



Adoption Central England

Annual Report 2020-2021



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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.

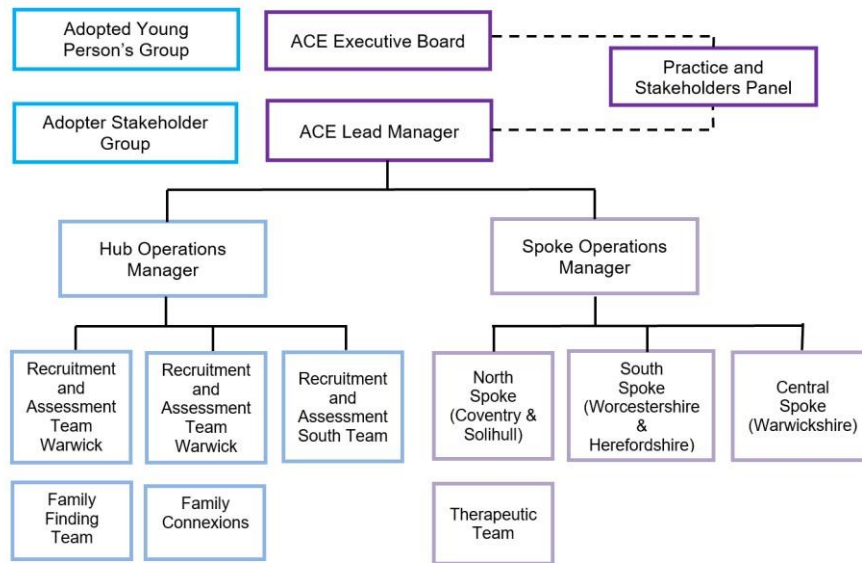
2.4 In March 2018 the ACE Executive Board supported the recommendation that ACE should become a service underpinned by **Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP)**. This approach ensures that relationships and emotional connection are at the heart of services and all aspects of the organisation are informed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

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

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

Diversity and Inclusion

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

Respecting colleagues

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

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

9. Disruptions

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

10. Complaints, compliments and representations

10.1 There was one complaint during this period.

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

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

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

11. Staff Development and Support

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

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

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

12. Overall impact and future plans

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

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

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

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

12.4 Key areas for development in 2021-2022 are:

Service level plans

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

Recruitment plans

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

Support plans

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

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

13. Conclusion

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

Brenda Vincent - Lead Manager
Adoption Central England

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

Actions	Update
For DDP principles to be implemented in all aspects of the organisation and for this to meet certification requirements.	<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.