Adoption Central England

Report of the Adoption Panel

1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022

Contents

Introduction by a Panel Chair

This opening report marks four full years of Adoption Central England (ACE) as a Regional Adoption Agency and the continuation of a constantly developing adoption panel and an efficient and effective adoption panel team.

The adoption panel has continued operation for a full second year virtually (online), and this has been with increased confidence and skill. This includes pre-meetings with adopters and their social workers, the use of break-out rooms and the sharing of documents online. As a result of these two years of experience of working virtually, ACE is participating in a research project led by the University of Worcester into the effectiveness of online panel meetings.

The panel continue to give feedback on all reports presented to panel. This feedback continues to acknowledge the continued high standard of Adopter Assessment Reports (AARs): in this year they were rated as 94% good or outstanding. The panel continues to give feedback on Child Permanence Reports (CPRs), Adoption Placement Reports (APRs) and Adoption Support Plans (ASPs). These reports have improved overall but continue to need additional work to reach an overall higher standard. There is, however, ongoing training on writing CPRs delivered by ACE and the participating Local Authorities.

It is gratifying to see that there has been a large increase in the number of social workers offering feedback to panels which was 62 returns in 2021/2022 as against 26 in the previous reporting year. This is very helpful feedback in assisting panels to continue to develop.

A new foster carer report was updated this reporting year and panel have read some excellent reports from those most closely connected to the children awaiting placement for adoption.

ACE is supporting the participating local authorities to continue to develop the policy of Fostering to Adopt (FFA) placements. This supports approved adopters to accept placements early before court proceedings are complete and to continue as foster carers until a Placement Order is agreed. This policy enables children to be placed as early as possible and in the majority of cases reduces the number of placement moves a child has to experience. Support and training are offered to support this practice.

The adoption panel chairs continue to meet with the ACE senior team and the panel team quarterly which is valuable to the continuing development of the adoption panel

and associated processes. In 2021/2022 the panel chairs and ACE managers have begun to meet with Agency Decision Makers (ADMs). Agency Decision Makers have begun to observe panels and have given positive feedback about the thoroughness with which panels quality assure all matters coming to panel and it is agreed that this will continue with two-way feedback in the future as general practice.

The Panel Advisers continue to recruit members to the panel who represent diversity e.g., people from Black, Asian, and different ethnic minorities and people from the LGBTQ+ communities especially those with adopter or adoption experience. The panel team have also recruited social workers with adoption and fostering experience and foster carers to add balance and better representation to panels.

An extremely interesting development in 21/22, and based on three years of operating as ACE, is the 'Recalibration Agenda '. In brief, this is about panel members focussing on the weight of evidence from assessing social workers and moving away from simply interviewing and questioning adopters themselves and or panels just seeing how they 'come across' in the meetings when they have already contributed so much to the development of the AAR. Panel members continue to work on developing this more balanced process.

Given that the online panel process to a certain extent inhibits face-to-face contact with other panel members and the staff of ACE, six-monthly in-person gatherings and learning events have been introduced. These events have proved very helpful in 'getting to know' people more directly.

Panel chairs and members continue to be committed to be part of the process of securing permanency for children who have a plan for adoption. We are also committed to be part of developing a strong and committed Regional Adoption Agency.

Avriel Reader, Adoption Panel Chair

Context

All adoption agencies are required by law[1] 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.

In April 2018, the Government's programme for the regionalisation of adoption services that heralded the creation of Adoption Central England (ACE) brought together the work of the adoption panels of Worcestershire County Council (now Worcestershire Children First), Warwickshire 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 **fourth** full year report of the ACE Adoption Panel since it became a single panel on 1 April 2018.

Constitution and Operation of the Adoption Panel

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 and a social work representative. Panel members have secure online access to adoption reports at least 5 working days before the panel meeting and submit their individual feedback on the quality of those reports beforehand. Panel Meetings are conducted via Microsoft Teams on Monday and Thursday mornings, and typically consider a maximum of 3 items (4 in exceptional circumstances).

The central list membership stands at 42 active members – i.e., those who have attended at least one Panel during the reporting period - as on 31 March 2022 (see Appendix B).

A priority has been achieving greater representation of our diverse area through recruitment of panel members from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and the LGBTQ+ communities. We have successfully been working towards this aim, securing increased representation within the panel membership including three new male panel members, a member who identifies as LGBTQ+, three members from within the BME communities and a foster carer member. This targeted recruitment work continues, as we aim to offer more diverse and bespoke panels that better reflect the children and families with whom we work.

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[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.

During this reporting period, ACE has welcomed 9 new members to the Central List and received resignations from 3 members (see Appendix B). All independent panel members are offered a modest fee for their participation and are required to attend an annual appraisal and at least one training event per year. Panel Training is described in Appendix C.

All attendees to an Adoption Panel are invited to share feedback on their experience via a Microsoft Form sent to each individual after the meeting. Observers – who may also be agency decision makers – are invited to share their comments on the meeting immediately afterwards. All feedback is collated by the panel advisers and shared within the agency and with panel chairs at regular meetings. See Appendix D.

Summary of Adoption Panel Activity, 2021-22

Proposals made to the Adoption Panel are presented in three key reports, read in advance by Panel members. The reports are:

- **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.

- **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's agency decision maker (the ADM) and the family court that adoption is the only plan for the child. The CPR also serves as a life story resource for the adopted child and their family.

- **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 2021-22

	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
Number of meetings	80	71	44	42
Platform	Online	Online	In Person [2]	In Person
Maximum number of cases	3-4	3	5-6	6-7
Cases considered	173	169	185	184
Cancelled Panels	16 (17%)	11 (13%)	6 (12%)	4 (9%)

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[2] Online panels commenced on 30 March 2020, following the implementation of national lockdown measures on 23 March, and have remained so since lockdown measures lifted.

Suitability to Adopt ('Approvals')

At meetings held between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, Panel considered 'suitable to adopt' proposals, representing 75 households. Families applying to ACE to adopt were drawn from the agency's constituent local authorities:

Adopters' Local Authority	Number of households 2021-22	Number of households 2020-21	Number of households 2019-20	Number of households 2018-19
Coventry City Council	**6**	**13**	12	27
Herefordshire Council	**13**	**3**	6	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	**2**	**6**	7	11
Warwickshire County Council	**23**	**21**	33	27
Worcestershire County Council	**21**	**19**	31	20
Non-ACE local authority	**10**	**15**	7	7
	75	**77**	97	92

Of the 75 applications presented to Panel:

- 72 families were recommended to the Agency Decision Maker as 'suitable to adopt'. There were two instances where a recommendation was deferred, and the case then re-presented at panel leading to positive recommendations.
- **1** family's suitability to adopt was reviewed.
- 2 families were *not* recommended as suitable to adopt following a 'Brief Report' from the assessing social worker and agency detailing the reasons why (known as the 'qualifying determinations').
- **All** but one of Panel's recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker were ratified (Panel did not recommend re-approval of one family where the ADM decided to approve.)

Of the 72 positive recommendations:

Profile of Adopters		2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
First applications		62	56	80	61
Subsequent applications		10	19	14	22
Household	Single adopters	6	7	8	11
	Heterosexual couples	55	60	-[3]	-
	Same-sex couples	11	8	-	-
Ethnicity	White British or White European households	62	64		-
	Asian or Mixed Asian/White households	5	9		
	Black Caribbean or Mixed Black Caribbean/White Households	1	1		
	Other ethnicity	4	1		
Offer	Foster carers	3	5	8	9
	Willing to consider FFA	32	26	-	-

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[3] - denotes data not collected by Panel Team during this reporting year

Matches for Adoption

At meetings held between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, the ACE Adoption Panel considered 91agenda items concerning matches for a total of 115 children. Two agenda items concerned different matches for the same child, while one was a proposed match that neither the panel recommended, nor the local authority ADM based on the recommendation of the panel.

Positive recommendations were therefore made for **89 proposed matches representing 114 children**.

Child's Local Authority	Number of matches 2021-22	Number of matches 2020-21	Number of matches 2019-20	Number of matches 2018-19
Coventry City Council	**20**	**25**	22	-
Herefordshire Council	**9**	**16**	8	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	**10**	**7**	8	-
Warwickshire County Council	**16**	**23**	19	-
Worcestershire County Council	**34**	**20**	29	-
	89	**91**	86	85

Profile of placement		**Number of matches 2021-22**	**Number of matches 2020-21**	Number of matches 2019-20	Number of matches 2018-19
Number of children	1 child	**68**	**75**	75	-
	2 children	**17**	**12**	7	-
	3 children	**4**	**4**	4	-
Total		**89**	**91**	86	85
Where age	0-12 months	**28**	**36**	-	-

of oldest child matched	12-24 months	**27**	**23**		
	2-4 years	**15**	**20**		
	4+ years	**19**	**12**		
Total		**89**	**91**		
Type of adoption	Mainstream adoption	**68**	**72**	55	64
	Fostering for Adoption	**16**	**15**	25	15
	Foster carer Adoption	**5**	**4**	6	6
Total		**89**	**91**	86	85
Ethnicity of children (by placement)	White British	**78**	**72**	-	-
	Gypsy, Roma, Traveller	**3**	**2**		
	Any other White Background	**1**	**2**		
	Asian or Asian British	**-**	**1**		
	Black, Black British, Black Caribbean, Black African	**-**	**-**		
	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (White and Black Caribbean White and Black African White and Asian any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background	**7**	**14**		
Total		**89**	**91**		

Plan of adoption for a relinquished child

Child's Local Authority	Number of plans 2021-22	Number of plans 2020-21	Number of plans 2019-20	Number of plans 2018-19
Coventry City Council	1[4]	5	0	-
Herefordshire Council	0	1	0	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	0	0	0	-
Warwickshire County Council	3	0	0	-
Worcestershire County Council	1	0	0	-
Total	6	6	0	4

Placement Disruptions

The Adoption Panel has been informed of 2 placements for adoption that disrupted before the making of an adoption order, and 3 agreed matches that were halted during transitions. Panel were also advised of 2 instances where a child placed under Fostering for Adoption arrangements did not progress to a match for adoption.

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[4] Plan of Adoption for twins

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"

<div align="right">

Adoption: National Minimum Standards, 2014, 17:2

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Adoption Panel Members provide individual feedback on the quality of adoption reports in advance of the panel meeting. **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 Dyadic Developmental Practice 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 through adoption 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

Adopter Assessment Report	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-2019[5]
Number of reports evaluated	77	77	91	35
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding	4.05	3.98	-	-
Where evidence of DDP informing assessment is satisfactory, good, or outstanding	99%	96%	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	0%	0%	17%	26%
Rated as good or outstanding	94%	61%	57%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good, or outstanding	100%	100%	83%	74%

Panel members' feedback included:

"This was an excellent report, succinct without leaving out sufficient detail. A comprehensive picture of this family emerged throughout the documentation, and it was apparent that some extremely difficult and sensitive conversations had taken place. However, notwithstanding this, the social worker did not shy away from difficult content nor recommendation. Very impressive."

"Report left me with no huge questions and a good sense of the couple. The information gathered from applicants, referees and checks was triangulated well."

"Excellent report which fully explored the couple's motivation to adopt. The potential challenging issues were explored by the social worker offering good analysis and evidence. The adopter voice was very present."

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[5] Feedback process implemented part-way through reporting period, from 26.11.2018

Panel feedback on the quality of matching reports

1. Child's Permanence Report (CPR)

Child's Permanence Report	2021-22 n=91 reports	2020-21	2019-20[6]	2018-19[7]
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding	3.82	3.72	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	1%	9%	36%	42%
Rated as good or outstanding	47%	41%	28%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good, or outstanding	99%	91%	64%	58%

Panel members' feedback included:

"It is a very thorough account of M's life and decisions that led to the adoption."

"Section 13 - Social worker's analysis of the child's needs and the implications for their future placement - does not reflect the boys' needs now and in the future at all."

"A lot of information is missing e.g., birth mother history and minimal information on birth father especially FS, Limited information to understand rationale for ICO initially and long delay. limited information on the assessments undertaken. Contact arrangements unclear."

"Social Worker produced a very informative document for child appreciation day, but it will be important to ensure information is cross referenced and included in the CPR as there is valuable information to recorded considering future access to records."

"Excellent, comprehensive and fluent report. A very difficult life story emerged in a factual, non-emotional manner. Report was of a particularly high standard."

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[6] Feedback on 73 out of 86 reports
[7] Feedback process implemented from 26.11.2018 and pertains to 24 matches

2. Adoption Placement Report

Adoption Placement Report	2021-22 n=91	2020-21	2019-20[8]	2018-19[9]
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding	3.74	3.67	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	2%	5%	35%	42%
Rated as good or outstanding	42%	37%	28%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good, or outstanding	98%	95%	65%	58%

Panel members' feedback included:

"It was very helpful to see the careful deliberation at the time the FFA placement was made, I don't think I have seen that evidenced so clearly before and it was reassuring to see that all involved considered the long term as well as short term implications of the placement".

"The APR does not explain why this family is best of 19 considered, other than that they are siblings who have not met and have a 7-year age difference. I would have liked to see how this family, and no other, is able to meet L's needs now, and into adulthood and beyond. I was surprised L was not placed under FFA regulations but was expected to wait, in foster care, to be matched with adopters of her much older sibling, who used to care for him as a child looked after".

"There is a lot of detail in the report, and I can see that there has been analysis by the Adoption Social Worker about the risks and vulnerabilities of this match. I can see the details of the strengths and why this match has been proposed."

It might have been helpful to know why LA are bringing this match to panel, as B has no attachment figure at almost two, presents as 'independent' i.e., significantly avoidant, and she is being matched with a family where independence in young children is sought, and neither parent appear to wish to prioritise B's attachment by staying at home longer. I worry this might be a disruption factor, as is a presence of

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[8] Feedback on 73 out 86 reports
[9] Feedback process implemented from 26.11.2018 and pertains to 24 matches

two birth children. It's very positive referral for emotional support has been sought and there is a plan of careful introductions.

Quality of Reports: Discussion

Adopter Assessment Reports

Over the past year panel members have frequently commended the assessing social worker for high-quality, thorough, and analytical assessments, deeming none to require significant improvement. Where panel members suggest improvements, they include

- more succinct reports
- greater analysis of vulnerabilities, to add balance and avoid 'advocacy-style' reports
- capturing the voice of children already in the family
- greater attention to evidencing capacity to parent siblings
- more evidence of in-depth discussion about Fostering for Adoption with reasons for adopters' decision
- clearer evidence, with examples where possible, of applicants' understanding of therapeutic parenting

Child Permanence Reports

Panel members have noticed that where social workers are supported with the preparation of the CPR – through agency advice from ACE, social worker training and dedicated permanency managers, the general quality of the CPR has improved, e.g.

- Reports are updated following the making of Care and Placement Orders to aid matching
- Reports increasingly evidence the Local Authority's exploration of wider family members during its care planning
- Reports reflecting progression in thinking about contact after adoption, including direct contact between siblings and where risk-assessed, birth parent.

However, with adoption being a relatively uncommon feature of a front-line worker's caseload, the quality of reports remains variable. Panel members highlight the key areas for improvement as:

- Birth Parents' own histories**: Where** known and shared sensitively and with consent, an account of a birth parent's own childhood and adolescence can go a long way to help an adopted child and their adopters understand why that parent was unable to meet the child's needs
- Consideration of a child's siblings, whether adopted, looked after or with birth family and evidence of proper consideration given to the relationship or potential for relationship between the adopted child and their brothers and sisters. Information about siblings is often scant or out of date, and sometimes missing altogether (more often paternal siblings) despite evidence that their carers have been spoken to during care proceedings.

- The impact and meaning of the child's experiences: The social worker's analysis of the child's needs and the implications for their future placement) needs to evidence a deeper appreciation of the impact of the child of their harmful experiences, both at the time and in the future, using research and professional expertise to anticipate and describe the therapeutic capacity required of the child's adopters.
- Language: In some instances, greater care needs to be taken in writing a report that will be read by the child when older. Panel members would challenge use of the term 'forever family', and the suggestion that 'anonymity is a benefit of adoption', and query unsubstantiated assertions that the 'birth parents clearly love the child very much'. Social workers are sometimes asked at panel to reflect on whether vivid descriptions of disturbing adult behaviour or quoted expletives are helpful, or conversely whether social work jargon such as 'chronic neglect' provides enough explanation to the child about the reasons they were removed from their family.
- Change of name and child's identity: Panel members are concerned where a decision to change a child's name appears not to have been properly considered nor authorised by a senior manager, or where a child's ethnicity/cultural background has not been fully explored or described.

Adoption Placement Reports

Panel members' key concerns arising from the Adoption Placement Report are

- Family finding and the rationale for the match: how why was this family chosen for this child or children? Panel members look for reassurance that the huge responsibility of selecting a family for the rest of a child's life has not been undertaken casually or hastily but rather with the greatest of care and proper accountability
- The risk of over-optimism and sufficiency of the Support Plan: Panel members are particularly concerned where they suspect a child's needs have been minimised and the adopters' parenting capacity exaggerated, coupled in some instances with a 'wait and see' approach to commissioning therapeutic support when a need is already evident. The panel members who are adoptive parents are particularly attuned to the challenges of parenting traumatised children and will often express concern about a lack of hypothesis and proactivity in the support plan.
- Ownership of contact proposals, particularly where direct contact is proposed with a birth parent, or with siblings placed elsewhere, where support to build relationships between families will need co-ordination and social worker oversight.

Foster Carer Reports

Panel members read and rate the reports of the child's foster carer closely, acknowledging that, of the team around the child, it is the foster carer who is in the best position to advise prospective adopters around what to expect when caring for the child. The quality of foster carer reports varies from the excellent, detailed, reflective

and attachment and trauma-aware, to the brief and superficial. Panel will commend a helpful report to the supervising social worker, while looking to ACE and its local authority partners to continue to develop more joined up practice between fostering and adoption professionals. A key innovation in 2021-22 has been ACE's development of a revised Foster Carer Report template which seeks to capture the key domains around caring for the child in greater depth.

Panel Priorities for 2022-23

Goal	Outcomes towards goal
To contribute where appropriate to ACE's Service Improvement Plan 2022-23 and its 5 key priorities, i.e. • To increase adopter recruitment and the timeliness of assessments with a focus on recruiting families for black and ethnic minority children, sibling groups and children with health and developmental uncertainty, • To improve placement timeliness through effective tracking and matching and embedding early permanence through fostering for adoption, • Extending the range of adoption support services, • Developing collaboration and partnership working with local authorities, health and education services, adoptive parents, adoption support providers and regional and voluntary adoption agencies.	• The provision of an effective adoption panel that makes sound and evidenced recommendations, provides expert advice, and contributes to the development of adoption policy, procedures, and practice.
To continue to recalibrate panel to fulfil its statutory role as independent scrutiny of adoption proposals, through further development of the professional knowledge, skills and effectiveness of panel and its members, using training resources available and mindful of feedback from all stakeholders	• Ongoing programme of 'bitesize' and accessible training events • Annual conference 2022 focusing on professional judgement

(adopters, social workers, agency managers, panel members, decision makers)	
To develop panel members' understanding of Early Permanence, in line with national and regional priorities	- Delivery of further training - Panel minutes evidence deeper understanding of Early Permanence when considering approvals and matches
To develop panel members' cultural competence and understanding of diversity to inform their non-biased consideration of adoption proposals	- Delivery of further training - Recruitment of panel members to Central List to represent communities served by ACE
To keep panel arrangements under review, including chairing, sufficiency of panel slots, frequency, efficiency of meeting, Teams updates, information leaflets and directory of panel members	- Regular internal meetings between Lead/Operational Managers, Hub Managers and Panel Team - Quarterly meetings with Panel Chairs - Review panel leaflets - Publish directory of panel members to LA partners - Key messages from University of Worcester research into efficiency of online panels: report pending.
To contribute to the pilot of a new Child's Permanence Report template	Focus groups and feedback forms
To provide opportunities for panel members and social workers to learn together side-by-side	Shared training events
To report to Panel Members on the outcome of matches	Twice-yearly in-person gatherings at which Hub Manager invited to present
To further develop professional relationships with ACE's local authority partners, including Agency Decision Makers and Operational Managers	- ADMs welcomed to observe panel meetings - Panel adviser report to LA managers' meetings - Improved channels of communication with LA managers to ensure that quality assurance feedback is properly directed - Recruitment of LA social workers to the Central List

Brenda Vincent

Lead Manager, ACE
ACE

Kate Moon

Panel Adviser,

Katie Nabbs

Panel Adviser, ACE

Appendix A: Review of priorities 2020-21

Goal	Outcome in 2021-22
A focus on equality, diversity and inclusion are increasingly evident in both the profile of any panel, and its practice.	Three panel members of non-White British ethnicity and one panel members from LGBTQ+ community have been recruited to the Central List. Panel members have attended training in EDI.
The voice of the child to be heard more clearly in panel's considerations	The child's photograph is shown at the start of a consideration of a match. Further consideration to be given to value of a 'child's question', drawn from the newly developing adopted young people's groups provided by ACE Spokes.
Panel's contribution to Adoption Central England's Service Improvement Plan, 2021-22 and its key priorities of • increased adopter recruitment • improved timeliness of adopter assessments • recruiting families for black and ethnic minority children, sibling groups and children with health and developmental uncertainty. • Timely placements • Embedding Fostering for Adoption	ACE and the Panel Team offered 80 panel meetings to the adoption agencies, representing 2 panels of 3 agenda items per week, with the option of a fourth item or additional panel in exceptional circumstances to ensure timely placements. Panel minutes evidence attention given to the of timeliness of both adopter assessments and matches, as well as a concern that opportunities for a child to benefit from a Fostering for Adoption placement are not missed. Panel members' readiness and ability to consider the needs of the priority groups will be the subject of ongoing review, with further training in key issues being provided.
Adjusting to a post-pandemic way of working while ensuring the robustness and credibility of the panel role.	Online panel meetings continue as a time and cost-efficient medium for all parties, while the limitations of virtual vs in-person meetings are discussed and addressed through panel member surveys, feedback from attendees, Chairs' meetings, updated IT guidance, developments in

	Microsoft Teams, in person gatherings and research.
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.	Panel Adviser reports to 6-monthly meetings of LA managers, sharing quality assurance feedback gathered from panel.
The recruitment of social worker Panel members with specialist fostering and post-adoption support knowledge to join the Central List.	Panel Advisers have followed up expressions of interests in joining Panel from three social workers with relevant experience, none of whom were able to progress their applications due to pressures of work. This remains an ongoing challenge.
Improved feedback response rates from stakeholders, particularly social workers	62 Feedback forms from social workers attending panel were received in the reporting year, compared to 26 in the previous year. Panel Advisers devised and delivered a workshop for children's social workers: "What to Expect at Panel".
Reporting to Panel on the outcome of matches	A presentation on the outcome of recent matches was given by Hazel Howard, Team Manager, at the in-person Panel Gathering on 3 November 2021. It is hoped that this can be repeated at least annually.
Ongoing consolidation of DDP in Panel practice	DDP supervision sessions have been offered to Panel Chairs and members.

Appendix B: Central List of Panel Members

*New member joining in 2021-2

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 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 Sudha Arun*, 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

Bob Duthie, adoptive parent, former board member at Adoption UK, retired banker

Catherine Lloyd, adopted person, author, former leader and advocate in education, social care and mental health settings, panel member and board member for another adoption agency.

Charlotte Shadbolt, adoptive parent of four children, former

Chris Gilbey-Smith*, independent member, adoptive parent, actor, and former lawyer

Dave Linton*, independent member, local authority foster carer

Elaine Stratford, adopted person and senior health professional

Faye Abbot***** elected member, councillor at Coventry City Council

Janis McBride, retired primary head teacher, fostering and adoption in family

Joanne Russell-Miller, adoptive parent, and human resources manager

Marian Mound*, independent member, retired adoption social worker

Marion Humphries*, elected member, councillor at Warwickshire County Council

Mark Bayfield, adoptive parent

Natasha Sutton, adoptive parent, and teacher

Nigel Pendleton, adoptive parent and foster carer, Warwickshire County Council

Patrick Fox, social worker in commissioning for Children's Services, adult services, and Approved Mental Health Professional, adopted person.

Rob Rogers, adoptive parent, educationalist, clergy, and counsellor

Sa'ddiya Mayet*, intercountry adoptive parent

Sharon Bent, adoptive parent and retired police officer

Taras Spyczak*, independent member, adoptive parent

Yasmeen Qazi*, independent member, adoptive parent, former social worker

Non-voting attendees

Kate Moon. Panel Adviser (30 hours)

Katie Nabbs, Panel Adviser (25 hours)

Melissa Rose, 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 C: Panel Training

Annual Conference, 29 September 2021 on 'Teams'

Contact and Communication in Adoption: Learning from the Experiences of Adoptive Families'

Led by Julie Young, Senior Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia, the session explored the crucial role of adoptive parents in family communication around adoption, and the importance of acknowledging their child's connection to their first/birth family. Julie shared findings from research on contact in adoption and discussed the implications for contact planning and preparing adoptive parents to help children make sense of their adoption story in a safe and beneficial way

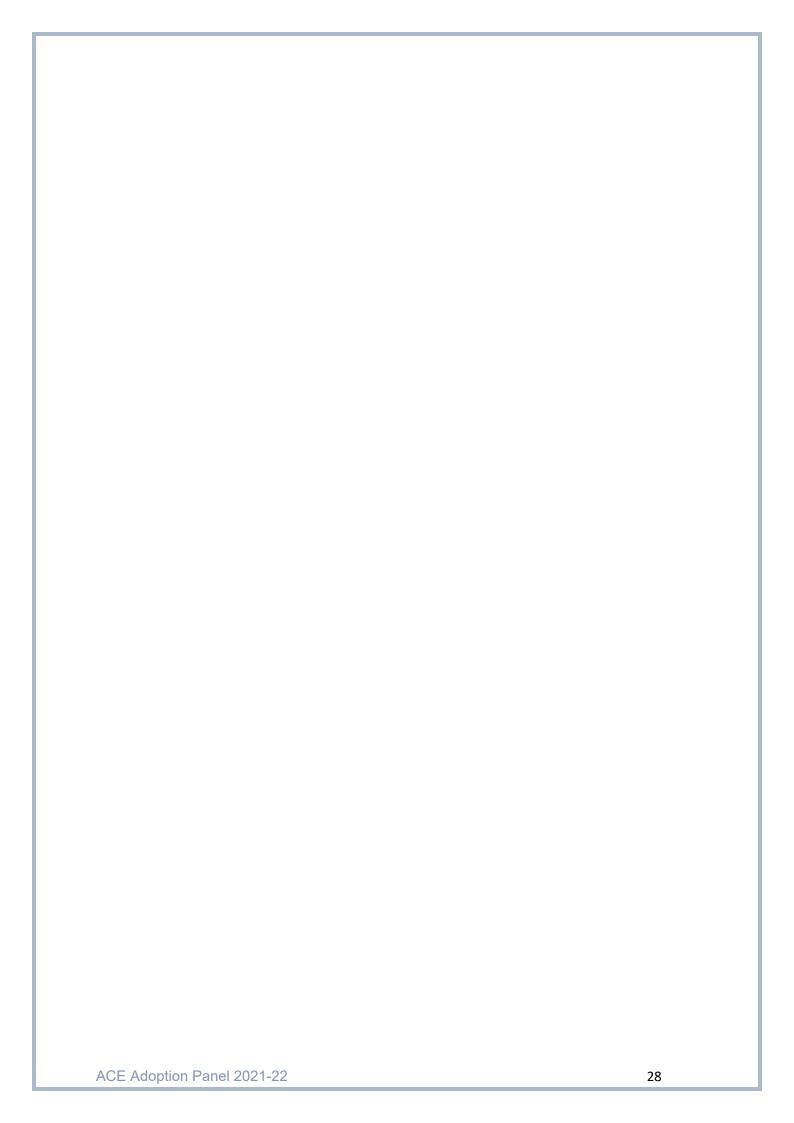Overall, the event was positively received by 23 panel members.

'Bitesize' Series

Developed to optimise the new opportunities created by virtual platforms, the 'Bitesize' programme of training workshops lasting 1-2 hours and held on Microsoft Teams has continued. Sessions held in 2021-22 include:

- Dyadic Development Practice, with Dr Billy Smythe (29 April 2021and 10 March 2022)
- Post-Adoption Support, with Louise Hathaway, Operations Manager at ACE (13 May 2021)
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, with Dr Joanna Kemp, EDI Adviser, Warwickshire CC (18 June 2021)
- Adoption Disruptions, with Brenda Vincent, Lead Manager, ACE (19 July 2021)
- Panel Members' Conversation Group, with Panel Advisers (1 December 2021)
- ACE's Family Connexions Service, with Margaret Meredith and Beth Wade (1 February 2022)

In-Person Panel Member Meetings, 3 November 2021

In recognition of the loss of face-to-face contact and challenge to collaborative working that a virtual platform has imposed on panel members, the agency now offers 6-monthly in-person meetings provided a minimum of 12 panel members can attend. The first meeting, held near Warwick, was attended by 15 panel members and the panel team, and included presentations by ACE lead manager, Brenda Vincent about the development of ACE's work, by Emma Wooldridge on the work of the family finders, by team manager, Hazel Howard, on outcomes for a number of children matched since the start of ACE, and by panel advisers Kate and Katie on the 'recalibration' of the panel role.

Appendix D: Feedback on the effectiveness of the Panel

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 added during the global pandemic in 2020.

Questions to prospective adopters	Approvals 2021-22 77 cases	Match 2021-22 91 cases	Approvals 2020-2021 77 cases	Match 2020-2021 91 cases	Approvals and matches 2019-20 185 cases	Approvals and matches[10] 2018-19 184 cases
Response rate	44%	40%	51%	42%	24 %	11%
Number of responses	34	36	39	38	44	
Attended on first date offered	62%	61%	67%	61%	61%	
None, or very few technical glitches with online attendance	79%	86%	79%	95%	-	-
Panel ran early, on time or less than 15 minutes behind	71%	64%	77%	79%	43%	-
Thought questions were relevant	91%	92%	90%	95%	84%	93%
Overall experience of attending Panel was negative	3%	3%	5%	0%	11%	-
Overall experience of attending Panel was neutral	6%	3%	5%	3%	15%	-
Overall experience of attending Panel was positive	91%	94%	90%	97%	74%	93%

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[10] Paper questionnaire sent to applicants by post

Happy to attend a virtual Panel again, or neutral	85%	83%	95%	100%	-	-

"The panel members were very welcoming and professional. All the questions were clearly formulated. The Chair of Panel Adviser was extremely good and efficient in her role. Our social worker and the child's social worker were of great support for us during the meeting."

"Through this process we are encouraged to understand each case and child is difference, think it would be beneficial if panel members also remember this when asking certain questions around decision making. One particular panel member came across a little too strongly with their own thoughts on a situation that left us feeling pushed into a corner about a delicate situation we'd already worked through with other professionals."

"It was a really positive experience. I had previously thought it was a box ticking exercise but have completely changed my mind on this. They were so helpful, experienced, clearly on our side and asked astute questions that showed they noticed things that were missing or needed to be done or that were hadn't considered or that might help us. To be honest, I'd have loved to have kept in touch with some panel members!"

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.

Questions to social workers	Approvals and matches 2021-22 173 cases	Approvals and matches 2020-2021 169 cases	Approvals and matches 2019-20 185 cases	Approvals and matches 2018-19 184 cases
Number of responses	62	31	40	25
Response rate (percentage of cases for which feedback submitted)	36%	18%	22%	14%
Case started within 30 minutes of advertised time	76%	87%	67.5%	52%
Thought questions to SW were relevant or extremely relevant[11]	81%	84%	85%	96%

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[11] 10% replied that they were not asked any questions

Thought questions to applicants were relevant or extremely relevant	81%	94%	87.5%	100%
Thought Chairing of meeting was 'good' or 'excellent'	92%	87%	-	-
Experience 'better than expected' or 'Excellent/very positive'	70%	77%	-	-

Sample of feedback from social workers:

"This was a very positive experience. I felt the chair was very warm and this was reflected well across panel (which can be difficult virtually) It was lovely that panel members had recognised and gave positive feedback on our child focus."

"I think more clarity over what is wanted from a question. I recognise panel has a very difficult job and they have such a lot to read through, but I did feel that the panel had maybe focussed on FFA with not fully allowing a clear answer. I also understand that this is my perspective and so it is subjective."

"Whilst it is important to clarify points it is not necessary to continue to probe to try to get a different answer than the one given. This was not a pleasant experience for myself or the adopters and in some ways overshadowed the joy of being matched. It was positive that the chair stepped in."

"No further improvements needed. Panel was on time and went smoothly. As a student, I felt nervous initially, but all panel members were very friendly and welcoming, which eased me into the meeting."

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 in writing 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:

> **"The process was sufficiently robust and thorough. I commend panel for meeting the social workers separately to address queries relating to the**

Prospective Adopters' assessment and CPR" (ADM Herefordshire, 1 November 2021)

"I am satisfied that the panel have undertaken a thorough examination of the evidence and information presented to them and followed due process with regard to reaching a decision on the match." (ADM, Solihull, 18 June 2021)

"I am satisfied that Panel were robust and thorough in their decision-making process. Strengths and vulnerabilities were discussed, and Panel were unanimous in support of their recommendation that the match should go ahead". (ADM, Coventry, 25 November 2021)

Agency Decision Makers who observed a panel meeting offered the following feedback:

"Really impressed. Really robust, a lot of challenge. It was really obvious that you had all read the papers, done your due diligence, and thought about the questions. It was thorough and challenge with the social workers and adopters was done in a sensitive way.

I liked the way you chaired it …giving people opportunity to say what they needed to say or add.

It was helpful to observe in terms of what you pick up in the papers – for me in that first case picking up those issues in terms of chronology, use of text messages, how we ensure the CPR is a document for the child and how social workers write that. Reflecting on what you picked up in terms of the child's voice and that we evidence that... Important that we and the child have the full picture." (ADM, Worcestershire, 31 March 2022)

I observed ACE Panel yesterday and it was really useful, firstly there were discussions about DDP questions... which was interesting and would be good to discuss with ADMs generally at the regional meeting, as we need to understand this more to support my questioning within ADM.

On the first child [match] I got to feel proud of our timeliness on Fostering for Adoption ...and it was lovely to see the baby and adopter...

The panel were really robust around the second child considered... exploring delay, siblings, matching .... there really was a lack of clarity in the CPR to understand all these issues. The questions were careful and kind, providing opportunity to gain the necessary information to recommend a match. I really saw the shift from what was in the paperwork to exploring the issues to a point of resolution, with vulnerabilities. It was skilful chairing alongside the diversity of the experiences of the panel too.

(ADM, Warwickshire, 17 March 2022)