

LEICESTERSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2019-2020





CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Performance	7
3. Post Adoption Support	12
4. Permanence Team.....	14
5. Statement by the Agency Decision Maker, Helen Gronhaug.....	15
6. Developments	17
7. Recommendations for 2020/2021	18
Adoption Panel	19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Annual Report for the Adoption Service sets out the performance for the service in 2019/20 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year 2020/21.

Key messages within this report are:

Recruitment

The Adoption Service has seen an increase in the number of adopter enquiries and attendance at open evenings during 2019/20. Between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020, 347 adopter enquiries were received. 78 adopter households attended one of the 7 open evenings held during this period. Of these, as of 31st March 2020, there were:

- 17 households in stage one of the assessment process
- a further 14 households within stage two
- 21 households being approved as adopters and
- a further 7 waiting for Agency Decision Maker ratification, following panel on 27/03/20

This is a conversion rate of 75.6% of enquiries progressing to stage one of the assessment process which is a significant improvement to 2018/19 which had a conversion rate of 34%

Family finding for older children

Leicestershire remains in line with Leicester City and Lincolnshire for placing children over 5 years old, having placed 18 between 2016-2019. As Leicestershire is joining Leicester City and Lincolnshire as part of the Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies it is promising that that Leicestershire is performing equally as well. We have also successfully placed a sibling group of 4 children, one of whom was over 5. A specific Facebook campaign for a sibling group of 3 resulted in over 100 enquiries and the progression to assessment for one family.

Family finding for children with complex needs

Finding adoption homes for children with complex health needs or disabilities remains a challenge. However, this remains on our agenda and is routinely part of our Facebook campaigns seeking adopters for those harder to place children. Leicestershire also uses Activity Days run by Coram Baaf and Exchange Events to ensure children's profiles reach a wider audience. By using Activity days our children get the opportunity to meet adopters face to face and play, and vice versa. Exchange events allow the sharing of profiles with an adoption social worker being present, they are available to adopters who express an interest in a child and information can be shared. The children are not part of this process.

Timeliness of children moving in with adoptive family

The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3 year trend and 1 year trend. The 3 main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

Against all three key performance indicators the 3 year trend data remains stable and either better or similar to statistical neighbours. A10 and A2 improved against the previous 3 year trend data with the number of days reducing by 11 days and 10 days respectively and are both comparatively shorter timescales than Statistical Neighbours. A20 remained the same at 255 days which is similar to statistical neighbours of 241 days (Full Data - Pg 6 'Performance').

Against all three indicators, the 1 year trend data for 2019 is highlighting an increase in the number of days in comparison to the previous year and therefore a decrease in the timeliness to achieve permanence. In addition across all three indicators Leicestershire is performing lower than statistical neighbours.

Adoption Score Card	2018	2019	Statistical Neighbours
A10	228 days	425 days	344 days
A2	133 days	167 days	157 days
A20	187 days	316 days	235 days

We have explored the variance for the 1 year trend data and have highlighted that there were 5 children who presented as being significant outliers in terms of increased number of days. We are satisfied that for the 5 children, any delay was due to the complexity of need and how this impacted on ensuring the right match; such as significant disabilities of the children and ensuring that the children received the right therapeutic intervention prior to placing to support the success of the placement. We will continue to have robust monitoring and oversight of the progression of children whose permanence plan is adoption and recognise that matching for children with additional complex needs may require more time, consideration and intervention.

Regional Engagement

Leicestershire has continued to be actively engaged in the Regional Home finding meetings where representatives from Lincolnshire, Leicester City and 3 Voluntary Agencies meet monthly to identify prospective matches for hard to place children. The meetings are now taking place quarterly with exchange and activities planned for the months in between. Leicestershire continues to chair and administer these meetings. There has been limited success with finding adoptive placements for our children within these meetings with matches being identified for 5 children



1. INTRODUCTION

OUR VISION

Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people and their families

This means that we will describe the outcomes we want to achieve for children, young people and their families and identify measures that can tell us how well we are achieving against them. We will aim to be the best performing local authority in the country against these measures, and where we are not yet there we will set stretching targets for annual improvement.

OUR MISSION

Children and young people in Leicestershire are safe and living in families where they can achieve their potential and have their health, wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities.

Under the 2011 National Minimum Standards 25.6, all Adoption Agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive regarding the activity and work of the Adoption Agency and Adoption Panel. To meet this standard the Adoption Service submits a monthly report to the Lead Member and Director and an annual report to the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Panel.



1.1 Our Service

Leicestershire County Council had operated a joint Fostering, Adoption and Placements Service since April 2015. In July 2019 we separated the two functions to have our own dedicated Fostering and Adoption Services. Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Adoption Agency. It undertakes statutory and regulated responsibilities relating to adoption. The main roles of the Adoption and Permanence Service is to provide high quality adoptive placements, a range of adoption and special guardianship support and other permanency options, including profiling for long term placements for children who are looked after by Leicestershire County Council and are unable to live with their birth families.

Adoption and Permanence Services are provided to:

- Children who are to be adopted
- Birth parents
- Prospective and approved adopters
- Children and adoptive parents who require adoption support services
- Children and Special Guardians who require therapeutic support and advice, where the child lives permanently in Leicestershire
- Adopted adults

The Adoption Service is led by the Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care and and Virtual School and managed through a Service Manager who has responsibility for the 3 teams that make up the adoption service, Assessment and Support, Permanence and Post Support.

Name	Designation
Jane Moore	Director, Children and Families Service
Sharon Cooke	Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Childrens Social Care
Nicci Collins	Deputy Assistant Director, Transformation
Kelda Claire	Interim Head of Service
Michelle Robinson	Service Manager
Helen Gronhaug	Agency Decision Maker
Gemma Barber	Manager, Adoption & Permanence Team
Emma Bulgin/Elle Taylor	Manager, Adoption & Permanence Team
Caramjit Supra	Manager, Adoption & Permanence Team
Katie Bancroft	Senior Practitioner, Post Adoption and SGO Support
Lauren Nichols	Senior Practitioner, Adoption
Claire Pepper, Sophie Cotteril, Emma Kamgue, Julie Bilton-Dowell, Judith Collins, Wendy Marsh, Angela Saduera, Bethany Fox	Family Finding Social Workers
Lisa Deakin	Special Guardianship Support Social Worker
Natasha Aaron, Harriet Person-Cole, Rachel Knox-Barrett, Debbie Bevan, Sue Bineham, Eleni Christodoulou	Adoption Social workers
Sameerah Makda, Charlotte Waggle, Vacant Post	Post Adoption Support Social Workers
Sarah Greaves, Anne Barton	Birth Records Counsellors
Sheryl Perberdy	Special Guardianship Support Worker
Lianne Graham-Halford	Post Adoption Support Worker
Michelle Smith	Life Story Worker
Leesha Irwin	Art Therapist
Lorraine Daniels	Panel Advisor

In September 2019 Leicestershire's Children and Family Service was inspected by Ofsted. Whilst the Adoption Service was not subject to its own inspection the feedback for the service was exceptional. The overall judgement for services for children in care, was **Good**.

This report should be read alongside the Care Placement Strategy and Permanence and Adoption Strategy 2017-2021. These are dynamic strategies, geared towards supporting the recruitment of a diverse and confident mix of adoptive families, ensure enduring relationships and high-quality adoption support services. They are integrally linked with other key strategic plans and strategies for the Council:

- Children and Family Departmental Plan 2017 – 2021
- Children & Families Partnership Plan
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to excellence 2017 - 2020
- Adoption Service, Statement of Purpose

1.2 National/Local Political Implications

Adoption has been a key part of the Government Agenda since 2012 and has seen significant change.

There continues to be a drive to increase the number of children who are able to achieve early permanency via fostering to adopt. This is an implicit feature of our assessment and training programme to ensure that all adopters are fully informed of the risks and benefits of offering such placements. We routinely ensure that adopters have the opportunity to hear from others who have offered this type of placement within their training.

2. PERFORMANCE

2.1 Adoption Score Card – Key Performance Indicators

The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3 year trend and 1 year trend. The 3 main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

Leicestershire Adoption Agency's average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family improved across the 3 year trend performance data with 2016-19 (334 days) being shorter than in 2015-18 (343 days), this highlights a reduction of 11 days. This remains positive in comparison to Statistical neighbours who have an average of 353 days. However, the average time in 2019 compared to 2018 (1 year trend) identified an increase from 268 days to 425 days and is higher than statistical neighbours with an average of 344 days.

The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family was shorter in 2016-19 (143 days) in comparison to 2015-18 (153 days). This remains positive in comparison to Statistical neighbours who have an average of 154 days. However, in 2019 we have again seen an increase in the 1 year trend in comparison to 2018 from 133 days to 167 days. Which is slightly higher than the statistical neighbours average of 157 days

The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child has remained the same of 255 days over the three year trend comparison 2015-18/2016-19. This remains similar our statistical neighbours average of 241 days. However, against the 1 year trend we have seen an increase from 2018 (187 days) to 2019 (316 days) and this is higher than statistical neighbours whose 1 year average for 2019 is 235.

The 1 year trend data highlights an increase across all 3 key performance indicators. This is due to there being 5 primary outlying cases in terms of increased number of days. We have explored these cases and are satisfied that any delay was due to the level of complexity of need and which took additional time to respond to, ensuring the right match. The complexity included; significant disabilities of the children and ensuring that the children received the right therapeutic intervention prior to placing to support the success of the placement. We will continue to have robust monitoring and oversight of the progression of children whose permanence plan is adoption and recognise that matching for children with additional complex needs may require more time, consideration and intervention.



2.2 Adoption Panels

Twenty-one adoption panels were held during this period, this is slightly less than the previous year when 23 adoption panels were held. The reduction is reflective of the smaller number of adopters coming through for approval and children being presented for matches. Leicestershire's Adoption Panels are usually held fortnightly and are chaired by an Independent Chair and a panel of independent members who have significant adoption experience. The adoption panel is only able to make a recommendation of approval or not. Any recommendation must be considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) before a Qualifying Determination can be made and the approval and/or match ratified. Leicestershire has a stand-alone Agency Decision Maker who is responsible for ensuring that they have considered all of the information presented to them before making a final decision.

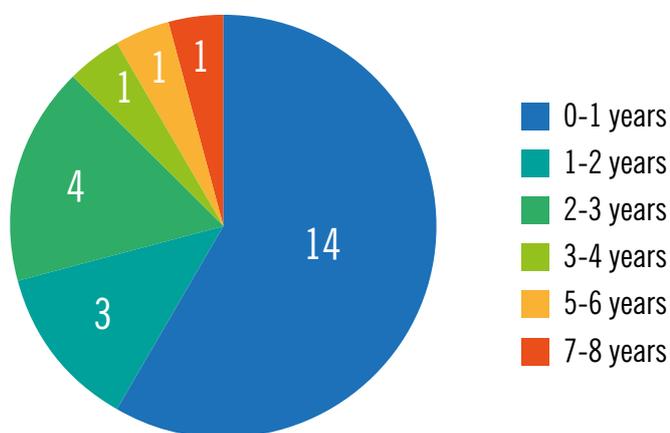
2.3 Adoption Plans

In this period twenty-four children were presented to the Agency Decision Maker for an adoption plan. Of the twenty-four children considered by the Agency Decision Maker, 90% met the National Minimum Standard timescale of coming to panel within two months of adoption being agreed as the plan. Those out of the timescale are due to deferment for technical reasons acceptable under the regulations. The requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 were fully met.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2005/0110723473/contents>

Chart 1 – Ages of children at point of approval for adoption

Ages of children at point of approval April 2019 - March 2020



This chart reflects the ages of the children coming through with a plan of adoption. Adoption is routinely considered during monthly case discussions with locality team managers where under the Public Law Outline legal proceedings are being considered or have been started.

2.4 Children Placed and Adopted

- 31 adoption orders were finalised for children in this period. Of these 11 were interagency placements.
- 21 adopters were approved in this period compared to 33 the previous year. A further 7 were waiting a Qualifying Determination from the Agency Decision Maker. 2 of these approvals were child specific. Of these the majority were White/British with 2 Asian/Indian and 1 white/Irish adopters.
- 25 children have been placed with their prospective adopters during this period.
- 21 children were placed with Leicestershire County Council approved adopters, and 4 via the inter-agency process.
- 3 sibling groups of 2 were placed



2.5 Adoption Approvals

During this period 21 adopter households were approved. 3 were presented to panel with a negative recommendation. These recommendations were upheld by panel and the Agency Decision Maker as it was assessed that the households were not suitable to meet the needs of children who have experienced adverse early experiences.

The recruiting of adopters is reviewed quarterly to ensure that we remain clear about the needs of our children and that we recruit to these. The Service Manager for Adoption attends the Children's Decision-Making panel which is chaired by the Head of Service for Fieldwork and is the forum where decisions for pre-proceedings and issuing of care proceedings is made. This provides oversight of cases that may progress to a permanence decision of adoption. The quarterly review also cross references with the pre-proceedings tracker and the adoption tracker to understand our current cohort of children in terms of ages and complexity and consider these against our recruitment needs.

Cases where delay or drift is identified are brought to the attention of the relevant Service Manager by the Adoption Service Manager to ensure that there are immediate plans put in place to understand the delay and to drive the permanence care plan forward. The Service Manager of the Adoption Team acts as Adoption Agency Advisor for children's adoption plan decisions and therefore works closely with ADM. There are weekly meetings scheduled to consider proposed adoption plans. The Adoption Service Manager and ADM now plan to review the adoption tracker together monthly to track children the progress for whom an adoption plan is being proposed so this can feed into ADM escalation and challenge process if needed. We continue to see a rise in sibling groups with a best interest decision of adoption.

1 child with an ethnicity other than White British was placed with adopters during 2019/2020. This was an interagency match where adopters who have been approved by an agency other than Leicestershire were identified as being the most appropriate adopters to meet the child's needs. Leicestershire pays a fee for an Interagency placement. 4 children with ethnicity other than White British progressed through to the granting of an Adoption Order. 2 Asian adoptive households were approved in this financial year with a further 2 Asian households and also 1 Black African household having entered into the assessment process.

The requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 were fully met for all assessments. The Regulations specify the requirements regarding the relevant experience of workers completing the reports and those who supervise them. There was one occasion when ADM escalated a concern that the requisite experience for writing adoption reports had not been met. This was resolved through escalation to Head of Service. They also set out specific factors an agency must consider when making a report assessing the suitability of a person to adopt a child and are used to help achieve clarity, consistency and transparency in the adoption service.

2.5 Quality of Reports

A Pilot Scheme was rolled out in September 2019, where the Permanence Team took over responsibility of completing Child Permanence Reports with a specific aim of involving birth family and improving the quality of reports. This was successful and is now a permanent service provision within the Permanence Team that covers all areas of the county. Monthly meetings are held with team managers of each fieldwork locality to ensure effective communication and tracking of cases.

“ The Child’s Permanence Report is an essential tool that explains to the child their life story to date, enables a plan of adoption to be ratified and presented to court and supports adopters in understanding the child’s early years. ”

Adoption plans were agreed for 24 children during this period. Since the Permanence Team have taken over the completion of the Child Permanence Reports there has been a reduction of those for whom further information was required before a decision could be made, and as such a reduction in delay in decision making. The Agency Decision Maker and Adoption Panel members feel that the quality of reports has improved, and the team often receives complimentary remarks about the quality from other agencies and adopters.

2.6 Children Waiting for Adoption

At the 31st March 2020 there were 53 children with a best interest decision of adoption although not all had Placement Orders granted by the court.

Family finding is being actively pursued with placements being sought via the Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies (known as the RAA), and an on-line private group where adopters can see profiles of children in need of adoptive homes known as Link Maker. At the point of an ADM decision being given to agree a care plan of adoption, children are profiled by members of the Permanence Team and are then, if appropriate, an anonymous profile is placed on Link Maker. The full profile is released at the point that a Placement Order is granted by the court. Leicestershire always seek to place with their own adopters initially - if this is not successful a search within the RAA is progressed, with a national search only being completed if no suitable adopters are identified after this point. Children who have been waiting for 8 weeks post the granting of an Adoption Order are brought to the attention of the Service Manager to provide more robust oversight and understanding of the delay to ensure plans are put in place to utilise all options available to achieve a successful adoption match. Leicestershire is clear that matches between children and adopters should be based on the adopters’ ability to meet the needs of the child and is a child centred and child led process. We have been successful in matching and have not needed to regularly participate in national exchange days or adoption activity days, having only 2 sets of siblings attend throughout 2019-20.

On 31st March 2020 we had 17 adopter applicants in stage one and a further 14 in stage two of the assessment process. At this point, the service had 55 Pack A requests and had a target of approving between 30 and 40 adoptive households. It should be recognised that not all Pack A requests result in a care plan of Adoption. Pack A requests are made at the commencement of Public Law Outline and are designed to start the Adoption process but with a realisation that for many children adoption is unlikely to become the final care plan.

No children were placed under Foster for Adoption protocols during this period. This continues to be tracked through attendance at CDM and is considered upon the referral being received. Adopters continue to receive

a session on Foster for Adoption through their training. Foster for Adoption is part of Leicestershire's early permanence planning and is designed to place children as early as possible with adoptive parents should a rehabilitation home be unlikely. It is most often used in cases of repeat pregnancies where older siblings have recently been part of Public Law Outline and have themselves been placed for adoption.

2.7 Adoption Disruptions

Adoption disruptions are when the placement ends prior to the Adoption Order being granted. Adoption social workers remain involved with the family through to the granting of the Order and the subsequent Celebration Hearing. In the case of adopters struggling with the emotional needs and as such, behaviour of their children the Adoption Team is available to provide intense support based on therapeutic techniques. All the permanence family finding social workers have been trained in level 1 Theraplay (Theraplay is a therapy for children and families for building and enhancing attachment, self-esteem, joyful engagement and trust in others) and also have access to a fully qualified play therapist who is based within the service.

There has been 1 adoption disruption during this period, this was of an older child who struggled to invest into a new family. The adopters had been approved by another adoption agency and had known the child prior to the matching process. Leicestershire has now strengthened its processes in relation to disruptions with an Independent Reviewing Officer being appointed as an independent chair to ensure fairness and transparency. Learning from disruptions is passed onto the relevant teams.





3. POST ADOPTION SUPPORT

3.1 Support Offer

Pre and post adoption support is provided in a number of ways within Leicestershire. The adoption social worker offers support up to three years post adoption order, especially in cases where adoption breakdown or disruption is a threat. This is set out in legislation (Adoption and Children Act 2002/Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005) as all placing authorities are required to provide support to a child they have placed for adoption for the first three years. We also have a dedicated support worker who makes first contact with the adopter at the point of 6 weeks post placement. This is the point when research suggests that post placement depression can become evident.

The support worker is Theraplay (level 1) trained, if necessary, she can remain involved to support managing behaviour and completing direct work with children. She contacts every adopter every 6 months post Adoption Order by telephone to ensure that the placement continues to progress and the support plan remains up to date and relevant. There is also a full-time post support social worker who works with families therapeutically using Theraplay and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) techniques that support attachment and positive parenting. The social worker completes an Assessment of Need for those families requiring more specialist therapy and will submit applications to the Adoption Support Fund for additional funding. DDP is a therapy and parenting approach that supports attachment building and overcoming developmental trauma through the use of Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy, known as the PACE approach.

The team also has an art therapist who works individually with adopted children. She also runs a weekly group for adopted children in order to promote their sense of identity and explore common themes. Quarterly newsletters are sent to all adopters which contain practical support, research articles and communication regarding the support available including invitations to two social gatherings.

“ There is so much useful info and facts in that newsletter. Very much appreciated. It really helps me. ”

“ Covering the section regarding Black life's matter is really important for our children in understanding and the importance to give children the confidence to speak out if there is an injustice. ”

Despite only being required by legislation to provide support for the first three years post granting of an Adoption Order, Leicestershire now offers lifelong support so after the three-year period, adopters can contact the team directly if they require specific adoption support. For those cases where there is a chance of a child being placed back into care or there are child protection concerns it remains that support is provided via First Response Children's Duty and fieldwork locality teams. The post support team will continue to work as part of a team around the family, offering support to the child and parents relating to the therapeutic needs of the adopted child.

Birth Parents are routinely offered support prior to the adoption of their children. This support is offered through a leaflet provided at the point of ADM ratifying a care plan of adoption. The Permanence Team has a protocol of any such request for support to birth parents who are facing the knowledge that the Local Authority is not supporting a return of their child to their care. being presented to Permanence Panel where an application for an independent person to undertake this service will be considered. The Permanence Team has also offered the First Family Group where parents of adopted children can meet up in Leicester City to gain support. This group is still in its infancy with only low numbers attending. This will be promoted throughout the next financial year and will take into consideration COVID19 safety requirements.

The Post Adoption Support Team liaises with the Virtual School and training is offered to schools particularly around attachment issues for adopted children and how to successfully manage these in the school setting. The training is highly valued by schools who report a change in staff behaviour and interaction with children which in turn impacts on the children's ability to engage in education.

The demand for Post Adoption Support continues to grow in all areas. Leicestershire has a Therapeutic Support Budget that can be accessed to support children emotionally prior to adoption. Each child can have an initial payment of up to £450 with a further £450 being available if required. The Service Manager for Children in Care has a role in monitoring applications and the progress of any therapy commissioned.

3.2 Adoption Support Fund

To 31st March 2020, Leicestershire has drawn down £499,478,28 from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is an increase in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£338,302,72) and represents support to 164 adoptive families. It should be noted that the art therapist post has been funded through this ASF funding at no cost to the Local Authority and Leicestershire has successfully trained workers therapeutically to ensure a better provision of services. Any money accumulated from the ASF also ensures that workers receive clinical supervision alongside regular supervision to ensure that their therapeutic practice is ethical and appropriate. Some of the most complex cases may be co-worked by the Locality Team with support from the Post Adoption Support Worker. In such cases an assessment will be conducted and an application may be made for appropriate therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund.

3.3 Birth Records Counselling

Birth Records Counselling is a service provided to adults who have been adopted and wish to access their records and understand their life story prior to being adopted. A social worker reads the records and provides a detailed account to the adoptee alongside therapeutic emotional support that enables the adult to process their journey. This service continues to be highly successful and adoptees regularly provide positive feedback.'

“ I wanted to share this photo of me and my half-sister, we have had an amazing reunion since my records were shared’ ”

“ I can say that just receiving the summary has meant so much to him, he is really grateful for your work. ”

Intermediary services where adopted children are supported to find and meet their birth parents are not carried out in house in Leicestershire. Some initial advice may be given but as with other Local Authorities we signpost adoptees who request this service to third sector agencies.



4. PERMANENCE TEAM

4.1 The role of the team is to undertake all family finding for children who need permanence via the adoption route. They also family find for adopters post approval and support adopters through the placing and supporting children through to the final order which is called an Adoption Order.

This work also includes family finding for long-term fostered children. A dedicated social worker has been appointed to this post and has received positive comments about her commitment and success.

'I wanted to pass on my thanks for all the work B has done on this case- above and beyond her responsibilities. . . B has chased people around which has been very much appreciated.'

Sounds like J and D have had really good transitions to their new carers and B has played a huge role in this so my huge thanks'

4.2 In addition to day-to-day operations, the team is very committed to ongoing developmental projects such as the introduction of Life Appreciation Days, processes for the permanence planning of children in long-term foster care and, further embedding of the Signs of Safety methodology in our practice. The team is becoming more involved in the completion of sibling together or apart assessments and a number of team members have undertaken Theraplay and DDP training to ensure that they can appropriately support adopters to understand the needs of our children and parent them therapeutically.

5. STATEMENT BY THE AGENCY DECISION MAKER, HELEN GRONHAUG

The independent position of the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) provides an over view of children's care planning and outcomes through consideration of adoption and fostering panel recommendations; children's adoption plans as well as foster carer reviews. This allows for the identification of practice and policy themes. This oversight of children's permanence planning is further enhanced through ADM's Permanence Panel membership. The direct report to the Assistant Director allows for improvement themes to readily feed into the Department's continuous improvement activity.

5.1 Children's Adoption plans

One of the primary objectives of the ADM role Action Plan is to strengthen quality assurance at the right place at the right time and by the right role. With more robust quality assurance by Permanence team managers and improvements in the quality of Child Permanence Reports, the reliance on ADM providing detailed quality assurance of has reduced. A feedback meeting is planned with Permanence Team Managers; Service Manager and ADM is to promote consistency amongst the teams, minimise unnecessary duplication and importantly further develop the writing style of 'writing to the child.'

This reporting period saw the roll out the CPRs being routinely being prepared by the Adoption Service. This leaves the locality social work teams completing assessment and care planning processes and the permanence social worker responsible for providing a coherent narrative of this work. With timetabling in narrow timeframes, the coordination of care planning and CPR submission to ADM is tight. Regular communication is needed between the teams to ensure all assessments are concluded before ADM considers the proposed adoption plan. The fact that the CPR forms the basis for a Placement Order application to court means it needs to be ready to evidence the rationale for an adoption plan shortly after ADM consideration. This can create challenges in meeting court timescales if ADM requests further clarification/ amendments.

While there have been some ambitious adoption plans presented, further work is needed to explore consistency across localities in consideration of adoption plans for children who might be considered harder to place, specifically older children or children with disabilities. Care planning of sibling groups continues to be a complex area for practitioners. It remains essential that issues of "Together or Apart" are considered at the outset of a child's journey. This should ensure that information gathering is purposeful from the start of care planning and provides a robust evidence base for decision making. With the development of adoption support service and skills within the Adoption Service, there is a developing understanding of the impact of placement decisions for siblings. While locality social work teams remain responsible for care planning decisions, permanence social workers are completing sibling assessments with knowledge of the longer term challenges facing adopted children and their adoptive families. This leaves potential for professional difference between teams as to whether siblings should remain together or whether children's needs (taking account of age and family relationships) are best served by separate adoption plans or permanence through fostering. The Permanence Team Managers are gaining a valuable overview of which children are being considered for a plan of adoption. The work of Permanence Panel in considering permanence plans of long term foster care for children will offer further insight. There are a small number of children who are presenting for an adoption plan as a standalone Placement Order application. There is potential for delay in progressing permanence for these children given they will already have been through a previous set of care proceedings. The oversight of IROs and the Permanence Team Managers needs to robustly address this. As this area of practice develops, it is important this is shared with key partners in the judiciary with implications for contact and placement proposals in court proceedings.

There continue to be occasions when ADM has been approached to review the decision of an adoption plan on the basis of further assessments agreed through court. This reflects the complex picture within court proceedings.

5.2 Adopter approvals.

During this year, assessment of prospective adopters have largely been commissioned externally. There have been challenges in terms of the consistency and quality of these assessments and many have been subject to repeated quality assurance. This has led to Panel deferring a number of recommendations . There have been more occasions when ADM has remained concerned about the robustness of the assessments even after Panel's scrutiny and has therefore required further work before making a determination. The outstanding work commonly related to applicants' understanding of adoptive parenting, child care experience, consideration to children already established within the family and questions around applicants' resilience and vulnerability of the applicants and their support network. There is scope to tighten up the timescales for the completion of such work whilst recognising these requests are often due to the presence of complicating factors. Other assessments which present complexities are where foster carers are being assessed for a child already placed with them.

ADM has identified there is a need for all to take responsibility at each and every stage of the assessment and planning process rather than defer down the line which potentially leads to an over reliance on ADM. The quarterly reflective meetings with Panel Advisor, Panel Chair, Vice Chairs, ADM and Service Manager offer an opportunity to understand any differences between Panel and ADM deliberations to drive practice development and appropriate scrutiny. ADM has advocated for pre panel and panel's quality assurance to be more robustly carried out.

The Adoption Medical Advisor provides a comprehensive service to Panel and ADM and has greatly assisted ADM in considering applications with complex health issues. There is a piece of work identified to ensure potential complexities are addressed as soon as possible within the assessment process. A feedback session which includes ADM and Panel Advisor was planned for 2020-1 period to the external agency completing assessments and to ensure issues identified within Stage 1 checks are adequately addressed by the external assessors during Stage 2 of the process.

5.3 Adoption Matches

While there have been occasions when further work has been required by ADM before approving a proposed match, improvements continue to be seen with support plans being more individualised to the child. Practice is informed by an acknowledgement of the impact of the children's health development and lived experience (acknowledging the impact of neglect and trauma) on short and long term needs and thus what capacity is implied for the adopters. This is further enhanced by the growing knowledge and skills within the post adoption service and this being put to good effect at an early stage. It remains an area for improvement to ensure all that is known about both the child and adopters' needs is reflected in a support plan. In particular, the needs of children who are already part of the adoptive family (by birth or through adoption) need to be consistently reflected in support plans. Where ADM has made requirements for additions to the Adoption Support Plan, these are passed to the child's Independent Reviewing Officer for their oversight and monitoring.

It has been recognised that Adoption Panel has not had access to a legal advisor for some time. However to date no regular service is available.

5.4 Disruptions

Learning from disruptions is vital to inform Panel and ADM practice and future decision making. While the process for learning has been established, it is important that this extends to Panel and ADM to ensure they are included in lessons learnt.

6. DEVELOPMENTS

6.1 Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies (RAA)

Leicestershire, Leicester City, Lincolnshire (also providing services to Rutland) and North Lincolnshire have agreed a partnership approach to the DfE's requirement that all agencies form a RAA. Over many months, there has been collaborative working and this has led to a Go-Live date being set for 14th October 2020. Leicestershire will be part of the newly formed RAA which will be known as Family Adoption Links. Family Adoption Links is currently headed by Bryan Glover in an interim capacity until March 2021. Monthly meetings are held with managers across each agency to ensure consistent development and practice.

6.2 Therapeutic Offer

The development of the Permanence Team continues to be positive - we have a dedicated life story worker who supports adopters with how to tell a child about their life experience. This has been received positively by adopters. We also have a dedicated art therapist and we have trained several workers to deliver DDP and Theraplay techniques to our families. Consideration will be given in the following 12 months to improving our SGO support offer and mirroring the life-long support that Adopters now receive. Leicestershire continues to work closely with Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and Leicester City as part of the Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies arrangements and will strengthen further after the go live date in October 2020, looking at specific areas like shared panels and a shared therapeutic offer.

6.3 Rutland Arrangements

As of March 2019, the Service Level Agreement ended with Rutland.





7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2020/2021

- 2020 will see the launch of the RAA and there will be a period of time that is needed to ensure that services are aligned with Leicester City, Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire. This is an exciting time where each authority can learn from the other and strive to provide an excellent and consistent service to adopters and children.
- Although Leicestershire continues to perform well against Department of Education score cards for the 3 year trend data. The decreasing timeliness identified for 1 year trend data 2019 requires an in-depth analysis to be completed to understand the increase in the time that children are waiting before being placed in their adoptive homes. This will be presented to SMT by the end of February 2021.
- The service will explore the possibility of mirroring our Post Adoption support offer to those family members and children subject to a Special Guardianship Order
- We will also focus on ensuring that adopters' journey is timely and efficient to ensure that we have the right adopters for our children. This work will be completed by March 2021
- Further consideration needs to be given to whether Leicestershire dually approves adopters as part of the Family Adoption Links arrangement to keep in line with our partners

Leicestershire Adoption Agency continues to strive to deliver excellent services to our children, we have demonstrated this by the improvement of the quality of our Child Permanence Reports, increased communication between ourselves and locality teams, working effectively with other agencies and being ambitious in our permanency planning. The Permanence Team have embedded the Signs of Safety approach and regularly use family network meetings and include words and pictures in Child Permanence Reports. We have a team of highly trained social workers and other professionals that deliver therapeutic support to children and adults to ensure stability and consistency and Leicestershire is committed to continued training of our workers to provide a high-quality service that supports stability for children.

Michelle Robinson
Service Manager – Permanency
November 2020.

ADOPTION PANEL

Chair's Annual Report of the Leicestershire County Council Adoption Panel

1st April 2019 - 31st of March 2020

1. Introduction

This report summarises the work of the panel over a 12-month period covering 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020. It should be read in conjunction with the statement of purpose produced by the agency.

2. Composition of the Panel

The Agency is required to maintain a Central list of persons who are suitable due to their variety of skills, background and knowledge, and who can be flexible in their availability. During this year there have been 0 new panel members appointed. In a continued bid to increase representation of experienced individuals, medical background and diversity in terms of gender and ethnicity, advertising has commenced to enable further recruitment of new Panel Members to satisfy these needs and increase the Central List.

There has also been a continued recruiting of more LCC Social Work Representatives, to spread the workload of panel attendance across more Social Workers. An updated Central List is below.

Name of Panel Member	Panel Role	Date Became a Panel Member
Mike Roughan	Independent Chair	24 June 2014
Mohamed Patel	Independent Vice-Chair	1 October 2011
Fiona Booth	Independent Member	17 August 2016
Jacinta Barnard	Independent Member	19 July 2017
Jayne Kelly	Independent Member	9 July 2015
Ashley Scott	Independent Member (Social Worker)	8 November 2015
Liz Blakeley	Independent Member	1 December 2014
Deanna Spencer	Independent Member	18 June 2014
Sue Oldman	Independent Member	28 May 2015
Katie Bancroft	LCC Social Worker Representative	26 March 2018
Shontall Bennett	LCC Social Worker Representative	26 March 2018
Dr Sian Davies	Medical Advisor	11 October 2011

3. Panel Functions

The core function of panel has remained the same, namely, to make recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) on the following:

- The suitability of Prospective Applicants to Adopt.
- The suitability of Approved Applicants to be matched with a Child/Children to reflect their Terms of Approval.
- To consider some 1st annual foster carer reviews, to relieve the workload of the Fostering Panel
- In addition, the Panel is available to provide advice and feedback to the agency of any cases that they wish panel to explore prior to any formal approval process.

Workload:

- The Adoption Panel met on 21 occasions with 2 panels being cancelled due to low workload hearing a total of 74 cases.
- New Prospective Adoptive Persons Recommendations to ADM 31.
- Deferred Prospective Adoptive Persons Recommendations 4.
- Non-Approvals of Prospective Adoptive Persons by panel 3.
- Matches Recommended to ADM 18.
- Deferred Matches Recommendations 2
- Recommendations to ADM deferred for further work 2.
- Deregistration's 0.
- Placement Disruptions 1.
- Relinquished Children Recommendation to ADM 2
- Relinquished Children Deferred- 1.

4. Business Support

The role of the Panel Administrator is to:

- produce an annual schedule of panels,
- ensure that panel members are invited to panel ensuring quoracy,
- maintain the panel booking system and to liaise with the Panel chair and panel adviser in constructing the panel agenda.
- receive and distribute reports to panel,
- general liaison with the Panel chair and panel adviser,
- produce a record of the panel discussion by way of minutes and ensure that those are amended and circulated to all relevant parties,
- liaise with the ADM in relation to the decision (decision letter).

There has continued to be consistency in the Panel Administrator role, which is much appreciated by all panel members.

Action: Administrators have attended minute-taker/administrator training- 2019

5. Quality Assurance – function and feedback

The panel provides feedback for each case presented to it, this is collated by the Panel Adviser, verbally as each case is heard. A new form has also been devised which panel members complete at the time of reading the reports.

6. Prospective Adoptive Carers Reports and Child Permanence Report (CPR)

Generally, panel comment favourably on the quality of the above reports. However, there have still been some occasions, primarily when new staff and external agency independent assessors have been used, where it has been felt that the reports lacked detailed analysis. Particularly as it relates to vulnerabilities of applicants and what support can be offered. We have strengthened the team manager quality assurance tool to support and guide social workers in reflective thinking and analysis. There is also regular liaison with the agency commissioned to continue to improve the quality of reports.

There has been a noticeable improvement to the quality of Prospective Adopter Reports, where a more rigid Quality Assurance Process has been employed. This is due to the noticeably good working relationship between the Panel Advisor and the Team Managers. In turn the latter have a good relationship with the panel and have been open to the feedback about their team's work. They and their staff have also used the panel to present cases where they have sought panel advice.

7. Agency Decision Maker Feedback

ADM has continued quarterly reflective discussions with Panel Advisor, Panel Chair, Vice Chair and Service Manager. These meetings offer an opportunity to understand any differences between Panel and ADM deliberations and drive practice development and appropriate scrutiny. The meetings provide a forum to explore factors which are fundamental to suitability to adopt or whether they relate to matching considerations. Panel's quality assurance function can therefore be more robustly carried out. It was agreed that minutes from previous panel should be included in the paperwork for the upcoming panel and used to inform members of the outcome of ADM and any possible learning. This has now been put in place.

8. Feedback from Attendees

All attendees are given feedback forms after attending panel. This feedback is then typed by the panel administrator and then shared with panel at each panel under any other business. Whilst it is noted that these forms are often completed, to date there has been no collation of these forms for detailed analysis of any learning.

Action: Panel adviser and Panel Administrator to collate the data received from these feedback forms in order to establish whether there are any patterns which would suggest the need for panel to change its practice.

During the Covid19 lockdown this has not been completed and sending feedback forms electronically will commence going forward.

9. Panel member development

Panel Appraisals, in terms of Timing and Due date, are managed by our Panel Advisor with assistance from Business Support. Where possible Appraisals are carried out, by Panel Chair and Panel Advisor, either before or after Panel, which minimises inconvenience to Panel Members and ensures that we keep up to date. Exceptions are arranged at mutually convenient timings. Panel Annual Training took place in November 2019. Members were updated with respect to the RAA progress and areas of learning identified by Panel Members and Panel Advisor, informed the day's learning Agenda.

10. Summary and Conclusions

The Agency and Panel have continued to operate in a context of considerable government change in relation to childcare services but have embraced this with a commitment to continuous improvement.

There are several issues that are being worked on and will further improve services to children, adopters and carers

- improve Quality Assurance of cases for presentation to Panel
- Renewed focus on the experience of attendees coming to panel ensuring that it is a positive experience.
- Minutes of previous panel to be included and presented at the following panel.
- Panel member reviews to be undertaken yearly and on-time.

During March 2020 the onset of Covid19 and the need to be innovative in continuing with Adoption Panels , have presented a number of challenges for all of us. The entire Team of Managers, Social Workers, Business Support , Panel Advisor and all Panel Members have worked very effectively to develop a Virtual Panel Process that has facilitated an uninterrupted Adoption Panel function to continue. This Virtual Process is regularly reviewed and improved and is well received by all concerned.

This Report has been produced by the Independent Chair of LCC Adoption Panel, with assistance from the Independent Vice Chair and Panel Advisor.

Mike Roughan MBE



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