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## Introduction

*Adoption Central England (ACE) has been established as a Regional Adoption Agency now for 5 years. The adoption panel within that plays an important part in the process of achieving permanency for children with a plan of adoption.*

*Over the past 5 years adoption panel members have been continually learning; taking on new systems and processes, increasing our knowledge of changing practice such as fostering for adoption, moving to on-line panels, and improving our own practice in assessing the paperwork, phrasing questions, and formulating our recommendations. Training courses have been informative and thought provoking, this past year the cultural humility training attended by panel chairs, the DDP training and the training day focusing on effective personal and professional judgment particularly encouraged us to reflect, question and improve the way we work.*

*The research paper into the effectiveness of on-line panels was really interesting and reaffirmed ACE's decision to continue on-line for the foreseeable future, with the majority of stakeholders preferring this format to in person meetings.*

*The annual report evidences the increasing use of fostering for adoption within ACE, with a higher number of prospective adopters recommended as potential FfA carers and more children placed under FfA this year. Having attended the regional workshop run by Midlands Together Collaboration on Early Permanence, it was pleasing to note that ACE is well embedded in its practice in this area, which is essential for children likely to have a plan of adoption, to reduce the number of placements and disruption for them. The quality of the FfA assessment within the AARs has improved significantly over time along with our learning.*

*Quality assurance is a key element of the adoption panel's role, with each panel member providing appropriate feedback on the quality of the key reports submitted, namely the Adopter Assessment Report (AAR), the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) and the Adoption Placement Report (APR). One hundred per cent of AARs were rated as either good or outstanding, this has now been the case for 3 years running and is a testament to the quality and dedication of our adoption social workers. There has also been a marked improvement in the quality of AARs and CPRs over the last year which is encouraging.*

*Feedback provided to panel by prospective adoptive parents and social workers who have attended panel is key to enable us to continue to learn; and reflect, refine, and improve the way we work, so please keep this coming. The ACE adoption panel is committed to continuous review of its practice to ensure we support the agency in achieving the best outcomes for children with a plan of adoption.*



**Charlotte Shadbolt**

**Panel Chair**

## Executive Summary

### Summary of panel activity, 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023

This is the **fifth** report of the panel at Adoption Central England since the formation of the Regional Adoption Agency in 2018. Panel meetings are held on Monday and Thursday mornings and consider 3 (exceptionally 4) agenda items, which may be the suitability of applicants to become adoptive parents, the viability of a match for adoption for a child or children proposed by one of ACE's five constituent local authorities, or a plan of consensual adoption for a relinquished baby. Since March 2020, meetings have been held exclusively online, using Microsoft Teams. As a single panel, the meeting is quorate with 5 members, but 6 members attend where possible, drawn from a Central List of 43 individuals. A fifth panel chair was appointed in December 2022. Five members resigned and two new members joined.

**82 panel meetings** took place in 2022-23, considering **190 agenda items**. The panel considered **72 'suitability to adopt' applications** and made positive recommendations first time for 70. One application was not recommended by panel but deferred by the agency decision maker (ADM) pending further assessment: the application was recommended when presented for a second time. In the second instance, the ADM disagreed with the panel and approved the application after receiving additional information from the assessing social worker. No agency recommendations against approval ('Brief Reports') were presented to panel in this period. Panel members noted a significant increase in the number of applicants willing to consider a fostering for adoption (FfA) placement, i.e., 65% compared to 44% in 2021-2. The number of applications from single applicants also increased significantly (13, compared to 6 in 2021-2) as did applications from Asian/Mixed Asian-White households (12, compared to 5 in 2021-2).

The panel considered **110 proposed matches for adoption, representing 129 children** – a significant increase on the previous year's 89 matches. Of these, 78 were matches with ACE-approved adopters, while 32 were matches with adopters approved by another agency.

The panel considered **consensual plans of adoption for 5 babies** from three local authorities: independent legal advice to the panel is provided by ACE's host local authority for these matters. In one case, the panel deferred a recommendation, advising that the local authority take further legal advice and gather more information for the Child's Permanence Report. The plan was brought to panel for a second time, when panel recommended adoption.

### Quality Assurance

The panel fulfils its quality assurance role through the panel members individually completing feedback forms prior to the meeting. Members rate the quality of the three key panel reports – the Adopter Assessment Report (AAR), the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) and the Adoption Placement Report (APR), providing a score between 1 (Poor) and 5 (Outstanding) and their comments/reasons. Panel's feedback on each AAR is shared with the manager of the assessing social worker shortly after the panel meeting. The panel's feedback on matching reports – CPR and APR – is shared every 6 months with senior managers from the relevant local authority. The panel advisers also note and collate the reasons given for an adopter assessment not meeting timescales, and whether a match is presented to panel within the National Minimum Standard of 6 months after the child's adoption decision.

Over the past year, panel members have rated **85% of Adopter Assessment Reports as either good or outstanding**, and none less than satisfactory. It rated **45% of Child's Permanence Reports as good or outstanding**, and 1% requiring improvement. **Adoption Placement Reports** were all rated at least satisfactory, **with 49% deemed good or outstanding**. Of note is the perceived improvement in the quality of CPRs from Coventry City Council (62% rated good or outstanding) which are typically prepared by social workers with substantial experience of adoption work.

The panel invites **feedback from prospective adopters** and social workers who attend, asking for their ratings on the quality of the experience, timekeeping and technical difficulty and reflections on the relevance of the questions asked. Response rates from adopters after their approval panel were 44%, falling to 33% after matching panel. All adopters who responded considered their overall experience of attending panel for approval as positive. Following matching, 91% stated their overall experience was positive, 6% were neutral and 3% negative.

**Social worker feedback** was received for 30% of cases, 82% of whom judged their panel experience to be either 'better than expected' or 'excellent/very positive', an improvement on 70% in 2021-22. Asked about the relevance of the questions, 84% felt that the questions put to them were relevant or extremely relevant, and 96% felt those put to the prospective adopters were relevant/extremely relevant. 89% judged the chairing of the meeting as 'good' or 'excellent'.

**Agency decision makers** at ACE and its five partner local authorities are asked to comment on panel's consideration of the case for which a decision is sought. In most cases, decision makers endorse the panel's robustness, sensitivity, challenge, attention to detail and process. Where the panel made a negative recommendation concerning the match of siblings with a couple, the ADM overruled, noting that the panel's decisions were over-reliant on verbal responses given at the meeting by adopters, and showed little triangulation with the reports. On another occasion the same ADM noted that the matters raised in panel's discussion of a case did not translate into questions. The ADM for ACE also agreed to approve an applicant where panel had not recommended, taking a different view on the level of concerns raised in the meeting.

Agency decision makers are invited to observe panel, and any requests to do so are prioritised over other observers. A number of ADMs observed a panel meeting in 2021-2 but take up this year has been low. The ADM at ACE routinely observes panel meetings ahead of a panel chair's appraisal and offers feedback.

### Key points during 2022-3

The '**Recalibration of Panel**' focus, introduced in 2021, has continued throughout the year, as panel chairs and advisers seek to ensure that the panel's scrutiny of adoption proposals is properly evidence-based rather than 'performance-based', remaining alert to the dangers of bias. The panel member conference in September 2022 encouraged reflection on the biographical and professional influences on panel members' decision making, while a tool to help panel members evaluate the quality of written evidence was produced in March 2023. Nine online '**bitesize**' workshops have taken place during the year, covering topics such as Relinquished Babies (now known as 'consensual adoptions') Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and a new CPR template. These were complemented by two **in-person events**, recognising the value to panel members of meeting with one another face-to-face, away from a screen. The event in May 2022 considered the lessons from recent placement disruptions, while November's event included a presentation from ACE staff on outcomes for children matched during the year, a discussion of the Cumbria Serious Case Review and discussion of recommendations arising from the panel conference. Panel member

Newsletters are distributed most months, and an online conversation group was started in March 2023.

**A research paper** written by Dr Peter Unwin of Worcester University and Kate Moon, panel adviser, captured the findings of a small study of the effectiveness of online panels, conducted in the autumn and winter of 2021-2. The views of panel members, adopters and social workers were gathered through a survey and interviews, then analysed and key findings shared. The paper noted the high level of support for the new platform from adopters and social workers, alongside greater ambivalence from panel members concluding:

*“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.”*

With **early permanence** being high on the agenda for adoption practice at a national level, the panel has continued to develop its voice in addressing with social workers and adopters their understanding and preparation for fostering for adoption (FfA), as well as its responsibility to consider adoption matches that have begun with a fostering phase as robustly as any other match. Panel chairs and advisers attended a regional workshop on early permanence convened by the Midlands Together Collaboration, and further training is planned for panel members in the coming year.

Panel has been represented by Katie Nabbs at the ACE **Black Lives Matters** group, and the panel advisers and chairs attended training in **Cultural Humility** in 2022. Of relevance to the panel role was ‘The 3 Cs’ approach to understanding diversity, which could equally apply to panel’s remit and behaviour, i.e., ‘Curiosity, Clarification, and - only where needed - Challenge’. ACE’s newly revised Diversity Policy was shared with panel members, and the panel advisers continue to welcome applications to join the Central List from the range of communities and families served by the agency.

The effectiveness of the adoption panel and key issues are reviewed at **business meetings** with the panel chairs, Head of ACE, and panel advisers. These were held in July 2022, December 2022 and March 2023 and areas of concern discussed included the ‘Somerset Judgement,’ adopter reviews, feedback from Ofsted Inspections, the sufficiency of panel meetings, training and IT needs, and reflections on the flow and behaviour of those meetings. The number of panel meetings per month was reduced during the autumn from 8 to 6 but returned to 8 in January 2023 due to the logistical challenges related to the peaks and troughs of demand for panel slots: it being easier to cancel a date that was not required than convene a panel at short notice. In January, **Charlotte Shadbolt** joined Avriel Reader, Heather Tobin, Margaret Powell, and Stuart Watkins as a **fifth panel chair**, and the following month two panel chairs attended a whole service Away Day at ACE. Margaret, Avriel, and Stuart also contributed to Ofsted inspections of Children’s Services at Coventry, Herefordshire, and Solihull during the year.

The **pilot of a panel preparation process** was agreed in December 2022 and started in March 2023. This aimed to facilitate better timekeeping at meetings but more importantly a greater focus during meetings on the pertinent issues through the collation of views and questions in advance – a method widely used in other panels. However, the pilot was quickly abandoned after 6 panels due to the additional pressure of advance preparation it placed upon panel chairs, coupled with the

technical challenges of finalising questions through screen-shared documents. This pilot coincided with a revision and simplification of the quality assurance forms, and the introduction of a tool to help panel members evaluate the quality of reports: while the preparation process was discontinued, these other changes remain.

**Panel advisers** Katie Nabbs and Kate Moon continue to oversee all aspects of the panel function, with Katie leading on panel member recruitment/central list and advising Monday panels, and Kate on QA feedback processes and reporting, advising Thursday panels. The panel advisers have participated in learning reviews in the cases of two matches that disrupted, and both conduct panel member appraisals using feedback gathered from the chairs after each meeting. They are also members of the Permanence West Midlands Advisers Group. Panel administrators Claire Duncombe and Jacquie Keir continue to produce high quality minutes for distribution to decision makers usually within 3 working days of the panel meeting, with Claire also ensuring that two meetings a week are quorate, supporting with the appointment and payment of panel members and supporting the chairs and members with IT issues.

### Practice Issues arising in 2022-3

- Medical advisors: it is noted that medical advisors appointed by some of the constituent local authorities have had no attendance at panel meetings, while the opportunity for prospective adopters to meet with medical advisors during matching and before panel has reduced.
- Quality of evidence in some panel reports, particularly the CPR, e.g., efforts to obtain photographs and information about siblings not shown, the final views of the Child's Guardian missing, and the findings of sibling assessments not included.
- The need to support panel members in making succinct, unambiguous, and well evidenced recommendations, in particular differentiating between approval and matching, and being clear about their role in early permanence proposals.
- Lack of evidence in the CPR for a baby presented for consensual adoption that the LA has taken legal advice around whether a Part 19 application for court direction is indicated.
- Explanations of delay in care planning for a child, with absence of clarity as to whether fostering for adoption was considered. (It is the duty of the local authority to consider FfA for all children with a plan of adoption.)
- Rationale for the choice of FfA carers as required by the Reg 22A report: further information and analysis is needed in some reports as to why the family selected is the right match for the child.
- Limited evidence in some adopter assessments that the additional challenges of parenting siblings has been fully explored.
- Similarly, some adopter assessments could evidence more strongly the applicants' understanding of a child's ethnic, cultural and identity needs.
- A significant number of local authority adoption reports presented lack the signature of a manager, which the panel views as an important marker of shared accountability for a life-changing plan of adoption for a child
- Panel would welcome more direction and guidance on understanding the impact on therapeutic parenting of adopters with known mental health issues – many have reported 'anxiety' and/or 'depression' or who are neurodivergent, with diagnoses of autism, ADHD, or other disorders.


## Panel Priorities for 2023-4

- To develop panel's role and voice in early permanence planning and matching
- To continue the ongoing training/learning programme for chairs and panel members, mindful of the need for peer support amongst newer members.
- Panel members to gain a more informed, contemporary understanding of aspects of adopter mental health and other neurodivergent conditions and their relevance to therapeutic parenting.
- Renewal of efforts to supporting panel members to make better evidenced recommendations which are triangulated with reports and alert to bias.
- To continue to embed Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy principles across panel practice, including the offer of DDP-informed supervision to panel chairs and members.
- To analyse in greater detail the composition of the central list membership through an equality monitoring questionnaire, to identify where further recruitment may be needed, and for panel to best reflect all groups of people within our communities.
- To address the balance of panel members to include more individuals with a professional interest in adoption (including social work members but also individuals working in mental health, education, voluntary sector) as well as, ideally, an adopted and care-experienced member or members.
- Streamlining quality assurance tools to reflect rating scheme used by Ofsted, in preparation for future inspections of regional adoption agencies.
- To promote mutual understanding and partnership working between ACE staff and the panel through meetings, joint training, and networking events, and to further explore how the work and expectations of the adoption panel can be relayed to local authority partners and other stakeholders through training and opportunities.
- To invite greater interaction with ADMs
- To review panel member expenses and method of reimbursement



**Brenda Vincent**

**Head of ACE**



**Kate Moon**

**Panel Adviser**



**Katie Nabbs**

**Panel Adviser**

July 2023



# Appendix 1: Context, Constitution and Operation of the ACE Adoption Panel

## Context

All adoption agencies are required by law<sup>1</sup> 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 fifth 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. Panel business can only be conducted if at least 5 members are present, including the chair and a social work representative: wherever possible, the ACE panel operates with 6 members. 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 in most weeks and typically consider a maximum of 3 items (4 in exceptional circumstances).

Two ideas were piloted during the year: a reduction in the number of panels from 8 to 6 per month, and a mechanism whereby panel members submitted their views and questions on agenda items to the panel chairs and advisers in advance of the meeting (a process widely used elsewhere). Meetings returned to 8 per month as it was found to be easier to cancel a panel for lack of business than it was to assemble an extra one at short notice. The 'panel preparation' pilot was trialled in March 2023 but discontinued due to the additional work it required of the panel chairs before and during the meeting.

## Membership

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Forty-three individuals have served as panel members during the reporting period. Five members have resigned during the year, while two new members have joined.

It remains a challenge to recruit enough social workers to cover twice-weekly panel meetings, and particular efforts were made with partner local authorities to recruit adoption-experienced social workers from within their Children's Teams. Despite a number of initial expressions of interest received, and a further mailing, it was not possible to proceed with any interested parties, for reasons including their newly qualified status and/or capacity to manage the additional workload. One independent social worker joined the central list in 2022-23, with another due to join in the coming year. The panel is particularly indebted to two social workers within ACE – Emma Wooldridge and Parveen Nagra - who have stepped in at short notice on several occasions so that a meeting could go ahead.

The panel team remains mindful of the rich diversity across the area served by ACE and continues to welcome and fast-track applications from suitably qualified people, with or without disabilities, and who represent Global Majority and/or LGBT+ communities and families. Wherever possible, a panel convened to consider adoption proposals will incorporate the perspectives of adoptive parents, adopted people, and others with a personal or professional interest in adoption, drawn from Black Caribbean, Black African, Asian, White British and White European ethnicities; a number of panel members bring the perspective gained through their lived experience of same-sex parenting.

An area of concern for panel chairs and panel advisers is the availability of medical advisers to attend panel meetings, which has been limited; a medical adviser was present at only 26 of the 82 meetings, and there was no representation at all from medical advisers serving one of the local authorities. Related to this is the reduction or cessation altogether of in-person consultations between medical advisers and prospective adopters at matching. These matters have been escalated to senior manager levels within the local authorities by the Head of ACE.

All chairs and independent panel members are offered a modest fee for their participation and are required to attend at least one training event per year. Twenty-three panel member appraisals were completed during 2022-23 and conducted by the panel advisers using feedback collected from panel chairs after each meeting.

## Appendix 2: Adoption Panel Activity, 2022-23

Proposals made to the adoption panel are presented in three key reports, which are 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 placed for adoption with a particular family and includes a plan describing how the child and family are to be supported, and what, if any, restrictions on parental responsibility are proposed. The child's social worker and the adoption social worker prepare this report.

### Panel meetings in 2022-23

	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
<b>Number of meetings</b>	<b>82</b>	80	71	44	42
<b>Platform</b>	<b>Online</b>	Online	Online	In Person <sup>2</sup>	In Person
<b>Maximum number of cases</b>	<b>3-4</b>	3-4	3	5-6	6-7
<b>Agenda items</b>	<b>190</b>	173	169	185	184
<b>Cancelled Panels</b>	9 (11%)	16 (17%)	11 (13%)	6 (12%)	4 (9%)

### Cancellations

- Panel dates are fixed and made known to social workers and managers for the year in advance. 6-8 panel agenda slots are available every month (except weeks containing a bank holiday or chairs meeting or training event) and spread across two meetings, held on Mondays and Thursdays.
- One panel was cancelled due to the sudden unavailability of social work member (essential for quoracy). Another panel was cancelled as no chair was available. One of the 8 cancellations was necessitated by the Queen's funeral.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

- Most panel cancellations – see feedback from adopters - are caused by the postponement of all the items previously booked in. In most cases the reason for postponement is the unreadiness of reports and/or the unavailability of social workers or prospective adopters to attend.
- A panel will go ahead with one item if the case cannot be moved to another meeting within a week.

### Suitability to Adopt ('Approvals')

At meetings held between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, panel considered 'suitable to adopt' proposals, representing **72 households**. Families applying to ACE to adopt were drawn from the agency's constituent local authorities as shown.

<b>Adopters' Local Authority</b>	<b>Number of households 2022-23</b>	Number of households 2021-22	Number of households 2020-21	Number of households 2019-20	Number of households 2018-19
Coventry City Council	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>	12	27
Herefordshire Council	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	6	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	7	11
Warwickshire County Council	<b>25</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>21</b>	33	27
Worcestershire Children First	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>19</b>	31	20
Non-ACE local authority	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	7	7
	<b>72</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>77</b>	97	92

Of the 72 applications presented to panel:

- 70 applications were considered suitable to adopt by panel at their first presentation, and these were ratified by the agency decision maker.
- Panel did not recommend approval for two applications. In the first case, the ADM decided that the applicant was suitable to adopt after receiving additional information from the assessing social worker. In the second case, the ADM initially upheld the panel's

recommendation, then amended the decision to deferment pending the receipt of further assessment information. At the second time of presentation to panel, the applicant was recommended as suitable to adopt.

- There were no agency recommendations *against* approval – known as ‘Brief Reports’ – presented to panel in this period.
- Statutory Guidance 3.52 states that ‘Stage Two [of the adopter application] should take four months unless there are exceptional circumstances.’ Stage Two starts when the agency receives notification from the prospective adopters that they wish to proceed and ends with the decision-maker’s decision on their suitability to adopt. Data collected at the panel stage notes that **approximately one-fifth (22%) of applications met this timescale with 46% of applications were presented to panel in 6 months or less.**

Timescales	Stage 2 exceeded timescales	Stage 2 completed within 4 months
<b>Reasons</b>	<b>56 (78%)</b>	<b>16 (22%)</b>
Delays continuing from Stage 1	13	
Delayed allocation	9	
Social Worker absence	8	
Adopter-led reasons	7	
Related to medicals	7	
No reason given	6	
Further assessment needed	4	
Social worker’s workload	2	
Availability of panel slot	0	

**Of the 72 applications presented:**

Profile of Adopters		2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
First applications		57	62	56	80	61
Subsequent applications		15	10	19	14	22
	Single adopters	13	6	7	8	11
	Opposite-sex couples	51	55	60	<sup>3</sup>	-
	Same-sex couples	8	11	8	-	-
Ethnicity	White British or White European households	56	62	64		-
	Asian or Mixed Asian/White households	12	5	9		
	Black Caribbean or Mixed Black Caribbean/White Households	4	1	1		
	Other ethnicity	0	4	1		
Offer	Foster carers	2	3	5	8	9
	Willing to consider FfA	47	32	26	-	-

## Matches for Adoption

At meetings held between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, the ACE adoption panel considered **110** agenda items concerning matches for a total of **129** children. Two agenda items concerned different matches for the same child: the first match ended, and the child was matched for a second time. Positive recommendations were made in all but one case: here, the ADM for the child overruled panel's negative recommendation citing panel's overreliance on answers given in the meeting and a lack of triangulation with the adoption reports which they felt addressed most of the panel's reservations.

<sup>3</sup> - denotes data not collected by Panel Team during this reporting year  
 ACE Adoption Panel 2022-23

Child's Local Authority	Number of matches (% meeting NMS 17.7) <sup>4</sup> 2022-23	Number of matches 2021-22	Number of matches 2020-21	Number of matches 2019-20	Number of matches 2018-19
Coventry City Council	37 (30%)	20	25	22	-
Herefordshire Council	9 (67%)	9	16	8	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	14 (36%)	10	7	8	-
Warwickshire County Council	22 (27%)	16	23	19	-
Worcestershire Children First	28 (46%)	34	20	29	-
	<b>110</b>	89	91	86	85

Profile of proposed placement	Number of matches 2022-23	Number of matches 2021-22	Number of matches 2020-21	Number of matches 2019-20	Number of matches 2018-19
1 child	93	68	75	75	-
2 children to be placed together	15	17	12	7	-
3 children to be placed together	2	4	4	4	-
Total no of matches	<b>110</b>	89	91	<b>86</b>	<b>85</b>
Age of oldest child					
0-12 months	29	28	36	-	-
12-24 months	31	27	23		
2-4 years	28	15	20		

<sup>4</sup> National Minimum Standard for Adoption 2014, 17.7: The adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the proposed placement of a child with particular prospective adopters within six months of the adoption agency's decision-maker deciding that the child should be placed for adoption.

to be placed	4+ years	<b>22</b>	19	12		
Total matches		<b>110</b>	89	91		
Type of adoption	Mainstream adoption	<b>85</b>	68	72	55	64
	fostering for Adoption <sup>5</sup>	<b>24</b>	16	15	25	15
	Foster Carer Adoption of child in their care	<b>1</b>	5	4	6	6
Total matches		<b>110</b>	89	91	86	85
Ethnicity of children (by placement)	White British	<b>86</b>	78	72	-	-
	Gypsy, Roma, Traveller	<b>3</b>	3	2		
	Any other White Background	<b>3</b>	1	2		
	Asian or Asian British	<b>1</b>	-	1		
	Black, Black British, Black Caribbean, Black African	<b>0</b>	-	-		
	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	<b>17</b>	7	14		
		<b>110</b>	89	91		
<b>Matches with ACE adopters</b>		<b>78</b>	-	-		
<b>Interagency matches</b>		<b>32</b>	-	-		

<sup>5</sup> Total does not include children placed under 'Connected Persons' arrangements.



## Consensual Plan of Adoption (formerly known as Relinquished Baby cases)

Child's Local Authority	Number of plans 2022-23	Number of plans 2021-22	Number of plans 2020-21	Number of plans 2019-20	Number of plans 2018-19
Coventry City Council	1	1	5	0	-
Herefordshire Council	0	0	1	0	-
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	0	0	0	0	-
Warwickshire County Council	2 <sup>6</sup>	3	0	0	-
Worcestershire Children First	2	2	0	0	-
Total	5	6	6	0	4

### Placement disruptions and placements that did not proceed to adoption.

The adoption panel has been informed of **3 Disruption Review** meetings, held when a child has been placed for adoption, but the placement breaks down before an application for an adoption order has been made. A further **3 Learning Reviews** were held in respect of children for whom the decision maker had agreed a match, but who did not proceed to placement: none of these were children placed under fostering to adopt arrangements. The panel is usually represented at these meetings by the panel adviser, with the panel chair also invited to attend where appropriate. The learning from these events is collated from the minutes by the ACE Head of Servicer into a separate report which is shared first with panel chairs and then panel members.

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<sup>6</sup> Panel recommended deferral of plan for one child, upheld by ADM; plan presented a second time and approved.

## Appendix 3: Panel Feedback on the Quality of Adoption Reports

*“Adoption panels provide quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of the reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent, and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement”.*

Adoption: National Minimum Standards, 2014, 17:2

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. 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’s 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 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. Case-specific feedback is shared with local authority social workers and managers were agreed by the chair and panel adviser.

### Panel feedback on the quality of the Adopter Assessment Reports (AAR)

Adopter Assessment Report	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-2019 <sup>7</sup>
Number of reports evaluated.	72	77	77	91	35
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding)	4.02	4.05	3.98	-	-
Where evidence of DDP informing assessment is satisfactory, good, or outstanding	99%	99%	96%	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	0%	0%	0%	17%	26%

<sup>7</sup> Feedback process implemented part-way through reporting period, from 26.11.2018.

Rated as good or outstanding	<b>86%</b>	94%	61%	57%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good, or outstanding.	<b>100%</b>	100%	100%	83%	74%

## Panel feedback on the quality of matching reports

### Child's Permanence Report (CPR)

All Local Authorities	2022-23 n=118	2021-22 n=91 reports	2020-21	2019-20 <sup>8</sup>	2018-19 <sup>9</sup>
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding)	<b>3.86</b>	3.82	3.72	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	<b>1%</b>	1%	9%	36%	42%
Rated as good or outstanding	<b>45%</b>	47%	41%	28%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good, or outstanding.	<b>99%</b>	99%	91%	64%	58%

### Adoption Placement Report (APR)

All Local Authorities	2022-23 n=117	2021-22 n=91	2020-21	2019-20 <sup>10</sup>	2018-19 <sup>11</sup>
Average rating (1: poor; 2: requires improvement; 3: satisfactory; 4: good; 5: outstanding)	<b>3.82</b>	3.74	3.67	-	-
Rated as requiring improvement	<b>0%</b>	2%	5%	35%	42%
Rated as good or outstanding	<b>49%</b>	42%	37%	28%	-
Rated as satisfactory, good, or outstanding	<b>100%</b>	98%	95%	65%	58%

<sup>8</sup> Feedback on 73 out of 86 reports

<sup>9</sup> Feedback process implemented from 26.11.2018 and pertains to 24 matches.

<sup>10</sup> Feedback on 73 out 86 reports

<sup>11</sup> Feedback process implemented from 26.11.2018 and pertains to 24 matches.

<b>By Local Authority, 2022-23</b>	<b>CPR</b> % Reports rated good or outstanding	<b>APR</b> % Reports rated good or outstanding
Coventry City Council	62	51
Herefordshire Council	44	33
Solihull MBC	40	40
Warwickshire County Council	46	41
Worcestershire Children First	57	59

## Appendix 4: Review of priorities 2022-23

Priority	Outcomes
<p>To contribute where appropriate to ACE's Service Improvement Plan 2022-23 and its 5 key priorities, as in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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</li> <li>To improve placement timeliness through effective tracking and matching and embedding early permanence through fostering for adoption</li> <li>Extending the range of adoption support services</li> <li>Developing collaboration and partnership working with local authorities, health and education services, adoptive parents, adoption support providers and regional and voluntary adoption agencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Panel team now collects data on the timeliness of adopter assessments, and reasons why timescales not met.</li> <li>Panel members are updated re ACE priorities in twice-yearly presentations by ACE Head of Service, and outcomes for children matched during the year are shared by ACE family finders.</li> <li>Panel chairs attended Cultural Humility Training during 2022-23</li> <li>Panel advisers and chairs attended Early Permanence Training, and EP is a topic regularly discussed in chairs' meetings and panel meetings.</li> <li>Panel members are periodically informed of new developments in post-adoption support and ACE's offer to families.</li> <li>Individuals from agencies with an interest in adoption observe panel meetings.</li> </ul>
<p>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 (adopters, social workers, agency managers, panel members, decision makers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conference focusing on the Effective Personal and Professional Judgement of Panel Members held on 27 September 2022.</li> <li>Feedback from stakeholders is requested after every panel meeting and key themes shared with panel chairs and members.</li> </ul>
<p>To develop panel members' understanding of early permanence, in line with national and regional priorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing: training event planned for May 2023. Chairs attended EP presentation in March 2023.</li> </ul>
<p>To develop panel members' cultural competence and understanding of diversity to inform their non-biased consideration of adoption proposals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing: panel adviser attends BLM group in ACE; cultural humility training attended by panel advisers and chairs.</li> </ul>
<p>To keep panel arrangements under review, including chairing, sufficiency of panel slots, frequency, efficiency of meeting, Teams updates, and information leaflets</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chairs' meetings held in July 2022, December 2022, and March 2023.</li> <li>New panel chair appointed in January 2023</li> <li>Panel leaflets updated.</li> <li>Further IT support provided to chairs</li> </ul>
<p>To contribute to the pilot of a new Child's Permanence Report template</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New template has been piloted and the final evaluation report will be considered in summer 2023.</li> </ul>
<p>To provide opportunities for panel members and social workers to learn together side-by-side</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing. In-person event in November 2022 brought together Hub staff and panel members.</li> </ul>

To report to panel members on the outcome of matches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Presentation delivered to panel members in November 2022.</li></ul>
To further develop professional relationships with ACE's local authority partners, including agency decision makers and operational managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Panel adviser attends LA Managers' meetings and provides feedback on quality of reports. Workshop with local authority ADMs planned for July 2023.</li></ul>

## Appendix 5: Central List of Panel Members

As on 31 March 2023

**\*New member joining in 2022-3**

### Independent chairs

**Margaret Powell**, adoptive parent, Vice-chair of a fostering panel and member of the Independent Review Mechanism

**Heather Tobin**, adoptive parent, also member of a fostering panel, family time support worker and retired senior police officer,

**Avriel Reader**, also chair for another regional adoption agency, and retired Head of Children's Services

**Stuart Watkins**, also chair of a fostering panel and Home for Good, retired Service Manager in Adoption and fostering, Worcestershire County Council

**Charlotte Shadbolt\***, adoptive parent with chairing experience in school governance, and professional background in banking

### Legal Advisor

**Marieluise Horne**, Solicitor, Children and Families Legal Services, Warwickshire County Council Legal Services

### Medical Advisors

**Dr Emma Thompson**, Agency Medical Advisor for Worcestershire Children First, Paediatrician, Children, Young People and Families, Worcestershire Health, and Care NHS Trust

**Dr Lucy Coker**, Agency Medical Advisor for Warwickshire, Senior Trust Specialist in Community Paediatrics, South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust (membership on hold at time of writing)

**Dr Vaishali Desai**, Agency Medical Advisor deputising for Dr Coker, Consultant Paediatrician, South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust

**Dr Viji Krishnamoorthy**, Agency Medical Advisor for Coventry City Council, Paediatrician, C&W Partnership Trust

**Dr Tanya Thangavelu**, Agency Medical Advisor for Solihull MBC, Specialist Doctor, Community Paediatrics, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust

**Dr Sudha Arun**, Agency Medical Advisor for Herefordshire, Paediatrician, Children in Care Team, Wye Valley NHS Trust Herefordshire

## Social Work Members

**Emma Wooldridge**, Family Finding Social Worker, ACE

**Eleanor Wynne**, Permanency Social Worker with Coventry City Council

**Parveen Nagra**, Post-Adoption Social Worker, ACE

**Liz Newman**, Team Manager, Stratford Children's Team, Warwickshire Children's Services

**Deborah Roden**, Social Worker in Connected Persons Team, Warwickshire fostering.

**Cornelia Heaney**, Operations Manager Assurance and Practice Improvement - Children & Families, Warwickshire County Council (*stepped down in December 2022*)

**Dr Peter Unwin**, registered social worker, 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

**Sharon Hurley**, Registered Manager, Worcestershire fostering.

**Clare Dainty\***, Independent Social Worker and Form F assessor

## 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 banker. chair from January 2023

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

**Dave Linton**, independent member, local authority foster carer and member of fostering panels

**Elaine Stratford**, adopted person and QA manager for cancer service.

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

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

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

**Judy Sharpe\***, retired Children and Family Law solicitor

**Lorraine Cooksey**, adoptive parent, former manager in education sector, panel member for another regional adoption agency

**Marion Mound**, retired adoption social worker

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

**Mark Bayfield**, adoptive parent, and civil servant



**Mark Connolly**, adoptive parent, and former business improvement manager

**Natasha Sutton**, adoptive parent, and former teacher

**Nigel Pendleton**, adoptive parent and foster carer, Warwickshire County Council (stepped down in March 2023)

**Patrick Fox**, commissioning manager for Children's Services, adult services, and Approved Mental Health Professional, adopted person.

**Rob Rogers**, adoptive parent, educator, minister, and counsellor (*stepped down in January 2023*)

**Sa'ddiya Mayet**, intercountry adoptive parent, and business analyst

**Sharon Bent**, adoptive parent and retired police officer.

**Taras Spyczak**, adoptive parent, and business manager

**Yasmeen Qazi**, adoptive parent, investigator for LGSC Ombudsman, former lawyer, and social worker

### **Non-voting attendees**

**Kate Moon**, Panel Adviser (30 hours)

**Katie Nabbs**, Panel Adviser (25.5 hours)

**Claire Duncombe**, Panel Administrator (full-time)

**Jacquie Keir**, Panel Administrator (part-time)

## Appendix 6: Panel Member Training

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### Online Panel Member Conference 27 September 2022:

**'Effective Personal and Professional Judgement for Panel Members' with Dr Arlene Weekes, social work academic and panel chair.**

Dr Weekes presented the findings of her research, published in 'Adoption & fostering,' into 'The biographic and professional influences on adoption and fostering panel members' recommendation-making.

### In-Person Panel Member Events

In recognition of the loss of face-to-face contact, potential isolation and challenge to collaborative working that online working has imposed on panel members, ACE offers two in-person events each year to panel members where a minimum of 12 members commit to attend. At an event held at Elmslie House in Malvern on **3 May 2022**, panel members considered the issues and learning from matches that had disrupted either during introductions or before the making of an adoption order. The event held at St Michael's Budbrooke (near Warwick) on **9 November 2022** considered the learning from the Cumbria Serious Case Review, as well as exploring the recommendations from the conference held in September.

### 'Bitesize' series

Sessions held online during 2022-3 and lasting for 60-90 minutes were:

- Relinquished Babies, with Jemma Fordham (Operations Manager) and Jessica Howkins (Social Worker, ACE), 6 July 2022
- DDP Supervision for panel chairs, 6 October 2022
- Reflections on Panel Member Conference, 19 October 2022
- DDP Supervision for new panel members, 20 October 2022
- New Template for the Child's Permanence Report, with Melissa Rose (Operations Manager), 13 December 2022
- Preparation for Panel, introducing guidance for evaluating adoption reports, 8 February 2023
- Lunchtime Webinars celebrating 5 years of ACE, 6-9 March.
- DDP Supervision for panel chairs, with Dr Billy Smythe, 9 March 2023
- Conversation Group, with Catherine Lloyd talking about her book, 'A Child in the Middle,' 15 March 2023
- DDP Supervision for panel members, with Dr Billy Smythe, 30 March 2023

## Appendix 7: Stakeholder Feedback on the effectiveness of the Panel

### From Prospective Adopters

*“The panel experience itself was well managed and I always understood what was happening. The chair and members asked relevant questions but made me feel at ease and so able to answer them. The recommendation and reasons were explained clearly so I understood them, I appreciated the option of a virtual panel, especially as I live some distance away.”*

*Prospective Adopter, following approval, July 2022*

*“The Adoption panel was very friendly, put us at ease, made us feel relaxed and excused how emotional we got during the questions. They explained who they all were and their relevant experience. They were all very positive, outlined our strengths and explained everything clearly.”*

*Prospective Adopter, following matching, August 2022*

Prospective adopters are invited to complete a short online questionnaire about their experience of attending the adoption panel: a new question reflecting the online format was added in 2020.

	<b>Approvals 2022-23 72 cases</b>	<b>Matches 2022-23 110 cases</b>	Approvals 2021-22 77 cases	Matches 2021-22 91 cases	Approvals 2020-2021 77 cases	Match 2020-2021 91 cases	Approvals and matches 2019-20 185 cases	Approvals and matches <sup>12</sup> 2018-19 184 cases
Response rate	<b>43%</b>	<b>33%</b>	44%	40%	51%	42%	24 %	11%
Number of responses	<b>31</b>	<b>36</b>	34	36	39	38	44	
Attended on first date offered.	<b>74%</b>	<b>75%</b>	62%	61%	67%	61%	61%	

<sup>12</sup> Paper questionnaire sent to applicants by post.

None, or very few technical glitches with online attendance	87%	100%	79%	86%	79%	95%	-	-
Panel ran early, on time or less than 15 minutes behind	71%	72%	71%	64%	77%	79%	43%	-
Thought questions were relevant	93%	94%	91%	92%	90%	95%	84%	93%
Overall experience of attending panel was negative	0%	3%	3%	3%	5%	0%	11%	-
Overall experience of attending panel was neutral	0%	6%	6%	3%	5%	3%	15%	-
Overall experience of attending panel was positive	100%	91%	91%	94%	90%	97%	74%	93%
Happy to attend a virtual panel again, or neutral	84%	97%	85%	83%	95%	100%	-	-

## From Social Workers

*“Panel experience was very positive. The panel members had clearly thoroughly read the reports provided and the questions asked of myself, and the couple were appropriate. The couple were offered reassurance by the panel chair throughout and this made it a positive experience for them. Experienced adopters on panel offered their advice on how best the couple can prepare for adoption and the applicants found this to be very useful.”*

*(Feedback from Social Worker, February 2023)*

Social workers attending the online panel either to present an approval, match or plan of adoption are invited to complete a short online questionnaire about their experience.

Questions to social workers	Approvals and matches 2022-23 190 agenda items	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	57	62	31	40	25
Response rate (percentage of cases for which feedback submitted)	30%	36%	18%	22%	14%
Case started within 30 minutes of advertised time	86%	76%	87%	67.5%	52%
Thought questions to SW were relevant or extremely relevant	84%	81%	84%	85%	96%
Thought questions to applicants were relevant or extremely relevant	96%	81%	94%	87.5%	100%
Thought chairing of meeting was 'good' or 'excellent'	89%	92%	87%	-	-
Experience 'better than expected' or 'Excellent/very positive'	82%	70%	77%	-	-

## 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 feedback in writing on the panel's process, as it is described in the Minutes of the panel meeting. The ADM decision for each case is then shared with the panel on the secure panel portal for a limited period.

In most cases, the agency decision maker was satisfied with the adoption panel's consideration of the proposal placed before it. Typical comments included:

*The papers and minutes of Panel evidenced appropriate and sensitive challenge in this case, and I am satisfied the Panel thoroughly considered the merits of the match and balanced this against identifiable risks appropriately (ADM, Worcestershire, 24.01.2023)*

*As ADM, I am satisfied that Panel were robust and thorough in their decision-making process and I can confirm that I am in agreement with Panel's unanimous recommendation that [child] should be placed for adoption with [adopters] (ADM, Coventry, 04.11.20220)*

*"I have considered an amended CPR and this whilst still has gaps has been updated to a level where I am confident to confirm [child's] match. Panel has been scrupulous with detail and recommendation and were correct to ask the ADM to have a more detailed assessment. Concise and clear recommendations given for the SW to follow." (ADM, Herefordshire, 05.08.2022)*

*"I have read the panel minutes and recommendation to match, and I fully agree and endorse the panel's recommendation." (ADM, Warwickshire, 01.12.2022)*

*I am satisfied that the questions raised by the panel about the match were answered and recorded within the minutes (ADM, Solihull, 03.11.2022)*

For one approval the ACE ADM noted that while 'it was appropriate to be cautious and the views of panel (and the panel experiences) are invaluable' they felt 'on balance' that the applicant had 'demonstrated her resilience and commitment to ensure the best for her child/ren.'

During the reporting period there was one occasion where the panel did not recommend a match of siblings with a couple. The ADM did not agree with the panel and approved the match, stating

*"The decisions in the panel appear to be based on the verbal responses given on the day by the adopters. There is little triangulation with the reports that have been provided which I feel answer many of the reservations that panel raised and which I have cross referenced ..." (ADM Solihull)*

The same ADM writing about a different case, noted that not all the issues raised in the panel discussion had been covered in the meeting.

The ACE Head of Service and decision maker at ACE has observed a panel meeting on several occasions during the year. Local Authority agency decision makers are also encouraged to observe an adoption panel meeting, but none has done so in 2022-3.