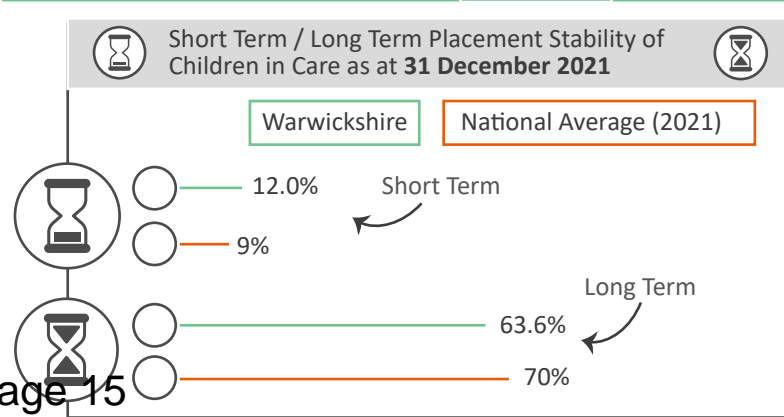
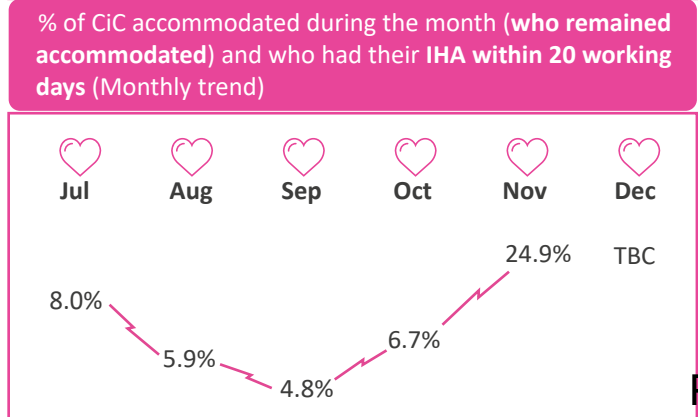
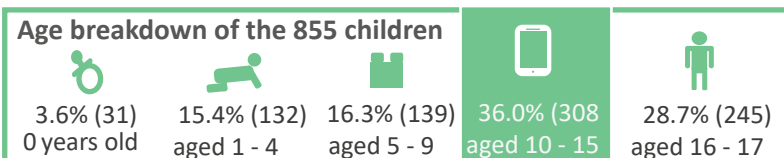
Allocated Team

12.6% (108) of Children in Care are Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers

7.5% (64) are allocated to the Children with Disability teams

25.3% (216) are allocated to the CiC 14-18 Years Team

75.4% of Children in Care at 31 December 2021 have had a 'completed' health assessment in the last 12 months



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Annual Report of the Adoption Service 2020-2021 for Warwickshire County Council

Report Authors:

Sharon Shaw – Service Manager for Corporate Parenting

Caitlin Burrows – Permanency Social Worker

Date: August 2021

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1. Introduction

This is the Warwickshire County Council adoption service report for the period April 2020 - March 2021. It provides an overview of adoption activity and performance.

Warwickshire delivers adoptions services with the regional adoption agency – Adoption Central England (ACE) which has been operational since 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. This report is to be read alongside the ACE Annual Report and the annual report from ACE Adoption Panel.

As a local authority shared services hosted by Warwickshire County Council, ACE provides the following services:

- 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 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 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.

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.

2. Local Authority Update

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

- We continue to place children in adoptive placements, once a Placement Order is granted, in a timely manner, and our figures remain lower than the 3-year national average.
- Fostering for adoption is considered for children where appropriate and this ensures that children receive stability and permanence at the earliest opportunity.
- We continue to be successful in placing sibling groups, ensuring that children have the opportunity to maintain their sibling relationship preventing them from experiencing further trauma by being separated from their brother or sisters. We have successfully achieved adoption for 3 sibling groups with adopters including 1 sibling groups of 3 and 2 sibling groups of 2.
- We have trained a number of Warwickshire staff in Richard Rose's Therapeutic Life Story Model.
- We have reviewed the children who have been subject to a Placement Order for a significant amount of time and have spent time considering a Change of Plan and revoking Placement Orders to enable us to progress their care plan of long term foster care or Special Guardianship Orders.
- Despite a global pandemic our number of children placed for adoption remained similar to the previous year and the number of children adopted has risen from 23 to 28.

3. Service Activity

In summary, during 2020/21:

- 23 children were subject of the decision that they should be placed for adoption
- 29 children were made subject to a Placement Order by the court
- 30 children were matched with prospective adopters
- 28 children were placed with adopters
- 28 children were made subject to an Adoption Order by the court.
- 1 disruption happened for a sibling group of 2 children.
- 13 Change of Plans/ Review of Plans were completed which enabled alternative permanency options to be progressed

Overall children's performance:

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number of children adopted	34	23	28
Number of children placed with adopters	30	28	28
Number of children awaiting match	28	22	25
Number of disruptions	1	0	2

The above figures indicate that in the last 12 months although the number of children placed with adopters has remained stable, there has been an increase in the numbers of adoption orders being granted. Despite there being a global pandemic, which has reduced court availability Warwickshire has been successful in progressing permanency through adoption. The national figures are not yet available for 2020/21 but figures recorded nationally for year ending 2020 show a fall in adoption numbers by 4%, a further fall from the 2019 numbers.

There has been a considerable decrease in the number of Agency Decisions being made. There are 25 children who have an ADM decision but have not been placed or matched, in comparison to 46 last year. During this year, we have focused on revoking Placement Orders when a change of plan decision has been made. Some of these have been long outstanding Placement Orders and either have a plan of long term foster care or Special Guardianship Order (SGO). We have continued to maintain a consistent approach to ensure that when a change of plan is required there is no delay

in achieving this and a process is in place to advise the Agency Decision Maker when children require a change of plan so that this can be completed in a timely manner.

The Permanency Social Worker meets regularly with the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to identify children where there is a possibility of early permanence to ensure there is no drift in care planning and tracking plans and also provides monthly updates to the Senior Leadership Team to ensure there is management oversight. This has resulted in an independent review which was completed by the Practice Improvement Team to extract learning on the issues of delay. The learning from the ADM and Permanency Social Worker's reviews is captured in a learning bulletin which is shared with all Children and Families Staff (and has received positive feedback) and is incorporated into ACE training.

The number of children in Warwickshire who are awaiting a match has increased by 3, this remains a relatively low number in comparison to the years before which supports the evidence that the number of children with a plan of adoption continues to decline. The Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board reports that in 2020/21 Adoption Orders granted decreased 17% compared to 2019/20 and SGOs increased by 4% compared to 2019/2020. Whilst there has been an increase in both Adoption Orders and SGOs in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20, the national trend has been evident in Warwickshire over the last 5 years with an overall decrease in Adoption Orders and an overall increase in SGOs. It is possible that historically the children who left care on an SGO may have been placed for adoption.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/2021
Adoptions Orders	54	70	46	34	23	28
Special Guardianship orders	24	26	33	18	31	37

Data for Adoption Orders granted:

Age at AO (Years)	Total No. of AOs Granted	%
Under 1	1	4%
1 to 4	20	71%
5 to 9	3	11%
10 to 15	4	14%
16 and over	0	0%
Total	28	100%

Gender	Total No. of AOs Granted	%
M	16	57%
F	12	43%
Total	28	100%

Ethnicity	Total No. of AOs Granted	%
White British	23	82%
White and Asian	1	4%
Black Caribbean	2	7%
White Other	2	7%
Total	28	100%

Sibling Groups?	Total No. of AOs Granted	%
No	21	75%
Yes*	7	25%
Total	28	100%

* Refers to two sibling groups of 2 and 1 sibling group of 3

Of the 28 children who were adopted between April 2020 and March 2021, 16 were male (57%) and 12 (43%) were female. In 19/20 there wasn't a split between males and females with 52% males being adopted and 48% females. The national data for this time period is not currently available however we can see from the national data from the previous year that Warwickshire are in line with the national figures which are 52% male and 48 % female.

It is evident from the chart above that a large proportion (71%) of Warwickshire adoptions are for children aged 1 to 4 years old. In the year April 2020 to March 2021, 20 children adopted were aged between 1 and 4 years of age when the Adoption Order was granted, 1 child was aged under 1 year, three were aged 5 to 9 years and four were aged between 10 and 15 years. These figures are similar to the national data for

the previous year, however we had 14% of Adoption Orders made to children aged 10-15 years old compared to the national average of 1%. Of these children, two were living with their adopter for 8 years prior to the adoption order being made and two were living with their adopters for two years. In the case of the two children living with their adopters for two years prior to the Adoption Order, the application for the adoption order was not made sooner due to the children experiencing a previous adoption disruption and the need for the children to settle and feel confident that this could be a permanent home for them.

There continues to be a clear majority of White British children being adopted in Warwickshire however this is of no bias as this high percentage is in line with the high percentage of White British children who were made subject to a Placement Order the same year. Therefore, this shows the consistency in the ethnicities of children that have been placed for adoption and successfully adopted. This also demonstrates that Warwickshire have a commitment to securing permanency for children of all ethnicities through adoption.

No. of Placement Orders by Ethnicity:

Ethnicity	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
White British	41	26	27	28
White and Asian	2	0	1	0
Any other Mixed background	3	0	0	0
Any other White background	1	1	1	0
White and Black Caribbean	1	3	0	1
Any other Asian background	1	0	0	0
White and Black African	0	1	0	0
Any other ethnicity	0	0	1	0
Total	49	31	30	29

As shown below, there have been 29 Placement Orders secured in the last 12 months, which is consistent with 30 Placement Orders granted in 2019/20.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Total No. of Placement Orders Granted	49	31	30	29

Similarly, to 2019-20 there has continued to be a number of foster carers wishing to adopt children in their care. Of the 28 children who were adopted in 2020/21, 5 individual children were adopted by their foster carers, 1 couple were assessed by ACE as adopters however the remaining 4 made private applications. These figures are in addition to the children who are placed in Foster For Adoption homes which are mentioned below. This is a very positive outcome for young people who have established secure relationships with their carers and do not have to experience a move providing them with consistent care.

There have been some incidents where foster carers have wished to adopt the children in their care which has not been supported by the Adoption Panel, whilst not querying the decision made by panel this has resulted in delay in the care planning and achieving of permanency for a number of children with carers making private applications.

Foster For Adopt

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, 11 children were placed for fostering in Foster For Adoption placements and during the same time period 9 children who were in a Foster For Adoption placement had their placement changed from a fostering placement to an adoptive placement. This demonstrates that Warwickshire continue to use Foster For Adoption placements to minimise disruption and change for our children and that these placements are successful in securing positive outcomes for our children.

Data for children with a Placement Order but not yet living with their adopters

During 2020/21, 20 children had a placement order granted and were still awaiting a match. Please note, included in the 20 children is one child that was living in an FFA

placement, two children matched but not yet placed with their adopters and one child whose Foster Carers are seeking adoption. This leaves 16 children who we are actively family finding for at the end of 2020/21. The breakdown data of these children is shown below.

Age at 31/03/2021 (Years)	Children with PO not yet placed	%
Under 1	0	0%
1 to 4	11	55%
5 to 9	8	40%
10 to 15	1	5%
16 and over	0	0%
Total	20	100%

Gender	Children with PO not yet placed	%
M	13	65%
F	7	35%
Total	20	100%

Ethnicity	Children with PO not yet placed	%
White British	19	95%
White and Black Caribbean	1	5%
Any other ethnicity	0	4%
Total	20	100%

Disability	Children with PO not yet placed	%
No	20	100%
Yes	0	0%
Total	20	100%

Sibling Groups?	Children with PO not yet placed	%
No	5	25%
Yes*	15	75%
Total	20	100%

* Includes 6 sibling groups of 2 and 1 sibling group of 3

In comparison to last year's data which featured a high number of individual male children between the ages of one to four years old it is evident that the highest need for adopters is for sibling groups, male children and children ranging between the ages of one to nine years. Of the twenty children with Placement Orders 8 are recorded as being slightly older aged five to nine. Therefore, alongside general family finding consideration should be given to targeting adopters that can meet the needs of older children with experiences of trauma.

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.

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic and national restrictions, ACE have not been able to hold any face to face family finding events or national exchange days where Warwickshire children have been able to be featured. However, two children have been able to attend covid secure activity days.

ACE continues to subscribe to 'Link Maker'. All Warwickshire children with a family finder are featured on 'Link Maker'. ACE also has its own internal portal to feature all Warwickshire 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 Groups

Sibling assessments underpin and support decisions to place brothers and sisters together or apart and maintain meaningful contact. Warwickshire has been successful in placing 11 children in 5 sibling groups between April 2020 and March 2021. This includes 4 groups of 2 siblings and 1 group of 3 siblings. Given that sibling groups are amongst the "harder to place" groups this is extremely positive.

Warwickshire have recently agreed that ACE will make exceptional payments to support the placement of sibling groups. This highlights Warwickshire's commitment and recognition of the importance of sibling relationships as a sibling relationship can provide a source of continuity throughout a child's lifetime and can often be the longest relationship they experience. It is extremely positive that over half of the children placed for adoption in Warwickshire this year were part of a sibling group. The fact that Warwickshire placed a sibling group of three is even more remarkable and evidences the excellent working relationship between ACE and Warwickshire in securing permanency for our children.

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.

This year, of the 28 children placed with adopters, Warwickshire have needed to use five inter-agency adopters for 3 sibling groups, one child with additional needs and one individual child. The remaining 19 children were placed with ACE adopters. Although the majority of children are placed with Ace adopters we have been required to increase the use of interagency placements to meet the needs of our children, particularly sibling groups. Using ACE adopters is the preferred choice as it enables adoptive families to access the intensive support services through ACE and receive support from a familiar agency.

Disruptions

In the previous 12 months, 2 children (1 sibling group) in Warwickshire have experienced an adoption disruption following prospective male adopter failing to bond with the children. However, these children have since gone on to be matched. There has continued to be the opportunity to learn from disruptions within ACE. Each child has a disruption meeting, which is 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.

4. Service Performance

The scorecard showing Warwickshire's average performance is detailed on page 14. The timeliness of children entering care and moving in with their adoptive family is 11 days higher than Warwickshire's previous three year national average of 343 however this figure remains below the three year national average (2016-2019) of 376 days.

There has been a significant increase in the average time (in days) between a child entering care and Warwickshire receiving court authority to place a child, for children who have been adopted in in 2020/21. Warwickshire average for 2020/21 was 306 days which is higher than both Warwickshire's and the national three-year average for 2016-2019. Similarly, the measure A20 which is the average time (in days) between a child entering care and a local authority receiving court authority to place a child, for children who have been adopted has significantly increased from 217 in 2019/20 to 306 in 2020/21. These increases are likely to be as a result of the significant delays in care proceedings due to the family courts being closed at the beginning of the pandemic and national lockdowns.

However, despite this delay for children, for Warwickshire children adopted between April 2020 and March 2021 the average number of days between a child being granted a placement order and being matched to an adoptive family is 111 which is a significant reduction from the previous year which was 159 days and remains below the three year national average (2016-2019) of 178 days. It should be noted however that Warwickshire has continued to be aspirational and been committed to identifying adopters for older children and sibling groups, this is likely to increase our timescales as they are harder to place children. It continues to be our view that if adoption is the most appropriate placement for a child all avenues should be explored even if this means our timescales are slightly longer.

Through Care Panel regularly reviews all children in care whose plan for permanency has not yet been achieved. A tracking system that includes the monitoring of pre-proceedings, and care proceedings through Child Decisions Meeting and progress of

placement orders by Throughcare Panel is now well embedded and representatives from ACE are invited to the panels. The addition of a Permanency Social Worker enables regular, consistent oversight of cases allowing for collaborative working between ACE and Warwickshire and information being provided to senior leadership for management oversight.

There has been a rise in timescales this year for A10 and A20, both measures will have been impacted by COVID-19, the closure of the courts and the subsequent backlog of cases waiting to be heard.

The scorecards below show how Warwickshire monitor their performance against their own 3 year average and a national 3 year average:

DFE Adoption Scorecard Measure	Definition	2020/21 (01/04/2020 - 31/03/2021)	DfE Adoption Scorecard 3 Year Average (2016 to 2019)	DfE Adoption Scorecard 3 Year Average - ENGLAND (2016 to 2019)	DfE Adoption Scorecard 3 Year Average - Stats Neighbour Average (2016 to 2019)
A1: BLA-PFA Measure removed and replaced by A10	Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted in 2020/21 .	430 days	-	-	-
A10: BLA-PFA New measure to replace A1	The average length of time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, for children who have been adopted in 2020/21 . The indicator is adjusted for foster carer adoptions, in that if a child was adopted by their foster carer, the time considered is stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family.	354 days	343 days	376 days	349 days
A2: PO-Match	Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, for children who have been adopted for children who have been adopted in 2020/21 .	111 days	115 days	178 days	151 days
A20: BLA-PO New measure for 2016-19	Average time (in days) between a child entering care and a local authority receiving court authority to place a child, for children who have been adopted in 2020/21 .	306 days	251 days	257 days	240 days
A3: % BLA-PFA (<14 months) Measure removed 2016-19	Percentage of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (includes all children that have been adopted in 2020/21 and those that were going through the adoption process at 31 March 2021).	36%	-	-	-

5. Service Plan 2021-2022

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:

- All children to receive good quality Life Story Work and Later Life Letters in a timely manner from their Allocated Social Worker or with support from the Life Story Work Team and the implementation of Therapeutic Life Story Work for some children.
- Promoting a change in culture and approach to Family Time, considering direct and indirect contact with birth family as a norm and considering open adoptions as a care plan, particularly where the risk is low or can be managed, in a commitment to family values and restorative practice.
- Reviewing children on Placement Order with ACE monthly
- Promoting early permanency through training for social workers across Warwickshire
- Promoting Foster For Adoption, to ensure that permanence is considered at an early stage for children when this is appropriate.
- Permanency worker to offer 'Permanency Drop Ins' for consultations on potential and current adoptions including support with writing good quality CPRs, Adoption Support Plans and the matching matrix.
- Develop robust Adoption Support Plans which are relevant to individual children and their needs.
- 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.
- Reviewing and updating Child Permanence Report inline with Warwickshire's Restorative Practice Model ensuring that the voice of the child and their journey is clear throughout the report.

6. Appendices



1. ACE Annual Report
2020-21.docx



2. ACE Panel Annual
Report 2020-21 FINA



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.

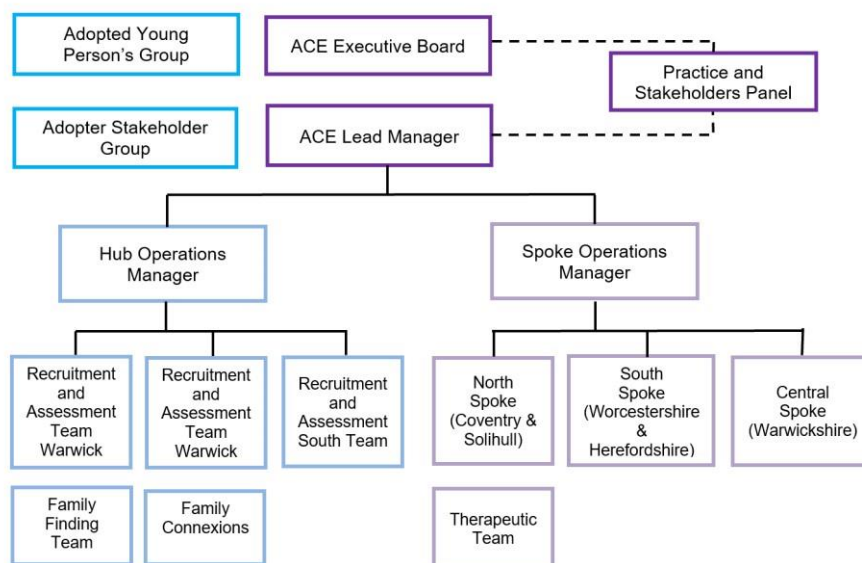
2.4 In March 2018 the ACE Executive Board supported the recommendation that ACE should become a service underpinned by **Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP)**. This approach ensures that relationships and emotional connection are at the heart of services and all aspects of the organisation are informed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

<p>the full range of communication e.g. website, Facebook, newsletters.</p>	<p>Separate information about training is sent via email, Facebook and is include in the newsletter.</p>
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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.	<p>Completed</p> <p>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.</p>
To review the ACE website incorporating podcasts illustrating different areas of the service and experiences and reflecting our ethos.	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>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.</p>
To update quality assurance arrangements embedding file auditing processes across the service.	<p>Completed</p> <p>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.</p>
To support the work arising through the PIF Assessment and Matching project.	<p>Completed</p> <p>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.</p>
To use recruitment opportunities to establish a more diverse workforce if possible.	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>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.</p>

<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Work with the local authorities to reduce delay in placing children from the point that the placement order has been granted by the court.</p>	<p>Ongoing This is through case tracking meetings and monthly arrangements with each local authority.</p>
<p>Improve adopter approval timescales.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>To increase and embed fostering for adoption setting targets for both ACE and local authorities.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>To improve communication about services, support and training using the full range of communication methods.</p>	<p>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'.</p>
<p>To offer more training and support about life story books and talking to children about adoption.</p>	<p>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</p>

	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.



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.
<p>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.</p>	<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)
<p>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.</p>	<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
<p>5. To recruit social workers with specialist knowledge of fostering to better equip</p>	<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.
<p>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</p>	<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.
<p>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.</p>	<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.”**

Item	Report detail	Date of Meeting
Update from CICC and Care Leaver Forum	Receive an update from children and young people from the CICC and Care Leaver Forum.	* Standing items for every meeting
Performance Data	Report which includes key data regarding CLA & Care Leavers	
Development of Work Programme for 2020/2021 and Forward Plan information	To consider proposed work programme & future areas of work for the panel; including information from the forward plan with items relevant to the remit of the panel	
Good news stories	Officers to put forward good news stories for CLA, care leavers & foster carers.	
Report from the Virtual School Head	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring Term (March/April) - annual report • Summer Term (July/August) - school stability, exclusions, attendance, PEP completion rates for the academic year, Post 16 overview • Autumn term (November) - data forecast for the academic year, Post 16 EET destinations 	21 March 2022
Performance SWFT Data	Quarterly performance information from SWFT to be added (health data and assessment data) to the regular performance data report. (Jackie Channell)	Standing Item every 6 months –due 17 January 2022

Report detail	Date of Meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To consider the need and timescales for care leavers and CLA receiving a CAMHS/RISE service and a report into the process for mental health assessments (Zoe Mayhew) 	<p><i>To be rescheduled</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warwickshire Adoption Report ACE Annual Report The Vanguard Project 	<p>17 January 2022</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SGO Policy Impact and Report Access to files and barriers faced 	<p>21 March 2022</p>

Actions from the meeting 9 November 2020

- Following a request from Councillor Pam Williams, request for a discussion with officers in relation to schools that offer functional skills to pupils – *Briefing note to be provided by Education Services (agreed at meeting on 18/01/2021)*.
- Review into the turnover of Social Workers to identify any trends (John Coleman).

Information circulated to Members outside of meetings

- Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Service (28/10/2021)
- Report of the Independent Reviewing Service (28/10/2021)

Items included on the Forward Plan relevant to the remit of the Panel:

The remit of the panel is to secure elected member and cross-organisation support and commitment for delivering improvement services and better outcomes for looked after children, young people and care leavers: *(updated 10/01/2022)*

Decision	Description	Date due	Decision Maker
Children's Services Residential Proposals	<i>Fully exempt report</i>	17 February 2022	Cabinet
Education (Schools) Capital Programme 2021/22	Additions to the Education (Schools) Capital Programme	15 March 2022	Council

Future Meetings - 2021/22

- 21 March 2022 @ 10am

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