

WEST YORKSHIRE ADOPTION JOINT COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 2ND AUGUST, 2022

PRESENT Councillor F Venner (Leeds) – Chair
Councillor C Thirkill (Bradford)
Councillor V Kendrick (Kirklees)
Councillor K Scott (Wakefield)

OFFICERS M Rawlings – One Adoption West Yorkshire
H Gray – Clerk

- 1 Appeals Against the refusal of inspection of documents**
There were no appeals against the refusal of inspection of documents.
- 2 Exempt Information - Possible exclusion of the press and public**
The agenda contained no exempt information.
- 3 Late Items**
No late items of business were added to the agenda.
- 4 Declarations of Interest**
No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.
- 5 Apologies for absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Councillor A Wilkinson (Calderdale) and Councillor M Isherwood (Wakefield). Councillor K Cooke (Wakefield) attended as a substitute.
- 6 Minutes of the Previous Meeting**
RESOLVED – The minutes of the meeting held 15th February 2022 were agreed as a correct record.
- 7 Election of Vice Chair**
RESOLVED – That Councillor Kendrick be appointed as Vice Chair of the Committee for 2022/23.
- 8 One Adoption West Yorkshire Annual Report 2021/22**
The Head of Agency submitted a report presenting the Annual Report of One Adoption West Yorkshire (OAWY) which provided an overview of adoption service activity and development from April 2021 to March 2022. The Annual report was presented as required by the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014, pursuant to the Care Standards Act 2000.

In presenting the annual report, the Head of Service outlined key issues and highlights from within One Adoption West Yorkshire for the April 2021 to March 2022 period, which included:

- Use of Resources
- Partnership Working
- Performance Management

- Practice, Quality of Provision and Management Oversight
- Continuous Professional and Service Development

Use of Resources (Staffing) - The Head of Service reported on the interim management arrangements in place and the ongoing work to secure permanent arrangements which would bring stability to the service. There had been some fluctuation in team morale, but it was important to note that sickness levels were lower than the rest of the Children and Families Directorate.

In relation to previous workplace challenges, the team had adopted a hybrid working approach, with workspace now secured in all 5 partner authorities, with the team linking well with partners.

Medical Examinations – These continue to be a challenge. There is pressure across the health system to undertake medicals for children and young people but for OAWY, the pressure is also in medical checks for adults/prospective adopters. It was reported that some GPs were unwilling to undertake medicals due to workload pressures or charged elevated fees which were a barrier to some prospective adopters progressing efficiently.

Child Placement - The Head of Service informed Members that during the last period a total of 171 children had been placed, with 73% of those placements being made within the OAWY area. 197 children had a plan for adoption ratified by the 5 local authorities, of them, 133 children were from white British backgrounds and 33 children were from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Recruitment - 112 adoptive households were approved during 2021/22. The training offer continues to develop and has returned to a face to face offer and some workshops /sessions re-introduced having been on hold due to Covid. Uptake of the workshops/sessions has been good, and Adoption UK has been commissioned to provide all new adopters with access to the Adopter Passport which in turn gives access to support resources.

The restructure of Stage 1 has been in place for 12 months and focusses on 'front door' enquiries. An audit of the approach showed improved responsiveness to individual need and good customer service.

Early Permanence Placements across the region were identified as a priority for 2022/23. Fewer households (19) were approved during 2021/22 as open to Early Permanence Placements, however this exceeds the number of children identified during the year to be placed via Early Permanence. OAWY has secured funding to develop Early Permanence in WY and have appointed a Project Lead to progress this.

Adoption Panels – 8 panels per month are held via Zoom. The use of remote meetings has provided an opportunity to attract a more diverse pool of Panel members from across the country, including some with care experience. An

additional Panel Chairs has been appointed, which has provided more capacity.

Family Finding – The Service has been able to host a mix of on-line and face to face sessions with the team working creatively to undertake family finding and achieve matches for children. The return to face to face work has reduced some of the challenges and pressures associated with the complexities of managing safe transitions during the pandemic.

Activities – OAWY has continued to make full use of the Adoption Support Fund to commission therapeutic work for families, children and young people. The Stay and Play groups have resumed across the region, the Bradford Tweens group continues, and work is ongoing to create similar provision within the other Local Authority areas. The adopter support groups – Adopter Chat, Single Adopters, Dads Group and Trans-racial/Ethnic/Cultural Adopter (TRECS) – are well established and continue to grow.

Disruptions – 8 disruptions were reported during 2021/22 which related to 6 placements. No disruptions were reported so far for 2022/23.

Training – A staff survey had been undertaken which had identified training and internal communications as areas of focus. As a result, more training to support staff had been offered and a Leadership Check In established to allow staff to communicate directly with the Head of Service.

Members of the Committee commented on the reported delays and costs associated with obtaining medicals which in turn slowed the both the adoption and fostering process. The Chair additionally reported a GPs perspective that adoption medicals were more time consuming than other medicals. In response, the Head of Service reported that undertaking medicals was seen as private work by GP's, so the fees were set locally. Additionally, the adoption medical required completion of a standard medical form, and some of the work could be undertaken by nursing staff rather than a GP. Retrieval of a prospective adopters' historical medical records would be part of the medical.

Members considered whether this issue should be raised at a local or Regional Health Partnership Board level and supported the Chairs suggestion to raise this with the Chair of the West Yorkshire Health Partnership Board (WYHPB) as an item for discussion at a future WYHPB meeting.

Responding to a query regarding the impact of a future pay award, the Head of Service confirmed that early discussions had been held with the Chief Financial Officers of each partner authority regarding support for OAWY.

In response to a query regarding whether less face to support during the Pandemic could have had an impact on the number of reports disruptions, the Head of Service explained that overall, the pandemic had an impact on across many services and individual family/friendship support networks. For OAWY, less face to face sessions were provided but introductions still continued. In

relation to the Adoption Panels, no difference in the quality of information provided/considered and decision making was reported. The Committee was assured that each case was reviewed and a face to face Panel was held where it was felt that approach was needed.

The Chair reported that Leeds had retained its “Outstanding” rating following a recent Ofsted Inspection of Leeds Children and Families Directorate and expressed her thanks to the OAWY team for the work they had undertaken which had supported the outcome.

Responding to a comment regarding Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) the Head of Service confirmed that the disparity of approach between previously Looked After Children and those not previously Looked After remained. Implementation of the regional financial support policy had stalled due to issues around the waiving of the means test for non-agency SGOs where the carer was in receipt of means tested benefits. Policy and legal advice indicate that the means test cannot be waived where children were not previously looked after, and Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit must be deducted unless the child was previously looked after. Local Authorities need to complete calculations to gauge the amount of child element in Universal Credit in these cases and further advice from Counsel is awaited before OAWY can meet with leaders in Leeds and Kirklees to reach a point of agreement on this issue. At that stage the Leeds policy is ready to be implemented and can be used as a template within the other 3 local authorities, Wakefield having chosen not to adopt the proposed regional approach.

In response to a query over whether the Adoption Support Fund was oversubscribed, the Head of Service explained that sometimes adopters request therapeutic support which may not be available or appropriate at that time and requires further consideration. OAWY supports approximately 800 families with more requests for support received each month than cases closed. The service restructure which should be in place by January 2023 will include the “Front Door” approach. First contact with the service will be with an experienced officer, who will deal with the request if possible rather than having to allocate all requests to a Social Worker. Alternative provision includes Support Group attendance, therapeutic playgroups and groups for older young people. Additionally, the OAWY website includes resources for adopters, there is an advice line and workshops.

It was agreed that information on the Adoption Support offer would be sent to all Committee Members.

The Chair reported on the support to Foster Carers given by the current Lord Mayor of Leeds during his career in Morley and the positive impact that this had – Morley had a high number of Foster Carers for an outer city ward. The role of Committee Members in promoting adoption was discussed. Noting that the Chair received regular invitations to attend Foster Groups, it was agreed that OAWY would give consideration on how Members could similarly engage with Adoption Groups.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions.

RESOLVED –

- a) To receive the annual report of One Adoption West Yorkshire (OAWY), detailed in appendix A of the submitted report, as required by the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014, pursuant to the Care Standards Act 2000.
- b) To note the progress and outcomes of the agency.
- c) To note the assurance provided by the Director of Children's Services that the agency was achieving good outcomes for children/service users.
- d) To support the progression of these arrangements.

9 Date and Time of Next Meeting

*Following the meeting, this was confirmed as Tuesday 7th February 2023 at 10.00 am.