



Adoption Central England

Annual Report 2023-2024



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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 sixth annual report providing a summary of activity and developments within ACE that covers the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. It can be read alongside the ACE Adoption Panel Annual Report 2023-2024.

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
 - Ensure post adoption support services to adoptive families are trauma informed and promote attachment between children and their adoptive parents.
- 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 that 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 independent 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. Increasingly the service is becoming drawn into reunification

arrangements whereby adopted young people under 18 years have sought contact with birth family members. In addition, the Post Commencement Regulations 2005 have now come into effect allowing adopted adults access to adoption records without the legal requirement for counselling or mediation. ACE is collaborating with local authority colleagues in developing protocols for the management of such requests.

2.5 ACE supports the development of professional practice around adoption and since July 2022 has delivered a range of training opportunities to social workers and related staff including foster carers. The training proposal for 2024-2025 is submitted as Appendix 1 and includes the recommendation to develop a training programme for local authority managers responsible for adoption. The training programme currently offered is:

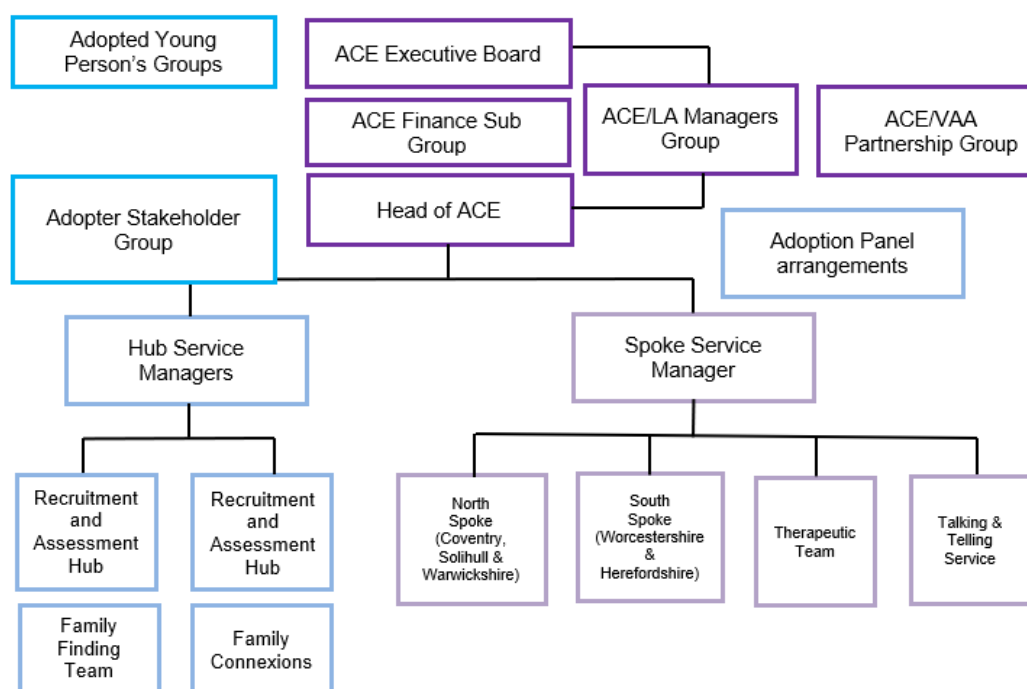
- (i) Permanence through adoption
- (ii) Child Permanence Reports
- (iii) Maintaining relationships and identity in adoption
- (iv) Preparing children for adoption and life story work and books
- (v) Care planning - considering the permanency options
- (vi) Supporting foster carer to prepare child for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

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 participate in matching children with adopters and provide support for 12 months after the adoption order is granted. Their work includes 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 and south are located within the local authority areas. They offer the following services:

- Duty and advice services
- Undertake assessments of need for adoption support
- Process and commission therapeutic services through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund
- Work directly with families who require social work services
- Provide birth records counselling to adult adoptees
- Complete non-agency adoption assessments for the court
- 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 72.41 FTE and as on 31 March 2022 there are 99 people working in ACE. The over establishment of posts was agreed by the Executive Board to cover the increase in adopter applications:

Roles	Structure Establishment	Appointed
ACE Managers incl. training manager and Business Support Manager	9.95 FTE	10.93
Hub social workers	15.26 FTE	14.29
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	18.64
Therapeutic Team – social workers incl. Therapeutic Life Story Work Practitioners	3.61 FTE	3.71
Family support workers supporting the Spokes	2.62 FTE	3.23
Social Worker – Adopter training lead	0.61 FTE	0.61

Business support and related roles including letterbox scheme coordinators	13.25 FTE	13.81
Adoption Panel Advisors – social workers	1.49 FTE	1.49
Total	73.43	73.44

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 agreed as the plan for the child. This service also hosts the Letterbox Scheme. The service will support birth parents in meeting adoptive families and will also support birth family members where adopted young people have sought reunification. In the region of 380 birth family members are being supported and the service has recently extended the number of support groups to meet this need. Many birth parents continue to have ongoing life challenges and mental health issues feature significantly.

3.5 The **Therapeutic Team** delivers therapeutic interventions to families who have high levels of assessed needs and can be on an individual or group work basis. The group work based programme includes:

- Therapeutic and Sensory Based Parenting
- Toddler and Baby Bonding
- Non-Violence Resistance
- Parenting Teens

3.6 The workers frequently work alongside social workers either within ACE or from the local authorities. One social worker is a qualified DDP practitioner, and two social workers have the Diploma in Therapeutic Life Story Work which complements the interventions delivered through the Therapeutic Team. The team can attract funding from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) for the therapeutic interventions delivered.

3.7 The **Family Finding Team** is a small group of ACE social workers who work closely with the social workers for the children in efforts to secure adoption for them. They produce the profiles on all children with an adoption plan and will lead wider interagency placement searches for families where this has been agreed with the local authority.

- 3.8 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 covers:
- First Year of Adoption
 - Parenting with PACE
 - Talking and Telling – The importance of Life Story
 - Identity and Maintaining Relationships
 - Eat Sleep and Play – Everyday challenges in parenting adopted children
 - Psychological Health in Adopted Children and Adolescents programme delivered by the ACE Clinical Psychology Service.
- 3.9 During the past year ACE, in partnership with local voluntary adoption agencies, has delivered workshops for family and friends of adoptive families which have been well received.
- 3.10 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.
- 3.11 The business support functions are supported by a part time data analyst who works closely with the local authorities, and an ASGSF 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**. In May 2024 approval has been given for exemption from tendering for a 2-year period, until January 2027. This will ensure continuity of therapeutic interventions and of service provision whilst the future of the ASGSF is uncertain.
- 3.12 During the past year ACE has made staffing adjustments to accommodate sickness and maternity leave absences as there has been heightened service demand during this period. Service reviews led to the following changes:
- Adopter registration of interest, Stage 1 references - dedicated business support officers have been allocated to complete these tasks.
 - The Spoke duty system - revised arrangements embedded which have ensured a more timely and consistent service.
 - Family Connexions Service – revised arrangements resetting the parameters of the service with the agreement of the ACE Executive Board.
 - Adopter assessment - staff members have completed adopter assessments as additional hours due to high demand.

- Adopter initial visits - trialling of a social worker dedicated to completing all initial assessments thereby releasing staffing capacity for adopter assessments.

3.13 In October 2021 the service inaugurated its **Clinical Psychology Service** through the appointment of a part time clinical psychologist. The continuation of this service has been agreed and funded by the ACE Executive Board and has a contract until 30 September 2025. This service 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.

3.14 The second annual report on this service is attached as Appendix 2.

3.15 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 2024, 74 (95%) of ACE staff had attended DDP level 1 training and 14 (19%) had completed DDP level 2 (19%). 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 has completed the DDP practicum. The DDP ethos and practice within the service is supported by the commissioned DDP consultant/trainer for 23 days a year.

3.16 An additional service provided through ACE is **ACE Individual and Couples Counselling Service** 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.

- 3.17 ACE also offers agency advice to the local authority agency decision makers (ADMs). This involves reviewing the adoption documentation and the provision of written specialist advice regarding the proposed adoption plan for the child.
- 3.18 ACE sends out the **ACE Connects** newsletter to local authority partner agencies 3 times a year advising of current issues and practice developments in adoption.

4. Financial Arrangements

- 4.1 ACE is funded through a funding share Formula for each local authority using a set of proxy indicators over a 30year 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. These are weighted and reviewed updated every 3 years.
- 4.2 Some elements of the ACE budget receive an annual inflationary increase subject to the Executive Board approval in the autumn before the following year budget is set. A review of the ACE budget has taken place during the year and regular meetings with local authority finance officers have been introduced as part of the governance arrangements. The interagency placement budget continues to be drawn upon significantly and 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. During this year 30% of adoption placements were made on an interagency basis.
- 4.3 The final year budget outturn for ACE was:
- Interagency budget – overspend£497,929
 - Staffing and services/supplies – underspend £82,650
 - Adoption Panel – overspend £12,125.

The total overspend was £427,403

This was funded by additional end of year partner contributions after utilising reserves.

- 4.4 Due to the importance of financial management and monitoring ACE has not taken advantage of national initiatives as there is uncertainty around longer-term financial commitments.

5. Performance

- 5.1 The trend in children requiring an adoption placement has been consistent over the past 2 years with Solihull MBC showing a significant increase in adoption decision-making more recently.

	2022/23	2023/24
Coventry	50	48
Herefordshire*	13	16
Solihull	16	26
Warwickshire	24	21
Worcestershire	49	47
ACE Total	152	158

- 5.2 Adoption performance of ACE can be assessed against the success in meeting the needs of those children requiring adoption and the **ACE Service Improvement Plan 2023-2024** as summarised in Appendix 3. This identifies both strategic and operational priorities set by the ACE Executive Board and local authorities, alongside those activities determined by ACE.
- 5.3 Two of the strategic priorities have been progressed alongside the operational priorities proposed by local authorities. Fostering for adoption was an operational priority, and despite slightly fewer fostering for adoption placements being made during the year, the number of approved adopters willing to be considered for fostering for adoption has increased. The only strategic priority not to progress is to examine the circumstances behind adoption breakdowns post adoption order. ACE has produced an audit template to support this action.
- 5.4 There are many factors that can impact on the other operational priority to improve the timescales between placement order and matching (A2). However, good progress is being made with the average ACE timescale being 218 days against a provisional England average of 198 days. When the median is considered, which excludes those outliers which can have a significant impact on average performance, the more reliable performance is 176 days.
- 5.5 ACE set out 23 actions in the Service Improvement Plan and completed 10 actions, made significant progress in 8 areas, and has 5 areas outstanding or requiring ongoing consideration. ACE received fewer adopter enquiries than required and therefore has a shortfall of adoptive parents. This is recognised nationally and the cost of living crisis is a contributing factor.
- 5.6 The recent **[Life Search Health, Wealth and Happiness Index](#)** found that millions of young Brits have been forced to delay their plans to start a family as a direct result of the cost of living crisis. The research found that almost half

(45%) of all Brits who had planned to either start a family, or have another child, have delayed their plans due to the cost of living crisis, rising to 60% of those aged 18-34. Nationally the cost of living crisis is also having an impact on the number of people coming forward to adopt and the number of children waiting for an adoptive family far exceeds the number of approved households.

5.7 The global pandemic impacted upon on adopter activity with a decline in children with adoption decisions and being adopted in 2020-2021. Subsequently in 2021-2022 fewer prospective adopters were entering Stage1 of the adopter preparation and assessment as reflected below. Adopter recruitment is a service priority alongside the timely placement of children for adoption. The following summary shows adoption panel activity and trends. Positively it is reporting a recent increase in adopter approvals and the corresponding increase in the number of children who have been matched with adoptive parents over the past 2 years. This demonstrates a strengthening and upward trend in prospective adopters coming through and in children being matched and placed with adoptive parents.

	Adopters Approvals	Matches	Consensual Adoptions	Total number of items
2023/24	86	100	5	192
2022/23	72	110	5	190
2021/22	75	89	6	173
2020/21	77	91	6	169
2019/20	97	86	0	185
2018/19	92	85	4	184

5.8 The Q4 Performance Report for 2023-2024 is attached as Appendix 4. In summary, key performance measures to note are:

- Of the 105 adoption placements made 73 (70%) were with ACE approved adopters.
- Whilst levels of adopter enquiries fell short of the 475 target, there was an increase in adopter approvals falling short of the target set by one household.
- 83 households were approved as suitable to adopt, one household was deferred, which is a 15% increase on the previous year.
- 22 households were approved from underrepresented groups, and unlike the previous year the approvals of Black and minority ethnic households was less than the target set but recruitment from LGBTQ+ households exceeded the target.

- In certain circumstances more adoptive households (68%) are willing to consider fostering for adoption.
- Where ACE can allocate a social worker in a timely way most adopter assessments (73%) will be presented to the adoption panel within 6 months.
- Placement performance timescales are variable across the region with Worcestershire and Herefordshire showing better performance against A10 and A2 (becoming looked after and placed for adoption and becoming looked after and placement order). This may be the result of their local court practices. Against A2 placement order to match, all authorities are doing well apart from Solihull whose performance is understood to be affected by outliers.
- There has been an increase in the number of children placed on an interagency basis, reflecting more children with adoption plans and the shortfall of ACE approved adopters.
- Two children experienced a placement disruption during this period and there were two further disruptions of children placed the previous year. A separate report and analysis are provided of adoption disruptions and of the learning reviews where fostering for adoption does not proceed to adoption.
- There has been an increase in requests for post adoption support with the number of 'assessments of need' completed for adoption support and the number of referrals for birth records counselling being higher than the previous year.

5.9 ACE continues to collaborate with the other regional adoption agencies and voluntary adoption agencies in the Midlands forming the **Midlands Together Collaboration**. In February 2024 a localised recruitment initiative took place and there are regular meetings between the agencies to explore potential placements for children and to plan family finding events.

5.10 The ACE recruitment and placement priorities for 2024-2025 will be:

- To increase adopter enquiries, approvals, and assessment timeliness.
- To address the shortfall of adopters from African and African-Caribbean communities.
- To reduce the reliance on interagency adoption placements to less than 20% of placements.
- To maintain low levels of adoption disruptions.
- To continue to support local authorities in considering fostering for adoption or concurrency for children where this is appropriate.

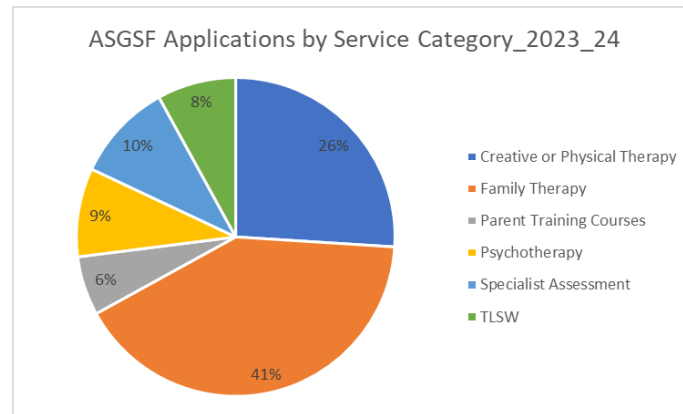
6. Adoption Support

- 6.1 Adoption support remains an area of importance within ACE and the workload and referral rate has been higher than the previous year. During this period the number of people contacting the service in respect of access to their adoption records was consistent at 229. However, the number of recorded contacts for post adoption support showed a significant increase from the previous 2 years (257,250) as 325 requests were made resulting in 133 'assessment of need for adoption support.'
- 6.2 On 31 March 2024 539 families were in receipt of an adoption support service and further 103 adopted people received birth records counselling. The service is beginning to see younger adopted adults coming forward for copies of their adoption records under the Post Commencement Regulations 2005. This is presenting practice challenges and protocols are in the development stage with the local authorities who are custodians of the adoption case records.
- 6.3 There has been a reduction in the number of notifications received for non-agency adoption which is a continuation of the decline witnessed during the pandemic. However, there continues to be a high level of enquiries relating to non-agency adoption and the initial counselling provided by ACE introduces the alternative options to adoption and sets out the requirements for applications to proceed.
- 6.4 Applications to the national ASGSF have remained high and during 2023-2024 the following applications were made:

Type of application	Amount Approved	Number of applications	Number of children	Number of families
Individual family applications	£1,332,006.41	393	400	353
ACE Therapeutic Team (includes group applications)	£157,464.95	50	158	107
Therapeutic Group applications	£62,870.68	11	110	75
Total	1,489,471.36	454	668	535

- 6.5 This is highlighting levels of need and the number of families who benefit from therapeutic intervention. Some therapeutic interventions are delivered through ACE thereby attracting ASGSF funding towards the cost of the ACE Therapeutic Team.

6.6 Each application to the ASGSF requires an assessment of need to have been completed and the summary below shows that family therapy was the most required intervention. This was followed by creative and physical therapies for children and young people such as play therapy and sensory integration therapy.



6.7 The Therapeutic Team offered the following interventions during 2023-2024:

- Therapeutic Parenting and Sensory Integration
- Non-Violent Resistance - NVR
- Parent Child Attachment Play - PCAP
- Toddler and Baby Bonding.

6.8 Additional support is available to adoptive families pre and post adoption through the **ACE Clinical Psychology Service**. This continues to be 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 follows:

- *'She helped me to look at certain issues in a different way and gave me some possible ways to help my daughter with these issues'.*
- *'Helped validate existing ideas and approaches, gave many new ideas and a fresh therapeutic look at some behavioural difficulties faced'.*
- *'For social workers to signpost this as a service when an adoptive parent calls asking for help. It was so helpful'.*
- *'The psychologist was able to clarify information provided by previous assessments as to the child's abilities as to understanding, processing, and expressing which provided clarification as to any potential ongoing therapeutic work'.*
- *'Helped to reflect our current situation and identified support needs for mum. Helped to confirm our thinking about what therapy would be most appropriate for child'.*

- *'It gave the adopters the opportunity to take a step back, reflect on the changes that await the child and them. It helped informed them more of certain unexpected behaviours from the child in response to change and prepared them on how to react and support the child'.*
- *'The psychologist was clear, reflective and helped parents to slow down and think openly about their child's level of need, whilst also giving them space to offload and share concerns'.*
- *'The psychologist helped me to consider my own approach to supporting the family, as well as offering the family a reflective space to share how they were feeling. I have not been able to achieve this with the family so the psychologist provided a safe space for us to make progress with the casework'.*

6.9 The **Adopters Newsletter** has been produced on a quarterly basis and is sent to 1009 households. ACE managers 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.
- 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 the emotional impact this can have.
- Advice regarding future life planning including signposting to other universal support services.
- Group sessions for birth parents and extended family members across the ACE region.
- Support with any direct contact or reunification plans requested by the adopted child and their adoptive parents.

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

Local authority	Number of referrals 1.4.2023-31.3.2024	Number of family members currently in receipt of a service	Number who are phone support or group only
Coventry	48	120	24
Solihull	19	26	6
Warwickshire	21	63	5
Worcestershire	53	124	10
Herefordshire	23	42	1
Out of ACE	2	4	2
Total	166	379	46

7.3 The workload for the Family Connexions Team of 3.33 FTE social workers and 0.81 Family Support Worker is significant. Birth mothers are the main recipients of the service at 67%, followed by birth fathers at 23.5%, grandparents 7% and finally siblings at 2%. The reunification work which has been started for some adopted young people is intensive and is set to increase as the importance of maintaining relationships becomes further embedded into adoption practice.

8. Quality Assurance and Inspection

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

- Case file auditing by managers.
- Learning from complaints and representations.
- Robust staff recruiting practices including induction.
- Regular supervision and annual appraisal of all staff.
- 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 Adopter 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 ASGSF and Complex Case Review Panel.
- Reviews of the DDP Action Plan including staff surveys.
- External validation through local authority OFSTED inspections.

- 8.2 The **Case File Audit Report 2023-2024** was received during this period noting that 20 case files had been audited. 50% of case files were judged as good, 25% outstanding and 25% requiring improvement. This shows an improvement on the previous year with more case files being judged as outstanding.
- 8.3 The audit showed improvement in the accuracy of recording information on MOSAIC, assessments showing clear strong analysis with clear recommendations being made. This was coupled with management oversight, recording of decisions and actions and appropriate follow up of safeguarding concerns. DDP principles were strongly reflected in relationships with families.
- 8.4 Areas for improvement for the Spoke teams is to ensure greater consistency and evidencing the voice of the family members throughout the assessment with a stronger emphasis on the child's racial, cultural, identity and health needs. It was highlighted that quarterly summaries should be provided to include reviews, providing a clearer overview of the interventions provided, and funding used. For the Hub teams the recording could better reflect the applicant's journey through the assessment process, and improvements in management oversight.
- 8.5 During 2023/24 the long-awaited adjustments to the MOSAIC workflow processes were completed. This has been well received as it allows managers to populate the workflow more fully with the summary of their supervision sessions and managerial oversight - an area highlighted for development in the Case File Audit Report.
- 8.6 In November 2023 ACE was one of six regional adoption agencies to be inspected by OFSTED. Reporting in March 2024 OFSTED conducted the thematic adoption inspection between October and December 2023. It was the first time OFSTED had visited regional adoption agencies (RAAs) who are responsible for delivering a range of adoption services on behalf of local authorities. The RAAs chosen were representative of the sector, taking into account factors such as location, size and model of service delivery.
- 8.7 The overall evidence from this thematic inspection indicated that, day-to-day adoption practice remains strong. However, despite this good practice, some of the challenges that led to regionalisation remain unresolved. Recruitment, assessment, family finding and matching remained consistently strong. Agencies supported prospective adopters well through a thorough assessment

process, which included good preparation training. However, despite the regional approach, there remained a shortage of adopters, particularly for those children who were more likely to wait longer than their peers. This reflected the ACE position noting the higher draw on interagency placements during this period.

- 8.8 Several RAAs had struggled to recruit and retain suitably skilled and experienced staff, however this is not the ACE experience where the DDP ethos and approach has enhanced staff retention and produced positive outcomes for service users.
- 8.9 ACE did identify with limited resources available that can impact on service delivery and the only recommendation made to the ACE Executive Board was in relation to this. The Executive Board are *'to consider capacity within the service to meet the level of future service demand with the recommendation that the Board ensures we have the staff/capacity to meet the level of service demand going forward'*.
- 8.10 Areas of exceptional practice highlighted about ACE were:
- (i) the embedding of the relationship-based approach – DDP, which has a significant positive impact on children, birth parents, adopters, and staff. This was felt all the way through the service – and the impact on relationships with other agencies.
 - (ii) The adoption support offer to adopters, birth parents and children is comprehensive and effective.
- 8.11 An OFSTED Action Plan has been produced following the inspection. Positively the Executive Board has agreed additional staffing to support the ACE Hub functions and the timely recruitment of adoptive parents. All other areas highlighted have been actioned (Appendix 5) and the Executive Board is to consider its own audit of the ACE Adoption Service in Autumn 2024.
- 8.12 ACE did not conduct an adopter's survey during this period as the decision was made to complete these bi-annually. However, their views were sought as part of the pan regional work on commissioning adoption support services and by OFSTED.

9. Practice Improvements, Innovations, and Developments

- 9.1 This section highlights those areas of practice and developments which have been considered by the ACE Executive Board and developed in collaboration with local authority partners and other services/agencies.

9.2 **Concurrency Scheme**

ACE has worked alongside two local authorities and has launched a **Concurrency Scheme**, with a voluntary adoption agency which will be piloted for 12 -18 months. As an early permanence option for children with dually approved carers both for fostering and for adoption, the primary objective of the placement would be rehabilitation unlike fostering for adoption where the carers have temporary approval as foster carers and the outcome for the child is assessed as most likely to be adoption. This scheme will sit alongside the fostering for adoption scheme which is well established in ACE.

Avoiding Cultural Bias in Adoption Matching

A workshop was delivered in April 2023 which explored this issue and was open to local authority and ACE practitioners.

Foster Carers who wish to Adopt and Consensual Adoption

ACE has worked with colleagues to update Practice Guidance in respect of **Foster Carers who wish to Adopt** and **Consensual Adoption** with a successful workshop of practitioners, lawyers and adoption panel chairs taking place on the latter on 22 April 2024. To support and embed practice in fostering for adoption, ACE has introduced quarterly meetings with fostering for adoption leads from the local authority fostering teams.

ADM and Panel Chairs Event - July 2023

This workshop explored the adoption panel role and functions alongside the responsibilities of ADMs within the adoption decision making processes. It also covered fostering for adoption, working with health partners and the role of the ACE Clinical Psychology Service.

Memorandum of Understanding for Adoption Medical Adviser Services in the Adoption Central England Region

Adopted as an example of good practice the Memorandum has been developed highlighting the joint responsibilities of ACE, local authorities, and health providers to deliver adoption services. It is intended to form the basis for ongoing discussions with health partners who have a crucial role in adoption. It also serves to ensure a legally compliant and consistent service following the Somerset judgement and incorporates the practice requirements arising from the 'Implications of the Cumbria Child Safeguarding Practice Review' (Coram-BAAF June 2023).

Cumbria Child Safeguarding Practice Review

ACE has considered the recommendations from the Serious Case Review into the death of a child placed with prospective adoptive parents. An action plan was put in place and subsequently changes have been introduced which have included (i) Health Declaration Form completed by prospective adopters at all

key stages of the process (ii) strengthening and highlighting the safeguarding responsibilities of those providing references (iii) notifications to GPs when a child is to be placed with prospective adoptive parents.

ACE Partnership and Hosting Agreement and Service Specification

The ACE Executive Board has considered the ACE Partnership and Hosting Agreement and Service Specification and slight changes have been made to reflect revised governance arrangements and working practices.

Letter Swap

Mentioned in the Government's Adoption Strategy, the Letter Swap project, led by Link Maker, is a pilot scheme set up to explore the digital exchange of information between birth family and adoptive parents. Since May 2023 ACE has been participating in the pilot which will be nationally evaluated and has been extended until Autumn 2024.

Enhanced Support for Family and Friends

With two voluntary adoption agencies in the region, ACE has planned the delivery of a series of quarterly workshops for the family and friends of adoptive families. The workshops held during this period covered Behaviour as Communication (September), Relationship Gestures (November), What is Life Story Work (January).

Post Commencement Regulations 2005

This has received particular attention over the past year as adopted young adults have come forward for copies of their adoption records. This has raised issues around the quality and sensitivity of the information which is disclosable particularly in the Child Permanence Reports which will have been completed some time ago. Unlike birth records counselling under previous legislation, there is no requirement to offer counselling. With the local authorities, a protocol is being developed as learning and practice is developing. A national working group is also considering the issues arising and ACE is contributing to this work.

Lifelong Links

Introduced as a pilot project with three regional adoption agencies, each with a local authority partner, Family Rights Group are leading the work to see if and how the model of Lifelong Links can be applied to adoption. ACE is contributing to the developmental work on this alongside Coventry City Council who have an established Lifelong Links Scheme for looked after young people.

National Adoption Commissioning Programme

ACE has taken a leadership role in moving forward this government sponsored programme aimed at exploring pan regional commissioning arrangements and

to test new ways of commissioning adoption support and improve current arrangements. A regional needs assessment has been progressed and there is interest in exploring and possibility of commissioning in the broadest terms, enhanced support care and other respite opportunities for adoptive families to enhance placement stability.

Maintaining Relationships

First considered by the ACE Executive Board in February 2022 there is growing momentum to consider the arrangements for ongoing contact post adoption. This is reflecting the evidence, and cultural change indicative of modern adoption. It was considered further by the Executive Board on May 2023 and ACE and local authority practitioners have been joining the webinars on this subject matter presented by the University of East Anglia. Practice champions have been identified in each local authority and this will be an area for developing practice over the coming year. In addition, ACE has chaired two meetings of the regional culture change champions who are currently working on an action plan linked to the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Subgroup recommendations.

Public Law Working Group: Adoption Subgroup (September 2023)

The ACE Executive Board made a formal response to this report which has focussed on international adoptions, consensual adoption, access to adoption records, processes and procedures in court and contact. The final report with recommendations is due to be launched in Autumn 2024 and many of the recommendations are welcomed where they add clarity, reduce bureaucracy, and speed up adoption processes. By far the most significant section relates to contact which poses challenges to existing practices. This will be a priority for consideration in the coming year by ACE, the local authority partners and the ACE Executive Board.

OFSTED Action Plan

An action plan was put in place following the OFSTED inspection. The feedback highlighted capacity issues within the service and additional staffing have been secured, and service parameters reviewed particularly in relation to adoption support. ACE has amended the processes of progressing adopter applicants through stages 1 and 2 of the adoption approval process. There is also a higher focus on 'voice and influence' within the service and the Executive Board intends to undertake an audit in Autumn 2024.

10. Diversity and Inclusion

- 10.1 ACE has had an ongoing commitment to deliver a safe, sensitive, and inclusive service and has a **Black Lives Matters Managers Group**. The group considers

the broader diversity issues and has produced both its internal and external diversity inclusion statements.

- 10.2 In this period 22 (26%) of approved adopter households were representative of minority community groups or the LGBTQ+ communities. However, unlike the previous year only 8 households were approved from the African, African – Caribbean or Asian communities. ACE has sufficient adopters who are representative of Asian communities and recognises the recruitment of African and African Caribbean families is an ongoing challenge which reduces placement choice for some children and delays permanency for others. This is an ongoing priority, and the service intends to dedicate staffing capacity to this area. The service is also reviewing how well therapeutic interventions meet the needs and expectations of minority communities. This is also a priority for the DDPi network.

11. Adoption Disruptions

This covers children who are placed for adoption but where the plan does not proceed to adoption. A separate **Report of disruptions in adoption placements 2023-2024** will consider the issues and learning that arises from these. During this period adoption four disruptions were considered. Two children were placed in the previous year and two disruptions relate to interagency adoption placements.

Four further learning reviews took place where the children were not placed or where there was a change of plan. This occurred where children placed on a fostering for adoption basis, were subsequently returned to the care of their birth parent or other connected person.

12. Complaints, Representations and Compliments

- 12.1 ACE received six complaints during this period. Three complaints were in respect of adoption support and three related to the adoption assessment process, delays in the stage 1 process, in allocation for assessment and a paused assessment due to new information becoming known later in the assessment process.

- 12.2 All complaints were investigated in line with the Complaints and Representation Procedure and key findings which were upheld were:

- ACE acknowledged delay in forwarding letterbox correspondence - ACE introduced a random auditing of letterbox records to ensure the required processes are followed.
- Stage 1 processes and communication with prospective adoptive families have been reviewed and two Business Support Officers have been

allocated to support this process and keep families updated in a timely way.

- ACE now ensures that the Adoption Support Flyer is sent out following an initial enquiry when families are progressing to an assessment of need and ACE now offers either a virtual or face-to-face assessment of need appointment.
- ACE managers reviewed the Stage 1 quality assurance processes.

12.3 The following are examples of compliments received about the service.

Janine (Letterbox) – The caring nature you have and the empathy when communicating with me has helped me to heal, to rebuild relations between care leaver and social worker/adoption team. I have lived with this separation anxiety and the chance of getting to send letters to A is life changing thank you, thank you, thank you so much

Ali (Family finder)– Truly brilliant practice. Your care, attention and dedication to make sure the whole team around J felt listened to and supported is the reason J's move has been so smooth.

Ann I just wanted to thank you for the way you supported me and my husband over the last few weeks. I really valued the way you listened, empathised and acknowledged it was tough, and then went on to sort out things for us. We were overjoyed to find out we had progressed to Stage 2!

Rhiannon has gone above and beyond to support this family, maintaining a position of trying to keep them connected and offer opportunities for repair. She was described as understanding, supportive and provided emotional safety to allow this parent to feel heard, and the support Rhiannon is providing is having a positive impact

Shaifali's dedication, compassion and expertise have made a profound impact on our family with our adoption journey. It is evident that the professional approach in her role also has a deep sense of purpose and genuine passion for making a positive difference in the lives of families. Please accept our heartfelt thanks for her exceptional services and for making a significant impact on our family's story.

Sarah B– thank you so much for your time yesterday, and your help in medicating. We were at such an emotional block it felt like a real challenge to get over it, but yesterday definitely helped to open the doors to conversation. I'm really trying adopt the NVR approach and I think the agreed 'words' will help to structure this so that we only discuss challenges when we're in the right emotional space. We really appreciate your time and interaction Sarah – goodness knows where we'd be without you! Thank you.

I found Lara to be extremely professional in how she was able to remain empathic but without shying away from the severity of the situation. She was open and honest in her approach.

South Duty Team – Thank you for your support. From the first time I spoke to a Duty Social Worker I felt heard and supported and didn't feel so alone anymore. That really did mean so much when we were going through such a tough time as a family. We don't need any more support at this time, but it's great to know you are there. Thank you again

Hannah L is very keen to help, supportive and empathetic and offers practical support which we have needed. It didn't feel we needed to convince her that she needed to take action as she just got we needed the support to be provided. Working with her is very refreshing and feels collaborative.

Melissa and Nicky – Thank you for such a useful and welcoming information meeting last night. Whilst there was a lot to digest, we really value the approach, warmth and time given to answer everyone's questions.

We were supported thoroughly from the initial phone call all the way through. The assessment was perfectly timed, very thorough and not rushed at all. The training, including the Theraplay, was well organised. The communication from the whole team was just outstanding. The transition phase was so well planned and detailed and we felt supported going forward, even including an 'adoption buddy'. Lisa L your paperwork was so detailed because you were obviously very in tune with us and thorough in your assessment to write in such detail. We can't think of anything more ACE could have done better.

13. Staff Development and Support

- 13.1 A full service event has not taken place during this period.
- 13.2 External training accessed for team members has included 'Connected parenting with NVR', 'Diversity in Permanence' and two further staff members have completed DDP level 2.
- 13.3 DDP practice is embedded through DDP learning sets and consultations, and DDP level 1 training was offered in January 2024 for ACE staff and local authority colleagues. The certification of ACE as a DDP accredited service is due to lapse in January 2025 and initial thoughts have been given to the evidence required to resubmit for DDP certification.
- 13.4 ACE staff have access to the comprehensive training and development programme through Warwickshire County Council, the host agency. 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 7th 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.
 - Developed a comprehensive post approval training package for adoptive parents. (Appendix 6 Adopter Training Brochure)
 - Worked alongside adopters as key stakeholders, promoting opportunities to engage more adopted young people in service processes and developments.
 - Strengthened quality assurance through various processes and arrangements.
 - Received positive affirmation through the OFSTED inspection process.
- 14.2 During 2023/2024 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. This is potentially an ongoing area of service pressure in 2024-

2025, however the early indications are that adopter recruitment is on the rise with more children being placed and supported through ACE.

14.3 The main priorities for 2024-2025 are:

- To increase adopter recruitment in line with the ACE Adopter Recruitment Sufficiency Strategy (Appendix 7).
- To address and clarify responsibilities in respect of the Post Commencement Regulations 2005 as they relate to access to adoption records.
- To work alongside local authority partners to achieve the Early Permanence Quality Kite Mark.
- To progress the arrangements for adoptive parents to support adopter training events.
- To develop the voice and influence strategy regarding adopted young people engagement.
- To work towards ACE's ongoing certification as a DDP informed service.
- To develop a clear plan and arrangements with local authority partners for meeting the requirements of supporting post adoption contact.
- To respond to the recommendations from the Public Law Working Group: Adoption Subgroup.

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 most placements being made with ACE approved adopters. Early permanence through fostering for adoption is well embedded by 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

16. Appendices

Social Worker Adoption Training Programme Proposal 2024-2025

Appendix 1



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Clinical Psychology Service Report

Appendix 2



Clinical Psychology
Service ACE Annual R

Service Improvement Plan 2023-2024

Appendix 3



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Q4 Performance Report

Appendix 4



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24%20Exec%20Board'

ACE OFSTED Action Plan

Appendix 5



OFSTED%20progress
%20report%20July%2

Adopter Training Brochure

Appendix 6



ACE TRAINING
BROCHURE.pdf

Adoption Recruitment Sufficiency Strategy 2024-2025

Appendix 7



Adoption%20Recruit
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