



Adoption Central England

Annual Report 2022-2023



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Coventry City Council, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and Worcestershire County Council joined with Warwickshire County Council (the host) on 1 February 2018 to form Adoption Central England (ACE). The service was joined by Herefordshire Council on 1 July 2019. ACE is a local authority shared service and was the seventh regional adoption agency to become operational in the country.
- 1.2 This is the fifth annual report providing a summary of activity and developments within ACE that covers the 5-year period up to 31 March 2023.

It can be read alongside the ACE Adoption Panel Annual Report 2022-2023. (Appendix 1).

2. Background Information

2.1 The overarching aim of ACE is to *‘provide an innovative and relationship focussed service for children, adoptive families and others affected by adoption. This is by offering lifelong support based on up to date practices and interventions and supported by modern technology.’*

2.2 ACE works in close partnership with the local authorities and other services to:

- Ensure that a wider pool of prospective adopters is ready to meet children’s need to be loved, nurtured, protected, and understood
- Ensure that adopters understand, accept, and can meet children’s needs and provide a secure relationship within which they can thrive
- Increase the levels of adoption for children waiting to be adopted
- Reduce the length of time those children wait to be adopted
- Improve/ensure attachment and trauma informed post adoption support services to adoptive families.

2.3 In March 2018 the ACE Executive Board supported the recommendation that ACE should become a service underpinned by **Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP)**. This approach ensures that relationships and emotional connection are at the heart of services and all aspects of the organisation are informed by DDP principles. In January 2021 ACE became the first adoption service to be DDP certified.

2.4 Since 1 November 2019 ACE has delivered the regional adoption support service for birth families – **Family Connexions**. Other services provided include non-agency (stepparent) adoption information, counselling and court assessments and birth records counselling for adopted adults.

2.5 ACE supports the development of professional practice around adoption and since July has delivered a range of training opportunities to social workers and related staff including foster carers. The training offered is listed below and the annual report is submitted as Appendix 2:

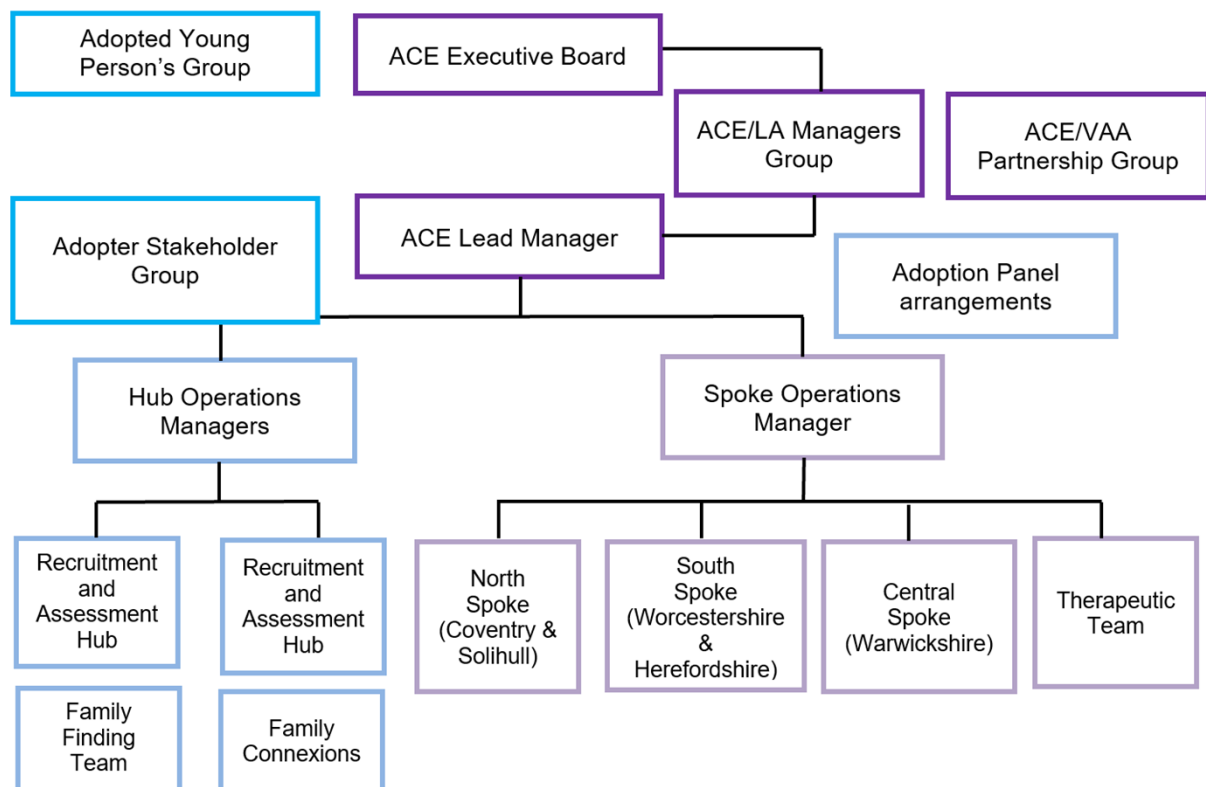
- (i) Permanence through adoption
- (ii) Child Permanence Reports
- (iii) Maintaining relationships and identity in adoption
- (iv) Preparing children for adoption and life story work and books
- (v) Care planning - considering the permanency options
- (vi) Supporting foster carer to prepare child for adoption and understanding the adoption process
- (vii) Early Permanence through Fostering for Adoption

(viii) Family finding, matching and supporting children in their adoptive home.

3. Staffing

3.1 ACE delivers services through a Hub and Spoke model. The Hub activities are concerned with the recruitment, preparation, and assessment of prospective adopters. The same staff are involved in matching children with adopters and provide support for 12 months after the adoption order is granted. Their work includes the support to arrangements where children are placed on an early permanence - fostering for adoption basis where the Hub social workers fulfil the fostering support responsibilities. They also plan and coordinate opportunities for adoptive families to meet. The Spokes, in the north/central and south are located within the local authority areas. They offer a duty service, undertake assessments of need for adoption support, process and commission therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund, work directly with families who require social work services, provide birth records counselling to adult adoptees, complete non-agency adoption assessments for the court and offer opportunities for adopted young people to meet.

3.2 The structure chart and governance arrangements are summarised as follows:



3.3 The establishment for ACE is 73.91 FTE and as on 31 March 2022 there are 97 people working in ACE as follows:

| Roles | Establishment | Appointed | Comment |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| ACE Managers incl. training manager | 9.95 FTE | 9.43 | 0.5 vacancy |
| Hub social workers | 15.26 FTE | 15.06 | 1.61 mat. leave |
| Family Finding Team - social workers | 3.4 FTE | 3.4 | - |
| Family Connexions – social workers | 3.33 FTE + 0.81 social care worker | 3.33 | - |
| Spoke social workers | 19.1 FTE | 13.57 | 4.61 vacancies |
| Therapeutic Team – social workers incl. Therapeutic Life Story Work Practitioners | 3.61 FTE | 3.41 | 0.2 vacancy |
| Family support workers supporting the Spokes | 2.62 FTE | 2.62 | - |
| Social Worker – Adopter training lead | 0.81 FTE | 0.81 | - |
| Business support and related roles | 13.25 FTE | 13.91 | 0.81 vacancy 0.6 mat. leave |
| Adoption Panel Advisors – social workers | 1.49 FTE | 1.49 | - |
| Total | 73.63 | 67.03 | 6.12 |

3.4 The service has three small specialist teams:

The **Family Connexions Service** has 3.33 FTE social workers and 0.81 FTE family support workers. The aim of the service is to provide a range of support services including information to birth family members when adoption has been formally identified as the plan for the child. This service also hosts the Letterbox Scheme.

The **Therapeutic Team** delivers therapeutic interventions to families who have high levels of assessed needs, and this can be on an individual or group work basis. The workers frequently work alongside other social workers either within ACE or from the local authorities. Two social workers have the Diploma in Therapeutic Life Story Work which complements the interventions delivered through the Therapeutic Team.

The **Family Finding Team** is a small group of ACE social workers who work very closely with the child's allocated social workers in efforts to secure adoption for children with priority needs.

- 3.5 ACE has a dedicated part time social work post to lead on adopter training. This includes the adopter preparation programme and post approval training, the majority of which is delivered by ACE. The post approval training programme in place and under review or development covers:
- Talking and Telling about Adoption – The importance of identity, and Life Story Books
 - Eat Sleep and Play
 - Psychological Health in Adopted Children and Adolescents
 - Self-Harm Workshop
 - First Year Together (under review)
 - Parenting with PACE (under review)
 - Maintaining Relationships (in development).
- 3.6 ACE is responsible for the coordination and delivery of adoption panel functions which remain online. This work is supported by 1.5 panel advisors and 1.5 panel administrators.
- 3.7 The business support functions are supported by a part time data analyst who works closely with the local authorities, and an Adoption Support Fund finance officer who processes all the financial transactions that underpin the provision of therapeutic interventions to adoptive families across the region. The Contracts Manager supports the arrangements for the **Framework Agreement for Therapeutic Interventions**.
- 3.8 The current year has been particularly challenging due to higher than usual staff vacancies and periods of absence. It has not been possible to backfill these positions due to financial restrictions which has resulted in the reprioritisation of work, managers backfilling, and social workers undertaking adopter assessments and Spoke duty functions as additional hours. There have also been challenges in progressing the necessary references required for prospective adopters in the Stage 1 process.
- 3.9 In October 2021 the service inaugurated its **Clinical Psychology Service** through the appointment of a part time clinical psychologist. This service is commissioned until March 2024 and aims to:
- Improve early and longer-term placement stability.
 - Improve adoptive parent/child relationships.
 - Offer timely support to adoptive parents to feel able to manage

challenges and risks.

- Improve prospective adopter understanding of children's needs and enhance the matching process.
- Enhance the confidence and skills of ACE staff to understand and support adoptive families.
- Contribute to the effective delivery of services through co working and training with ACE staff.

3.10 The first annual report on this service is attached as Appendix 3.

3.11 Staff introduce and model for prospective adopters, information about attachment and developmental trauma and the key DDP principles. The DDP attitude of PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy) is demonstrated throughout this process. Staff work in ways that focus on maintaining openness with families and enhancing family relationships, safety, and connection. As a DDP certified service the 80% target set for ACE social workers to be trained at DDP Level 1 has been exceeded. As on 31 March 2023, **71** (91%) social work and related staff had DDP level 1 training and **14** (19%) staff are trained at DDP 2. These staff lead on embedding and mentoring staff within the ACE service on DDP principles and practices, including the adoption panel membership. One social worker is progressing the DDP practicum. The DDP ethos and practice within the service is supported by the commissioned DDP consultant/trainer for 23 days a year.

3.12 Additional services provided through ACE include:

ACE Individual and Couples Counselling Service (see Appendix 4) that offers the opportunity for individual adopters and for couples to re-connect with their own lived experiences where they are currently experiencing difficulties. The counselling will explore how the couple's relationship has been impacted by adoption and the sessions focus on what individual adopters or couples need and how they can express and communicate their needs to others.

Space2Talk (see Appendix 5) aims to provide space for adoptive parents to talk about themselves, their emotional well-being and everything that comes with being an adoptive parent to other adoptive parents who are trained and supported to provide this service. Volunteers encourage adoptive parents to explore experiences and challenges that they may be facing. Volunteers do not offer solutions to these problems; they encourage and empower adopters to find their own solutions to the issues that the adoptive parents raise.

4. Financial arrangements

4.1 ACE is funded through a funding share calculation for each local authority against average outturn data over a 3-year period. The proxy indicators used to calculate respective contributions are (i) local authority children adopted (ii)

number of looked after children 0-4 years (iii) number of looked after children 5-9 years.

- 4.2 Some elements of the ACE budget receive an annual inflationary increase but not the interagency budget which was drawn upon significantly during this period. From the outset of the year, it was evident that the budget would be insufficient to meet the needs of the service and consequently the service reserves were drawn upon and a Financial Review was completed. This work is set to continue during 2023/24.
- 4.3 Due to the financial circumstances of ACE the decision was made to pause the proposed development of the Enhanced Support Care Scheme (respite), end the financial support to sibling placements of three or more children. ACE also withdrew from a national initiative to develop arrangements for maintaining relationships in fostering for adoption placements. Staffing decisions were also affected.

5. Performance

5.1 The performance of ACE against the **ACE Service Improvement Plan 2022-2023** is summarised in Appendix 6. This identifies 28 actions of which 13 related to specific performance related activities, with the remaining being innovative or developmental in nature. From these, 14 areas of activity were either completed or achieved and by their nature 13 areas are ongoing. The main areas highlighted for ongoing consideration relate to overall timeliness of adoption planning and placements, the usage of interagency placements and the development of the enhanced support (respite) scheme.

5.2 In summary, key performance measures to note are:

- Of the 120 children placed for adoption 85 (71%) were placed with ACE approved adopters,
- Levels of adopter enquiries fell short of the RAA average, however the number of enquirers entering the process at stage 1 has increased,
- 72 households were approved as suitable to adopt which is similar to the previous year and the percentage of prospective adopters approved within 6 months of registration of interest has increased but falls short of the target of 75% set,
- 26 households were approved from underrepresented groups, exceeding the target for Black and minority ethnic households, falling short for families from LGBTQ+ households,
- The target was exceeded for those adoptive households willing to consider fostering for adoption which is mirrored by the increase in children who have benefited from early permanence placements,

- The number of households able to consider the needs of priority children was less than required,
- Placement performance timescales is better than the provisional 3-year England average timescale of 198 days, although variation between ACE local authorities is noted,
- There has been a significant increase in the number of children placed on an interagency basis, reflecting the increase in children with adoption plans and the sufficiency shortfall of ACE approved adopters for those children waiting,
- 3 children experienced a placement disruption during this period whose circumstances are contained in the attached report (see Appendix 7) which reflects learning and makes practice recommendations.

5.3 The number of children who are coming forward with a plan for adoption since 2020/21 has seen a year on year increase as follows:

| | |
|---------|-----|
| 2020-21 | 129 |
| 2021-22 | 148 |
| 2022-23 | 152 |

This represents a **15%** increase.

5.4 Also more children are benefiting from fostering for adoption allowing them to experience placement stability sooner with 24 (20%) children being placed under this arrangement in 2022-23, an increase from 17 in the previous year and exceeding the target of 20.

5.5 Overall, this reflects positively on the ambition that local authorities have for children to be adopted, but this has created a sufficiency pressure during a period when less people are coming forward to adopt. This is reported in research conducted by Adoption UK and is similar to the experience of other regional adoption agencies.

'9 out of 10 prospective adopters say the cost-of-living crisis is affecting their decisions about adoption, according to a December 2022 survey by the charity Adoption UK. 87% of prospective adopters said cost of living increases were a significant factor in the decisions they were making about becoming an adoptive parent – for example, the number of siblings they could consider parenting. Sibling groups already spend 11 months longer in care than single children before being adopted.'

5.6 ACE approved **72** adoption households during this period which is consistent with the previous year, and many have been earmarked for matching with ACE children. Whilst enquiries have been lower than expected (475) the conversion rate of those moving on to stage 1 of the process has increased at

27%, reflecting that enquirers are positively choosing to progress their adoption journey through ACE.

5.7 To increase potential placement opportunities, ACE has developed a collaboration with regional adoption agencies and voluntary adoption agencies in the Midlands forming the **Midlands Together Collaboration**. More children have secured families regionally which allows easing of arrangements for adoption support in the longer term.

5.8 Areas for attention during 2023-2024 will be:

- To increase adopter enquiries, approval and assessment timeliness.
- To reduce the reliance on interagency adoption placements to less than 20% of placement.
- To maintain low levels of adoption disruptions.
- Continue to focus on fostering for adoption and the development of services and support around such arrangements.
- Continue to attract prospective adopters from under-represented groups with a particular focus on the LGBTQ+ communities.
- To minimise delay for children and explore how adoption timeliness can be improved.
- To establish consistent practices and decision making across the 5 local authorities in respect of fostering for adoption thereby increasing further the number of children who benefit from such arrangements.

6. Adoption Support

6.1 Adoption support remains an area of importance within ACE and the workload and referral rate has been similar to the previous year. The number of contacts to the service was **250** with **117** assessments of need completed.

6.2 As on 31.3.2023 there were **625** allocated support cases. **239** adoptive families with higher levels of need and complexities were supported at tier 3/4 and **234** families at the lower-level tiers 1/2 where intervention and support is primarily delivered from an external therapeutic provider. **55** families were awaiting allocation on this date and held within the duty process due to staff shortages.

6.3 In October 2022 an independent **Adoption Support Brief Service Review** was undertaken based on a blueprint for adoption support services published in 2019. The purpose was to provide a benchmark and an audit tool against which agencies could review and adjust resources and systems to make service improvements and achieve whole system change. The blueprint sets out 17 requirements of a high-quality adoption support system which covered

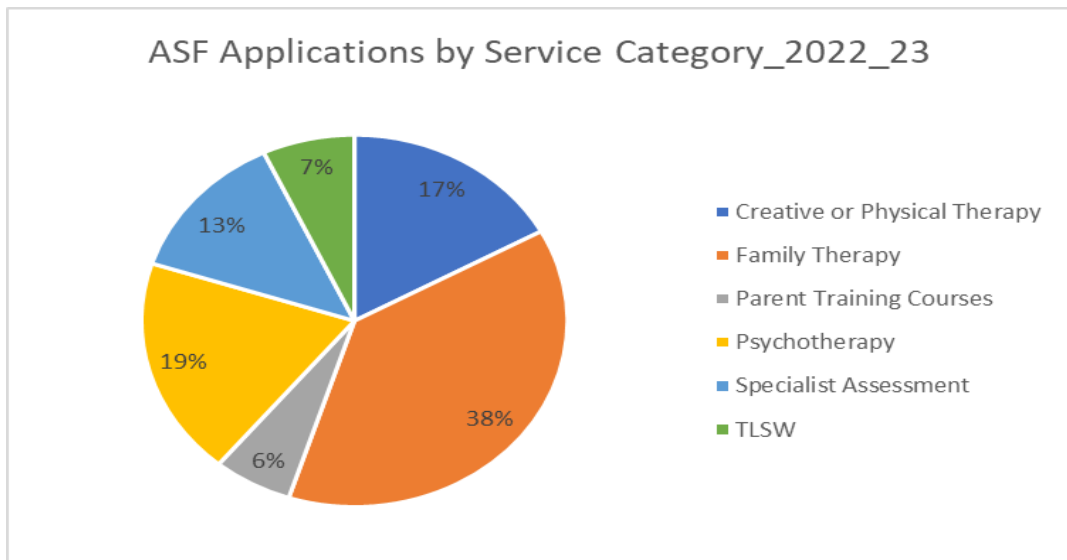
the four primary themes – strategic, communication and engagement, systems and process and service delivery. The review concluded that:

‘The RAA has a clear vision with shared values and structures and processes already in place. There are always challenges as demands on services increase and the environment in which the RAA operates changes, but ACE has evolved into a creative, internally stable, outward looking organisation, retaining connections with, but an identity separate, to the local authorities funding them. They provide excellent value for money and their adoption support service is one of the most developed in the country. Measured against the evaluation tool from the Blueprint, ACE matches or in many areas exceeds the exempla services in relation to the provision of adoption support.’

- 6.4 The service also provides Birth Records Counselling to adopted adults and **209** counselling enquiries were received during this period.
- 6.5 There has been a gradual increase in non-agency adoption notifications following a decline during the pandemic. There have been 172 contacts about non-agency adoption during this period which resulted in 97 enquiries and a subsequent 47 initial counselling sessions which is equivalent to 24 days intervention from the Hub service. **25** new notifications of intention in respect of non-agency (step parent) adoption came through during this period with **21** non-agency adoption assessments allocated and a further **21** applications pending allocation.
- 6.6 Applications to the national Adoption Support Fund have remained high and during 2022-2023 the following applications were made:

| Type of application | Amount | Number of applications | Number of children | Number of families |
|--------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Individual family applications | £1,238,045.26 | 318 | 346 | 302 |
| ACE Therapeutic Team | £108,708.81 | 54 | 163 | 121 |
| Therapeutic Group applications | £44,248.83 | 13 | 118 | 94 |

- 6.7 The ACE **Framework Agreement for Therapeutic Providers** was extended and now has an approved list of **49** accredited providers.
- 6.8 The types of support most frequently required by adoptive families are:



This shows that interventions focused on working with adopted children through their adoptive parents are significant (42%) with direct work with children through various therapeutic interventions making up the majority of applications to the Adoption Support Fund.

6.9 The Therapeutic Team offered the following interventions during 2022-2023:

- Therapeutic parenting and sensory integration
- Non Violent Resistance - NVR
- Parent child attachment play - PCAP
- Toddler Bonding.

6.10 Further support is available to adoptive families pre and post adoption through the **ACE Clinical Psychology Service** as detailed in Appendix 3. This is an invaluable addition to the range of support services available to adoptive families in the region. Feedback from adoptive families and professionals has been extremely positive as evidenced by the following:

'It really flipped the coin for me... it was very helpful to see the other side view [the Psychologist] brought and I have taken that away as a positive instead of my sad feeling that my daughter is struggling.'

'It was helpful to talk things through with a professional and hear some practical ideas about different strategies that can be tried and support that can be offered... [the Psychologist] also recommended a book which I have purchased and think it will be relevant for my work with all the family's I support.'

'This is an excellent service for both social workers and families which helps all parties to reflect on situations that can be challenging to families.'

6.11 The **Adopters Newsletter** has been produced on a quarterly basis and sent to over 850 households and ACE managers continue to meet with the Adopters Stakeholder Group at quarterly intervals.

7. Services to birth relatives – Family Connexions

7.1 Family Connexions provides a range of services to birth family members who can be supported in the following ways:

- 1 to 1 emotional and relational support, offering opportunities to have their experience accepted, understood and to have access to advice during and after the adoption process
- An explanation of the adoption process
- Support with the practical aspects of the adoption process, including support with letterbox contact and/or meeting with adopters. Practical guidance is combined with support around emotional impact.
- Advice regarding future life planning including signposting to other universal support service.
- Group sessions for birth parents and extended family members across the ACE region
- Support with any direct contact or reunification plans requested by the adopted child and their adoptive parents.

7.2 The service is well embedded. As at year end the workload from across the region was as follows:

| Local authority | No. of referrals | No. of current cases being worked | Groups while waiting 1:1 |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Coventry | 5 | 77 | 10 |
| Solihull | 3 | 33 | 5 |
| Warwickshire | 6 | 100 | 4 |
| Worcestershire | 7 | 95 | 3 |
| Herefordshire | 4 | 49 | 0 |
| Out of ACE | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Total | 25 | 347 | 29 |

7.3 The Family Connexions team works, alongside the Spoke adoption support teams, to continue their collaborative working in supporting adopted young people to re-establish contact with birth family members.

8. Quality assurance and inspection

8.1 ACE has a range of quality assurance arrangements in place that includes:

- Case file auditing by managers introduced February 2021.

- Learning from complaints and representations.
- Robust staff recruiting practices including induction.
- Regular supervision and annual appraisal of all staff.
- Opportunities for staff exit interviews.
- Quarterly performance management reports presented to the ACE Executive Board.
- Feedback to ACE and local authorities on the quality of reports presented to the adoption panel - see Adoption Panel Annual Report.
- Framework Agreement for external providers delivering therapeutic services to adoptive families.
- User feedback through the Adopters Stakeholder Group, training events, adoption panel.
- Managerial oversight of reports and countersigning.
- Feedback from local authority partners and other stakeholders through various forums.
- Timescales monitored for key activities in the adopter journey from enquiry to approval.
- Observed practices.
- The Adoption Support Fund Review Panel.
- Reviews of the DDP Action Plan including staff surveys.
- External validation through local authority OFSTED inspections.

8.2 This was the second year for case file auditing and the **Case File Audit Report** noted that fewer audits were completed during this period. 18 were completed of the scheduled 24 due to competing workload priorities and other demands on managerial time and availability.

8.3 Testament to the quality of social work practice in ACE from the 10 adoption support audits 8 were judged as outstanding or good and from the 8 Hub audits 6 (75%) were considered outstanding or good.

'Family matched and transitions in process - SW keeping in mind needs of all involved, including birth son. Clear record of contact maintained throughout transitions.'

'Most key documents evident and good case recording enabling understanding of adopters, and their children, experience and decision making.'

'There was good practice where the family's first language was not English. Due to significant delays in Stage 1 (Covid related), it had been some time since the family had attended the preparing to adopt training (virtual), so SW ensured she re-visited key elements of this during the assessment. More assessment sessions were therefore needed and after each session or key

conversation SW had emailed the family, summarising the discussions, to ensure they had the information to process at their pace.'

'SW clearly applies the principles of DDP in their communication with the applicant.'

'Communication with both parents clearly evident and demonstrates the social workers connection to both parents, regardless of them living in sperate households.'

'Child's voice is present.'

'DDP was explored during discussion with social worker, and they have clear knowledge and understanding of the principles and how they have supported parents to understand the child's inner world.'

'The DDP principles are weaved in with regards to holding of the family and validating their experiences and lots of acceptance of the children by the adopters.'

- 8.4 Areas for attention in 2023/24 will be to ensure that the MOSAIC record is fully populated, that adopters receive the assessment of need in a timelier way and for documentation related to family finding, matching and transitions are uploaded to ESCR and finally for there to be stronger evidence of reflective and analytical supervision.
- 8.5 During 2023/24 the long-awaited adjustments to the MOSAIC workflow processes are due to commence which should assist. However, managers struggle with the time and capacity to populate the workflow more fully with the summary of their supervision sessions and managerial oversight.
- 8.6 During the past year ACE has been part of two **OFSTED** inspections that took place for Coventry City Council in June 2022 and Solihull MBC in November 2022. There was no qualitative reference to ACE in the Solihull report, but the Coventry inspection reported:

'Timely decisions are made to secure permanence via adoption. The local authority and the regional adoption agency, ACE, have worked hard to improve information presented to panel. As a result, children and adopters are well matched. Transitions for children are well planned and managed and adopters continue to receive support after the child is placed. Adopters are provided with therapeutic training ...'

- 8.7 The ACE **Adopter's Annual Survey** 2022 was sent out in November to 824 households who receive the ACE Newsletter. ACE was pleased to receive **107**

responses, a 30% increase on the previous year. Survey respondents were from across the ACE region . Approximately 54% of the respondents were families currently receiving an adoption support service, 20% of households were with the Hub teams and 26% of families were not receiving services at the present time.

- 8.8 Overall positive comments and representations were made about services received from ACE. Some of the comments received were:

‘When we first adopted We did not know enough to appreciate how much therapeutic parenting was needed to how it impacted on our family. After research, attending courses and receiving support through the ASF we can confirm that therapeutic parenting is imperative to support adopted children who may have suffered any sort of trauma. We would not have survived as a family if we had not implemented and kept revisiting how to parent in a therapeutic way.’

‘We cannot fault the support and services we received from ACE. We would highly recommend the team.’

‘We have found the stay and play groups and walk and talk most valuable for connecting with other adoptive families.’

‘We appreciated the support and kindness the social worker and psychologist provided particularly around the issue of our child making contact with biological family.’

- 8.9 Whilst no specific themes emerged from the survey a range of comments were made about the timeliness of the support through the Adoption Support Fund, a request for additional training on PACE (therapeutic parenting), also references to parenting teens and for speedier allocation for adoption support. Requests were made about ease of access to training courses, signposting to resources for teens and improving confidence in the letterbox arrangements.
- 8.10 These issues have been addressed. There are plans to widen the scope for the Parenting with PACE post approval training and a course has been developed on ‘Maintaining Relationships and Letterbox.’ Further adjustments have been made to the ACE website particularly as 68 (63%) respondents told us that they had accessed the website – 40 for general browsing and 28 for specific information. The website alongside the ACE Newsletter is a key means whereby ACE maintains contact with adoptive families across the region.

9. Practice Improvements

- 9.1 In the past year ACE has worked with colleagues to update Practice Guidance in respect of **Consensual Adoption** and **Foster Carers who wish to Adopt**.
- 9.2 Agreements (including that from the court) were also obtained for ACE to pilot a revised **Child's Permanence Report** with the aim to improve its relevance and to include a trauma informed perspective. It is hoped that this will be cascaded across the ACE region pending an evaluation and consideration by the ACE Executive Board.
- 9.3 ACE has delivered on its commitment to extend the range of training opportunities available to local authority social workers and foster carers as detailed in Appendix 2 and has continued to offer this service.
- 9.4 The number of groups for adopted young people across the region has extended to 3 with between 30-40 young people attending. ACE will be exploring how adopted young adults can support the *voice and influence* agenda going forward.
- 9.5 ACE participated in the only known research study on the impact of online adoption panels – '**An evaluation of an online adoption panel from the perspective of panel members, social workers and prospective adopters**', led by Dr Peter Unwin, Principal Lecturer in Social Work, University of Worcester and Kate Moon, Agency Panel Adviser, Adoption Central England.

- 9.6 The overall conclusion was:

'The above findings indicate that the overall online experiences of prospective adopters, panel members and social workers have largely been positive, this positivity increasing as systems became more embedded within the organisation. The technology itself has developed ... Also, many of those attending panel have developed confidence and skill in managing themselves in a virtual environment ...'

Further

'...no evidence has emerged since the onset of online adoption panels that the nature of their recommendations has changed in any significant ways. Panels are not run for the benefit of panel members, social workers or prospective adopters but for the child/ children seeking permanency. Evidence from the present research suggests a healthy panel system which is able to have appropriate debate, and one which has sophisticated its technological approach as all players have become more conversant with the online world.'

- 9.7 The study offered recommendations some of which have been put in place by ACE for developing the practice of an online adoption panel meeting including consideration of when an in-person panel would significantly support those attending, social workers offering to be in the same room as adopters when

attending panel, and regular in-person training sessions for panel members to support informal networking and mentoring.

10. Diversity and Inclusion

- 10.1 ACE has had an ongoing commitment to deliver a safe, sensitive, and inclusive service and has continued with its **Black Lives Matters Conversation Group**. The service has developed further its inclusivity statements of intent and has encouraged training and development opportunities through team discussion, learning and awareness. Moving forward the focus will be broadened to include a wider range of marginalised groups with a high level action plan in development. There will be an ongoing focus on recruitment of adopters from under representative groups. It is recognised that therapeutic interventions are typically ethnocentric with a bias to white families and ACE will be considering how to better support black and minority ethnic families and whether there is a specific need for a support group for transracially adopted young people.

11. Disruptions

- 11.1 The **Report of disruptions in adoption placements 2022-2023** is found in Appendix 7. Three disruptions took place during this period representing 2.3% of the placements made. Three further learning reviews took place where children were not placed. The findings emphasise the importance of having up to date information about the child's needs, recognising the impact of trauma and how this affects a child's capacity to attach. Support plans need to consider current and future potential needs and prospective adopters need a realistic appreciation of how children respond during periods of transition. The importance of the professional team working closely together to support and ameliorate the risk of disruption was emphasised alongside the importance of managing endings appropriately considering the needs of all those affected.

12. Complaints, compliments, and representations

- 12.1 ACE received three complaints during this period. In 2 complaints there were similarities where the complaints were partially upheld, and apologies offered. Both related to issues with a Children's Team also and in both situations the complaints raised concerns that issues to do with the child's needs were not fully covered in the child's adoption documentation. There were also subsequent delays in assessments and access to further support or the family's experience of forthcoming support was not positive.
- 12.2 The third complaint concerned prospective adopters' dissatisfaction with delays in the stage 1 process.
- 12.3 The following is a summary of the compliments received about the service.

Catherine and Hayley S – Birth Records Counselling service...This has been very thorough, informative and worthwhile. Dealt with sensitively. Great support offered and followed up, contact kept throughout – thank you.

ACE Adoption Panel – As I won't be doing any further ADMs for Warwickshire, I want to thank you for the excellent support you have provided to Warwickshire. The ACE Panel are conscientious and support of timely decisions for children.

Nicky and South Team – Can I take this opportunity to thank your team (and Sally S) for the support this intervention has given to us both.

Hayley H – Thank you for all your help in the lead up to the end of stage one, everything has run very smoothly, everybody we have been in contact with at ACE has been so helpful – thank you.

Louise H – What an inspiring meeting chair you are Louise even in difficult circumstances you managed a challenging and emotional meeting with passion and kindness

Yi Pei - thank you for all your help with the non-agency consultations and your keen eye when things aren't quite right – much appreciated!

Carol & Jack – In terms of finance and contracts – you guys are always very responsive, helpful and everything is done quickly. I have every confidence, taking on cases, that I know they are going to be appropriate referrals and your Social Workers take the time to have a chat first, which is hugely beneficial. The time taken between discussion and ASF applications being agreed is within ASF realms and I am updated where delays occur or approval is received. A big thanks to ACE!

We spoke to the Therapeutic Team about our concerns – They were amazing!!

Lisa R - You made such an effort to put us at ease and even though the process itself can be intrusive, I never felt uncomfortable. We have always felt we can call and ask your advice - which is a testament to how professional and approachable you are. You were brilliant at preparing us for the various stages. You understand us a couple, empathising during the difficult times and celebrating at the happy times. We have been so lucky to have you as our Social Worker

Charlotte H - I just wanted to say how much I appreciate the support you are giving us. Having you check in with us with such compassion and also saying 'you are doing great' really does mean a lot!

We have just finished the 3 day training course with Emily and Rachel – it was fantastic! They both made it really enjoyable and we felt like we learnt a lot from it. Eager to move to stage 2 now.

Emma H & Sarah F – The NVR course was invaluable, informative, and very clearly explained. There were many useful, practical, and innovative ideas. We all benefited from the touches of humour which were frequent and made everyone feel comfortable, relaxed, and happy to ask questions. It was exceptionally well structured and timed. The 1-1 sessions as well as the group sessions helped me enormously and things at home have really improved due to following the advice given. The best course I have been on – wish I could do it again as I'm sure everyone does.

Jess H - We felt well supported by our Social Worker Jess, and the rest of the ACE Team. We were fortunate to have a very smooth matching process and transition. We will access any further support and information as needed. We hope to adopt again in the future through ACE.

Comments from Panel - Sheleen had helpfully and sensitively explored issues around culture, faith disability, inclusion, resilience and therapeutic parenting and there was evidence of a supportive professional relationship with the applicants

Lisa L - From our 1st meeting with Lisa we all felt at ease. She was kind, caring, thoughtful of our past experiences and most of all she was human... Lisa took time to introduce herself and explain her knowledge, experience and the whole adoption process. She explained what she needed from us in the most respectful manner and made the whole journey and absolute pleasure. Lisa helped us every step of the way. When our little boy was placed with us this support remained. We then went on to complete our family with the addition of our daughter with Lisa again by our side. Lisa is not only an incredible Social Worker, she is an incredible person that needs full recognition for all she does.

We cannot fault the support and services that we received from ACE - We would highly recommend the team.

Nicky L – The circle of discovering my natural parents is now complete –

Hayley S - Business Support, was so nice and listened. I did not feel judged. Hayley was patient and I'm glad I reached out

Rosie – Thank you for being the first person to help me track my life down and being there for me every step, I really appreciate you helping me get my past life and getting me answers so I can move forward

Sharon - Just wanted to share T's school photo with you to show how happy and well rounded he is and show what a difference you made to all our lives.

I would like to thank Jemma for her thorough ACE input and the openness of the team for reviewing opportunities for these children.

Jackie B has been brilliant in the last 12 months – she's an exceptional Social Worker who really understands what we have been through, Jackie pulled people together from all the services. When she was off Lara stepped in – she knew everything that went on before and picked up the ball running – she was great and held everything together. - I just wanted you to know

Helen G – It was a real pleasure to meet you and you were just so caring in the way you listened to us.

Melissa R - What would we have done without you? We just can't imagine. You were quite simply the cavalry! You galvanised so many people into action and commitment to supporting adoption by us for M. You went far and above your professional obligations and gave much of yourself in doing so. We can never really know the extent of all that you did for M and us but your efforts played a huge part in keeping our little family together. You really did keep us going at times. We hope that you know that we will be forever grateful to you. We can only repay you by being the best parents we can be for M and that we promise is our lifelong aim.

Smera organised a child appreciation day with the prospective adopters and included me in this, giving them the opportunity to ask questions. There seems to have been a lot of thought and preparation in creating some stable foundations and assurances for the prospective adopters. It is good to see that Smera has used the approach to create a social story using characters that the children can connect with to help prepare them for their next transition. It is wonderful that the 3 brothers will now be able to live together.

We have found the 'Stay and Play' groups and 'Walk and Talk' most valuable for connecting with other adoptive families – thank you

We would definitely recommend ACE to anyone considering adoption in central England.

13. Staff Development and Support

- 13.1 A full service event took place on 10 January 2023 which was the first opportunity since the coronavirus lockdown for the staff group to get together. It provided an opportunity for ACE staff to reconnect and to be updated about the range of services delivered through the team.
- 13.2 External training accessed for some team members has included:
- BUSS Level 2
 - IAC Conference on Adoption Reconstruction
 - Access to Information for Post Commencement Adoptions
 - RAA profiling webinar for family finder
 - Trauma Informed Practice and Leadership
 - Seeking connections research project
 - The Voices and Stories of adopted people – Identity and relationships.
 - West Midlands Early Permanence Practice Events
- 13.3 Additionally alongside colleagues in the Special Guardianship Support teams across the region, ACE team members attended the course programme delivered by the ACE Clinical Psychology Service. These cover, Neurodiversity in children who are adopted, psychological interventions and understanding mental health in adopted young people, psychological perspective on self-harm.
- 13.4 DDP practice is embedded through DDP learning sets and consultations, and ACE staff have access to the comprehensive training and development programme through Warwickshire County Council, the host agency.
- 13.5 Some ACE staff are also attending the practice educator development programme which allows them to have social workers in training placed in ACE.

14. Overall impact and future plans

- 14.1 ACE is an established regional adoption agency now entering its 6th year. It has:
- A brand identity and relaunched its website recently.
 - Achieved DDP certification, maintains and promotes DDP informed practices.
 - Embedded early permanence – fostering for adoption.
 - Continued to place most children with ACE approved adopters.
 - Widened the range of support services available to adoptive families including the ACE Clinical Psychology Service.
 - Maintained diversity in its recruitment of adoptive families.

- Developed a comprehensive post approval training package for adoptive parents.
- Continued to engage with adopters as key stakeholders including an annual survey.
- Strengthened quality assurance through various processes and arrangements.

14.2 During 2022/2023 the service costs exceeded the allocated budget, and the ACE Executive Board addressed this issue through the agreed arrangements. The interagency placement budget was a particular pressure brought about by the increase in children with adoption plans and shortfall in ACE approved adopters. Measures were introduced during this period whereby the ACE Executive Board members makes the decision whether to pursue an interagency placement. This will be an ongoing area of service pressure in 2023-2024, however the early indications are that adopter recruitment is on the rise with the majority of children still being placed and supported through ACE.

14.3 The ACE Executive Board has determined the strategic priorities for 2023-2025 which are:

Concurrency

A proposed scheme is developed and delivered in partnership with a VAA partner to increase the number and percentage of early permanence placements. Different from fostering for adoption this scheme can support children and families where the primary plan is reunification with the parallel plan being in place for adoption, where reunification is unsuccessful.

Maintaining relationships, identity, and contact

Through local authority *champions* to engage with University of East Anglia cultural change and training programme leading to maintaining relationships arrangements in adoption being better supported and reviewed, and the extension of training to all relevant staff.

Adoption Breakdown

To conduct a survey of circumstances where adopted young people no longer live with their adoptive families and based on the findings to hear the voice and experience of adopted young people and their adoptive parents. To plan a regional learning event to consider the wider implications for practice and support.

14.4 The main ACE service development areas for 2023-2024 are:

- (i) To further support local authorities in embedding early permanence through fostering for adoption accessing support from the Midlands Together Collaboration Project on Early Permanence.
- (ii) To have an ongoing focus on adoption timeliness – improving the timescale between placement order and matching.
- (iii) To increase adopter recruitment in line with the ACE Adopter Sufficiency Strategy (see Appendix 8).
- (iv) To develop the adoption support database and implement the requirements of the nationally agreed adoption support dataset.
- (v) To extend ongoing training to family and friends to enhance placement stability.
- (vi) To address and clarify responsibilities in respect of the Post Commencement Regulations 2005 as they relate to access to adoption records.
- (vi) To explore avenues to address the mental health needs of adopted young people.
- (vii) To participate in the nationally commissioned Letter Swap pilot – a digital database for the exchange of correspondence post adoption.
- (viii) To work alongside local authority partners to achieve the Early Permanence Quality Kite Mark.
- (ix) To respond to the learning arising from the Cumbria Learning Review into the death of a child in an adoption placement.
- (x) To progress the arrangements for adoptive parents to support adopter training events.
- (xi) To develop the voice and influence strategy regarding adopted young people engagement.
- (xii) To work towards ACE's ongoing certification as a DDP informed service.

15. Conclusion

- 15.1 The period under review has not been without its challenges due to the financial pressures on the service and staffing. The ACE Executive Board has been supportive and agreed the enhanced funding for a 12 month period pending further review during 2023-2024.
- 15.2 The region has seen an increasing number of children with ambitious plans for adoption with the majority of placements being made with ACE approved adopters. Early permanence through fostering for adoption is well embedded

in most local authorities in the region. The early indications are that adopter recruitment is on the increase although the cost of living crisis is having an impact.

- 15.3 Adoption disruption is low and the quality assurance processes and adopter survey evidence that ACE is providing an effective, comprehensive and well regarded service despite recent challenges.

Brenda Vincent - Head of ACE

Annual Panel Annual Report 2022-2023

Appendix 1



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Social Worker Adoption Training Programme Annual Report 2022-2023

Appendix 2



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Clinical Psychology Report

Appendix 3



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Annual Report - ACE Counselling Service

Appendix 4



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Annual Report - Space2Talk 2022-2023

Appendix 5



Space2Talk%20report
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Service Improvement Plan 2022-2023

Appendix 6

| Outcome | Key Performance Measure | 2022/23 | 3-year average 2019-2022 | Activities | Progress |
|---|-------------------------|---------|--------------------------|--|----------|
| Family finding activity is successful, clear, purposeful, and monitored. | 85%- 90% | (71%) | 82.6% | The majority of ACE children are placed with ACE approved adopters. Of the 120 children placed for adoption 85 (71%) were placed with ACE approved adopters. | |
| | 100 | 72 | 80 | Sufficient adopters are recruited and approved to meet projected need. 72 households were approved as suitable to adopt which is similar to the previous year. | |
| | 30 15 15 | 17 9 | 9 12 | To increase the number of approved adopters from underrepresented groups. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black and minority ethnic groups LGBTQ+ households. 26 households were approved from underrepresented groups, exceeding the target for Black and minority ethnic households, falling short for families from LGBTQ+ households. | |
| Prospective adopters are prepared, assessed, and approved within timescale. | 600 | 475 | 566 | ACE receives sufficient enquiries to meet its recruitment target. Levels of adopter enquiries fell short of the RAA average. | |
| | 120 | 127 | 96 | Number of applicants commencing stage 1. However, the number of enquirers entering the process at stage 1 has increased. | |
| | 75% | 54% | 2021-2022 | Prospective adopters are approved within 6 months of registration of interest. | |

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|---|----------|-----------|------------------------------|--|--|
| | | | 51% approved within 6 months | This has improved from previous year however falls short of the target for 75% of adopter stage 2 assessments to be completed within 6 months. | |
| | 35 | 49 (68%) | 30 | To increase the number of prospective adopters willing to consider FfA. The target was exceeded for those adoptive households willing to consider fostering for adoption. | |
| Increase the levels of adoption for children waiting to be adopted. | 60 | 48 (66 %) | 70 (Includes FfA) | Number of approved households recruited for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sibling groups, • Older children – 4 yrs.+, • B & ME children, • Children with a disability/developmental uncertainty. The number of households able to consider the needs of priority children was less than required. | |
| | 20 | 24 | 21 | To embed and increase the number of fostering for adoption placements. Fostering for adoption is well embedded and an increase on the previous year of 17 is noted. | |
| | 121 days | 179 days | 189 days | The average time between placement order and deciding the match to an adoptive family – Adoption Scorecard indicator A2, children to be placed within threshold timescale of 121 days. Performance is better than the provisional 3 year England average timescales of 198 days although variation between ACE local authorities is noted. | |
| | 12% | 29% | 17% | Less than 12% of children placed for adoption are placed on an interagency basis. There has been a significant increase in the number of children place on an interagency basis, reflecting the increase in children with adoption plans and the sufficiency shortfall of approved adopters for those children waiting. | |

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|--|-----|------|------|--|--|
| | 2% | 2.5% | 2.6% | Of children placed ACE has fewer than 2% adoption disruptions. 3 children experienced a placement discretion during this period. | |
| | | | - | To introduce measures to monitor the timeliness between the adoption decision for a child and matching. (National minimum Adoption Standards introduce a 6-month timescale.) This is implemented and reported to local authorities through the adoption panel quality assurance process. | |
| Adoption support is timely and appropriate. | 90% | | - | Adopter satisfaction with all aspects of the service remains high. As verified through the annual survey and reports through panel processes. | |
| | 80% | | - | ACE completes assessment of need for adoption support within 35 days. | |
| | 75% | | - | Birth records counselling - services to adopted adults in accordance with statutory requirements received within 3 months of request. The demand/need for support has exceed the capacity of the service. | |
| | - | | - | To explore assessment, support, and services where foetal alcohol syndrome is or maybe evident, are enhanced including the provision of information for adoptive parents. Information and advice available of pathways. | |
| | | | | To introduce the revised Spoke Duty process. Implemented. | |
| Best practice and innovation are encouraged. | - | | - | To strengthen relationships and partnership working to ensure that the mental health needs of adopted children are recognised and considered in service planning and delivery. There are ongoing challenges in respect of accessing psychiatric assessments and psychological therapies. | |
| | - | | - | To extend and deliver a range of training and learning opportunities for local authority social workers | |

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|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| | | | | In place since July 2022. | |
| | - | | - | To work across the West Midlands is further embedding and raising standards of practice around fostering for adoption. Guidance and training events delivered and going work on cost- benefit analysis and embedding practices. | |
| | - | | - | As a preventive service to put in place support through the provision of the Enhanced Support Scheme and extending support and training family and friends. Paused due to funding. | |
| | - | | - | To support measures that change the approach to contact in adoption including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of Practice Guidance. • Skills based training on assessing and implementing contact plans for social workers. To be part of a broader national and regional strategy going forward. | |
| ACE are committed to and have an awareness of DDP practice, principles of PACE and therapeutic parenting. | - | | - | As a DDP certified service continue efforts to explore opportunities to extend the influence this model into other areas of practice. For example, in CPRs. Integral to practices in ACE and opportunities used to share learning. | |
| To become a stakeholder led service. | - | | - | To explore opportunities for adoptive parents to support the training and development of prospective and approved adopters. Progressing based on HR and existing arrangements within the local authority. | |
| | | | | To act on the findings of the ACE Annual Adopter Survey. | |

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| | | | | Completed. | |
| | | | | To implement measures to capture the views of children and young people about the services receive and to facilitate their contribution to service delivery. This is captured in reviews with plans to develop a broader 'voice and influence' strategy. | |
| | | | | To extend adopted young people support groups across the region. Three groups meet. | |
| | | | | To extend the birth parents support groups across the region. Networks are well established. | |

Report of Adoption Disruptions 2022-2023

Appendix 7



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ACE Adopter Recruitment Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2024

Appendix 8



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