

Contents

	Page
Chairs' Introduction	3
Context	5
Developments in 2020-21 and Review of Plan	6
Central List	15
Panel Training	18
Summary of Panel Activity	20
Quality Assurance	26
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adopter Assessment Report (AAR)• Child's Permanence Report (CPR)• Adoption Placement Report (APR)	
Feedback to Panel	33
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• From Prospective Adopters• From Social Workers• From Agency Decision Makers	
Priorities for 2021-22	42
Appendix A: Central List	45
Appendix B: Feedback on Panel training	48

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.

9. To find ways to keep the child and their welfare at the heart of the Adoption Panel's activities.

- **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.**

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	9		
	Asian/White households			
	Black Caribbean or Mixed Black	1		
	Caribbean/White Households			
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.”**