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## Report of Director of Children and Families

### Report to West Yorkshire Adoption Joint Committee

**Date: 28<sup>nd</sup> July 2020**

**Subject: Head of Service Report**

Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	X No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, access to information procedure rule number:	X No

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### Summary of main issues

1. This report is a brief report and provides a summary from the Head of Service on the developments of the service since the annual report was completed in April 2020.

### Recommendations

1. The Joint Committee is requested to:
  - a) Note the progress of the agency; and
  - b) Support the progression of these arrangements.

1.	<b><u>Use of Resources</u></b>
1.1	<b>Staffing &amp; HR</b>
1.1.1	<p>Since the start of the pandemic the staff group have worked incredibly hard and have gone the extra mile in supporting children and families in the region. The wellbeing of staff has been a primary concern and we have put in place a number of support arrangements to ensure that they are well supported during this time. This has included regular check ins, buddying for those living alone, coffee catch ups within and across teams with managers accessing peer support and training to help think about developing resilience and promoting self-care.</p>
1.1.2	<p>There have been a number of vacancies across the service in the social work teams and business support. Within the social work staff these are due to three members of staff retiring, a member of staff moving back to the local authority for a promotion opportunity and other vacancies following the promotion of internal staff to advanced practitioner positions. In addition to these pressures we also have 7 members of staff on maternity leave, including two managers and this creates additional pressures within the service and achieving temporary backfill for the social work positions can be difficult.</p>
1.1.3	<p>We have been working closely with staff regarding the recovery regarding Covid 19 and held an all staff event in June looking at self-care, building resilience and developing relationships online. Staff spent time in small groups thinking about the recovery and we asked staff their views on the following questions: what have we stopped doing that we should bring back; what have we started that we could/should stop; what have we started that we should continue; what are we not doing now that we have never done before, but that we might need?</p>
1.1.4	<p>The overwhelming view of staff is that there are many aspects of working at home that are beneficial and they feel they are more efficient and get more done, spending less time travelling. Some meetings are much better done virtually and the availability of other professionals has improved enabling decisions to be made more quickly, particularly about progressing matches. Some staff are very anxious about undertaking home visits and office working, whereas others feel more confident and feel able to manage well with social distancing arrangements. These discussions will continue.</p>
1.1.5	<p><b>Accommodation</b></p> <p>Staff within the agency continue to work from home with one member of staff in each area collecting the post and some managers going in for the induction of new staff. The service managers linked to each LA are linked in with the key operational lead for adoption in each LA to determine the local arrangements and health and safety assessments are still being undertaken in some LA's. We are not expecting staff to</p>

<p>1.2</p> <p>1.3</p>	<p>return to the office in the near future, unless for business essential reasons.</p> <p><b>Budget</b></p> <p>Based on our latest intelligence we are forecasting a balanced financial position for OAWY. There are some pressures identified for Inter Agency both shortfall of income (£220k) against the target and on the expenditure side (£187k) where we are seeing higher placements than at this time last year. However, they are currently savings that will mitigate these pressures on Staffing and other running costs.</p> <p>There have been ongoing discussions about changing the funding formula with a view to implement an activity based funding formula in April 2021. A verbal update can be provided regarding this at the meeting.</p>
<p>2</p> <p>2.1</p> <p>2.2</p> <p>2.2.1</p> <p>2.2.2</p> <p>2.3</p>	<p><b><u>Partnership working</u></b></p> <p><b>Centre of Excellence</b></p> <p>Discussions continue to take place with Leeds Community Health trust to progress the recruitment to the health positions. This was delayed due to Covid 19 as the trust were unable to take forward any other work. This has recently started again and at this point the indicated costs are higher than anticipated and negotiations and discussions are ongoing regarding this with the provider and health commissioners across the region to come to a resolution regarding the staffing required to achieve the intended outcomes of the project.</p> <p><b>Financial Support in adoption</b></p> <p>The management board have agreed proposals to move towards a regional approach regarding the financial support in adoption. These proposals are in the process of being considered through the local governance arrangements to seek agreement to the proposals.</p> <p><b>Special Guardianship regional work</b></p> <p><b><i>Financial support</i></b></p> <p>Similar discussions regarding a regional approach to supporting special guardians have also taken place and each local authority (LA) is now considering how these proposals are progressed through the governance processes of each LA.</p> <p>A task and finish group regarding the financial assessment tool met in June and all the finance leads involved within carer payment teams were involved in the discussions and feel very positive about the work. This is currently being tested and the stakeholder group is due to meet at the</p>

<p>2.3.1</p> <p>2.3.3</p>	<p>end of July to assess the impact if we implement the tool and once assessed agree an implementation plan.</p> <p>One of the managers from OAWY, Rhian Beynon, has been appointed to lead from within OAWY on special guardianship and co-ordinate the regional work and contract with Grandparents Plus. Rhian co-ordinated the recent funds from the ASF Covid 19 fund for SGO with a really positive take up from the LA's.</p> <p>The Grandparents Plus project is progressing well with further support provided from the ASF Covid 19 funds. The latest quarterly report is attached at <b>Appendix 1</b>.</p>
<p>3.</p> <p>3.1</p>	<p><b>Performance Management</b></p> <p>The annual report with the performance of the last year is discussed in a separate report. The first quarter report is not due to be reported until August.</p>
<p>4.</p> <p>4.1</p> <p>4.1.1</p> <p>4.12</p>	<p><b><u>Practice, quality of provision and management oversight</u></b></p> <p><b>Black Lives Matter</b></p> <p>The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement presents us with some very serious questions regarding our regional adoption service but it is also an opportunity that we can take to address the issues raised. We cannot change the past but we can all challenge how we think about things in the future and it is important that we view family values through the lens of different people and create more discussion, challenge existing stereotypes and bust myths. We are taking these discussions forward with our staff, our service users and partners who are working with us to set a reviewed vision of inclusion, diversity and equality for the future that we are all working towards. These discussions will feed into our equality impact assessment and will work towards a clear action plan about the areas we need to focus on for our new 3 year plan.</p> <p><b>Recruitment and Assessment</b></p> <p>The recruitment and assessment teams are currently under a great deal of pressure due to the number of people entering the assessment process since the start of the year; at the end of May there were 90 households in stage one of the process, compared with 64 at the end of May 2019. With a reduced adoption advisor capacity due to staff leaving and sickness this has proved challenging. We currently have three full time vacancies within the recruitment service, which is impacting on allocation capacity. Alongside this a number of sessional workers are not currently in a position to carry out assessments, which means we now have a large number of families waiting to be allocated a social worker for an assessment. There is a backlog of people due to the</p>

postponement of preparation training due to the pandemic and we are now catching up with the cohorts from March, April and May as this training is now being carried out using Zoom. We have an action plan in place to address the bulge that is likely to occur in the autumn and recruiting to positions and sessional posts is underway.

The flexibility within the amended regulations enables us to move adopters from stage 1 of the process to stage 2 of the process without a medical assessment and this is helpful, given the difficulties experienced regarding adult medical assessments given the pandemic.

4.2

### **Adoption panel**

Virtual panels are now well established, and while there continue to be some bumps along the way, we are now involving adopters in the panel meetings. We have increased the number of adoption panels to 9 panels a month and have increased the number of items considered at each panel to 4 items in order to increase capacity and reduce delay for adopters. We are also utilising the amended regulations to allow some cases to be considered directly by the agency decision maker, rather than going to panel and this is discussed in more detail below.

4.3

### **Flexibility in the regulations due to Covid 19**

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 allow agencies to consider whether to refer cases to the adoption panel, or proceed to make a decision under regulation 19 without such a referral. Given the issues with adoption panels being held virtually and to ensure the continuation of approvals of adopters, the management board have agreed that Agency Decisions could be made outside of the adoption panel process in the following circumstances, only where panel capacity would cause delay for the child or in approving the adopter where children are identified to be matched with them.

- Approval of experienced adopters
- Approval and Match of foster carer adopters
- Approval and Match of sibling adopters
- Approval of adopters who can consider early permanence placements and a child has been identified as a match.

4.4

It is important to ensure that whilst this is agreed we continue to ensure planning for children and adopters is appropriately scrutinised. Each local authority have agreed the who the nominated officer is responsible to agree the use of the flexibility and in all LA's this held at the Head of service position or above across the 5 LA's. OAWY are keeping a log of when the flexibilities have been used around this process.

4.5

### **Advertising and marketing**

4.5.1

Proposals for a new website design have now been agreed and these are now with the web developers with a view to implement a new site by the end of September. The evaluation of the 19/20 marketing strategy is attached and the plan for 20/21 attached at **Appendix 2**.

### **Family Finding**

4.5.2

#### **Matching and Introductions**

The impact of Covid 19 within the court arena has meant that some final hearings of care proceedings have been deferred to a later date. This has meant that children's plans for moving to their permanent family are delayed. However, family finding has been progressing and some children have moved to their adoptive family. We continue to monitor the impact of the delays in the court arena.

4.5.3

#### ***Virtual Profiling Event***

Our first virtual profiling event took place on 2nd June, via Skype. We profiled six children, two of whom are part of a sibling group. 11 adopters attended the event, with a large number being supported by their adoption social workers who were able to attend the event. Three children received expressions of interest following the event and two of these of being further explored.

4.5.4

We received some great feedback from the adopters who joined us for the event:

*"Family finders seemed really engaged with the needs of the children they were presenting – it was lovely to see that they had built such relationships with the children and their foster carers"*

*"Family finders really help bring each child to life"*

*"very supported by the people running the event and my social worker"*

*"it calmed of fears of the process, how well the children (and their new families) are supported through transitions"*

4.5.5

We received positive feedback and we will be holding the next virtual profiling event on 6th August and will be profiling a higher number of children and opening up the event to more adopters including to our Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) partners who we are contracting under the Inter-agency Adoption Placements Service.

#### ***Inter-agency Adoption Placements Service***

4.5.6

A contract was awarded at the end of May to a consortium of local voluntary adoption agencies provide a minimum of 30 placements per year and have 6 placements identified to date and we are working with the Alliance to formulate a referral pathway. The aim of this is to ensure

that children can be linked with more local families, where we are not able to find a family from within our own resources.

4.6

### ***Adoption Support***

The lockdown has forced us to work with families, children and young people in a different way. We have had to suspend our support groups, workshops and parenting programmes as these all involved meeting face to face in fairly close proximity. Assessments, direct work has moved to being undertaken on a virtual platform where appropriate. We have found that it is possible to undertake an assessment with families and young people via virtual means – although it has been harder with those families where we didn't have a pre-existing relationship with them.

4.6.1

We have undertaken a small number of visits to families – subject to a risk assessment and ensuring social distance measures are observed – mostly when there is risk of edge of care/breakdown or safeguarding concerns.

4.6.2

Applications to the Adoption Support Fund have continued to be made and we continue to work with therapy providers to identify the most appropriate way for therapy to be delivered to children, young people and families at this time. Most therapy sessions are being provided either over virtual platforms or if that isn't appropriate sessions have been paused for the time being.

4.6.3

The Adoption Support Fund Covid-19 scheme provided by the government has meant that we have been able to put together packages of immediately available support for families. We have drawn down £300k to support adoptive families and special guardians within the region. Examples of support provided is across 3 tiers:

Tier 1 – annual memberships of Adoption UK and Grandparents Plus

Tier 2 - Peer support for families

Additional peer support for adopters and special guardians

Child to parent violence seminars focussing on de-escalation, presence and Support.

Tier 3 Support

Packages of individual support for families.

The take up has been very positive from special guardians and adoptive parents.