



## **Half yearly Adoption Agency report**

**Date: 11th November 2020**

### **1. Purpose of this report**

1.1 This report sets out the work and developments within One Adoption West Yorkshire between April 2020 and September 2020.

### **2. Main issues**

#### **Use of Resources**

#### **2.1 Staffing & HR**

2.2 During the last 6 months the staff group have continued to work incredibly hard despite a great deal of pressure across the whole service given the pandemic. There have been a number of vacancies and recruitment to vacant posts has been underway with interviews planned and dates for new starters agreed. There are also 6 members of staff on maternity leave and a small number of staff on long term sick leave with serious health problems.

2.3 Morale within the teams fluctuates and the managers have been working hard to support staff. Children returning to school in September was a relief for many staff but many children have also been sent home for self-isolation due to concern about Covid 19 which created a further pressure for staff. The managers are feeling under pressure with staffing issues and demand high across the services with many of them acting down to carry out casework in order to progress matches.

#### **2.4 Accommodation**

2.5 Staff are continuing working 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 managers have been meeting up with staff for 1-2-1's and teams were starting to meet up and look at rota's for resuming work in the offices across the region, until the recent announcement from the Prime Minister.

2.6 However, an added difficulty for staff is that there is currently no accommodation for staff in Kirklees or Calderdale areas due to refurbishment and asset managers in

the LA are trying to identify interim accommodation, pending a more permanent relocation. The completion of the letterbox work and access to files work has been challenging without an office base in these areas leading to a full service not being able to be provided. The letterbox post has been re-directed from Huddersfield office to Leeds creating some delays and staff needing to travel to Leeds to process this work.

## **2.7 Budget**

2.10 At the end of Period 6 there are pressures of £100k on the budget due to a reduction in the income from the adoption support fund given the pandemic for staffing costs. In addition, the pay award was higher than budgeted for adding to the pressure and income from interagency placements has not been realised. An action plan is in place in order to address the pressure, whilst also ensuring a safe and responsive service and the forecast is to achieve a balanced budget.

## **2.11 Duty System**

2.12 Since the start of this year, the duty and advice service has been run remotely and as such we have been able to provide the same level of duty service as we were pre-COVID/ lockdown. The duty managers have operated a collective check-in call at the start of each day with the duty workers, in order to prioritise work for the day and agree how breaks will be managed across the duty team. This has worked well and made up for the fact workers aren't based with each other in an office environment. Some workers have shared that they prefer being able to sit with colleagues when on duty – however others feel a better service has been offered, without the distractions of the office environment.

2.13 At the beginning of August, we implemented a choice system when a member of the public calls the duty and advice line. They can choose option 1 if they are interested in becoming an adopter; option 2 if they have a letterbox or contact query; and option 3 for any other type of call. This has reduced the number of calls to option 3 (which is essentially the 'old' main duty and advice line) and means that callers are able to immediately speak with someone who can better respond to the nature of their call. It also means that we can better understand the amount and type of calls into the service – this will be reported on more fully at year end.

2.14 The total number of calls to the duty and advice line for the first half of the year is 2053. This averages at 79 calls per week. During lockdown when schools were mostly closed we experienced a lower number of calls to the line, but this has since picked up again. There has been a significant increase in callers interested in becoming adopters.

## **2.15 Partnership working**

2.16 *Operational leads group*

2.17 Over the last 6 months this group has met twice looking at interface issues and particularly focussing on the impact of coronavirus upon children's care planning and moving onto adoption. Discussions have also taken place around aligning adoption payments and joint audit work has also been discussed and agreed.

#### 2.18 *Centre of Excellence Project*

2.19 Discussions have progressed with Leeds Community Health trust following a delay due to the pandemic and the final model has been agreed with LCHT for the health posts to work with the existing staff in the multi-disciplinary team (MDT) in the table below.

Due to increasing cost the model is reduced overall by the assistant psychologist position which will reduce the ability of the team to evaluate fully the impact of the model. We are looking at other funding streams to evaluate the model but this is not guaranteed and will be a limiting factor in fully evaluating the outcome of the project.

Clinical Psychologist / Psychology Lead ( 0.6FTE)
Psychologist (1FTE)
Occupational Therapist – (2 x 0.6 FTE)
Speech and Language Therapist (0.6)

2.20 Due to the slippage of the start of the contract with LCHT and the delayed implementation of the model there is funding gap between April 23- December 23 and this has been flagged and raised with the Clinical Commissioning Groups and the local authorities.

2.21 A update report is provided at Appendix 1 regarding the progress of the work of the MDT.

#### 2.22 *Meetings with medical advisors*

2.23 The agency continues to meet with Medical Advisors across the region where there is a need to discuss practice issues. A medical advisor protocol has been agreed and there has been a series of peer support and auditing across the region to look at the quality of reports and this is helpful to improve the information provided for adoptive families. There have been challenges as a result of the impact of Covid-19 and the medical advisors have worked hard to ensure that they provide medical information for children in a timely way in order for their adoption plans to progress. Medical advisors have also continued to support adoption panels and have met the demand of the increased frequency in recent months.

#### 2.24 *Virtual school heads*

2.25 The work across the region from our education worker alongside the five virtual school heads (VSH) continues to grow. The helpline is well used and accessed by

adoptive parents, schools and other professionals offering advice and support as needed and developing the services understanding of how best to support our families and to develop online training and tools as needed. We continue to work to increase the awareness of attachment and trauma in West Yorkshire schools by delivered training to school staff and by providing workshops to adopters in partnership with the service delivery teams. Calderdale Virtual School has fully embraced the Secure Base Model and it is now embedded within their Personal Education Plans. Grandparents plus continue to attend allowing further opportunities to share information and knowledge across the region regarding support for special guardians. The meetings have recently focussed on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and shared information which can be distributed across the five local authorities in order to support schools in their understanding of its implications for learners.

#### *2.26 Special Guardianship (SG)*

2.27 The SG Support Plan is being tested by the kinship teams in the 5 LAs with a review planned for 12.11.20. Engagement with managers of the children's teams is ongoing to ensure use of the plan is understood by all the services that may engage with prospective special guardians.

2.28 The Grandparents Plus project is progressing well with further support provided from the ASF Covid-19 funds. Grandparents Plus are being encouraged to resource a moderated regional Facebook group that allows us to connect with a large number of special guardians in the region and hear their views. This group currently has 120 members. OAWY is also exploring with PAC UK/ Family Action an advocacy group for young people on SGOs to develop the voice and influence of young people in these arrangements across the region.

2.29 Training in Non-Violent Resistance for the kinship teams across the 5 LA's has been commissioned. 23 support workers and managers will receive four days training in January with ongoing workshops to support embedding the learning.

2.30 Ways to increase the use of the Adoption Support Fund, to provide much needed therapeutic support to special guardian families, are being looked into. A therapeutic parenting programme designed for special guardians has been commissioned and a group application to the fund on behalf of the region will be made. This work is currently being funded from income received for the national recruitment work up to the end of March 2021 and a discussion has been undertaken with the management board who wish to continue progressing this work moving forward.

### **3.0 Performance Management**

3.1 This is addressed in more detail in Appendix 2 and 3.

### **3.2 Practice, quality of provision and management oversight**

3.3 *Recruitment and Assessment*

- 3.4 The recruitment and assessment teams are under a great deal of pressure due to the number of people entering the assessment process. We are seeing increases in numbers at all stages of the process, which is positive, but also raises concerns regarding capacity. Despite the ongoing challenges relating to staff sickness and vacancies, 56 households have already been approved during 2020/21 and a further 35 approvals are booked into adoption panel before Christmas.
- 3.5 The online preparation training is now complemented with additional online training relating to Building Relationships (4th day), Early Permanence and Adopting Siblings. Additional training for Experienced Parents will be in place by November and following this training for Foster Carers Adopting and Adopter's Support Networks will be developed.
- 3.6 Having reviewed the prospective adopters in the assessment process and the demographic of the children with an adoption plan across the region and the capacity within the current staff cohort, we have just made the decision to temporarily decline enquiries from households seeking to adopt a child under two years; unless they are able to meet the needs of a child with a disability or a child with Black African/Caribbean heritage. This decision will be reviewed in January 2021 when it is hoped some of the assessments will have been progressed and there will be more capacity to bring more adopters into the process for very young children.
- 3.7 *Adoption Panel*
- 3.8 Adoption panel capacity has been a challenge and we continue to regularly review this. Having made use of the amended regulations to allow for decisions outside of panel, this is no longer available, which has further increased pressure on panel capacity. We have moved from 7 to 8 panels per month to increase capacity and are trialling holding additional approval specific panels in November and December to see if this impacts positively on capacity.
- 3.9 Feedback from social workers attending panel has been positive with one stating that they had "*Good communication about virtual panel arrangements*" "*the panel chair was friendly and clear*".

The panels have a quality assurance function and provide feedback regarding the quality of approvals considered. During Q1 and Q2 of 2020/21 96% of these were considered good or outstanding which is a positive picture.

With regards to matching reports presented at panel 76.19% were considered good or excellent and 23.81 % required improvement. Individual feedback is provided to each LA regarding reports relating to children from their LA. The themes regarding improving these relate to missing information, typo's and language needing to be more clear and less negative.

### 3.10 *Advertising and Marketing*

3.11 Progress is being made on the redesign of the website, with final agreement on the draft designs expected to be made shortly with a view to the website being live by the end of October. The website will incorporate photographs which have been commissioned by One Adoption to help our website and marketing materials stand out from other agencies and have more of a local feel.

3.12 One Adoption West Yorkshire received funding in April 2020 of £1million from the Department of Education, held on behalf of Regional Adoption Agency leaders, to be used for national recruitment work. One adoption is actively supporting the national adopter recruitment campaign #YouCanAdopt that has been developed by the national recruitment steering group, with focussed messaging to meet our specific needs around recruiting black adopters.

### 3.13 *Family Finding*

3.14 With 98 children being placed in the first half of the year the staff have worked creatively to undertake family finding and achieve the matches for children.

3.15 Transitions remain challenging with individual risk assessments being carried out to do these safely. The staff have been very creative in trying to progress these and very often the anxiety about these are about foster carers circumstances. As the winter approaches there will be less options for using gardens and outdoor spaces and we are engaging with fostering service managers across the regions to ensure that foster carers and adopters are supported and that the creativity can be harnessed in thinking through individual situations. The University of East Anglia Moving to Adoption model has been utilised where possible to support transitions and has particularly supported the getting to know you phased of introductions.

3.16 Profiling events have been delivered virtually with two events being held in Q1 and Q2 of 2020/21, the initial event engaged adopters roved by OAWY and the second also included adopters from the Voluntary Adoption Alliance.

3.17 *The first event saw seven children being profiled (two children part of a sibling group), four children received expressions of interest and two links were positively explored, one child has subsequently been matched with adopters. 12 children (six children part of a sibling group) were profiled at the second event, with 10 children (six children part of a sibling group) received expressions of interest from adopters. Two links (including a sibling group) are progressing to panel. One comment from an adopter stated:*

- *“The information provided was informative and interesting and was lovely to hear each SW give a personal account of the children, it gave much more insight than a standard profile”*

- 3.18 OAWY has commissioned the Voluntary Adoption Alliance within the region to provide placements, this contract commenced at the end of May with 25 placements being provided in the first year, at the end of September, 19 placements have been utilised in the first half of the year. A project lead has been appointed by the Voluntary Adoption Alliance and working together arrangements have been established to enhance the knowledge of the needs of children requiring external placements through the contract.
- 3.19 *Adoption Support*
- 3.20 The teams adapted very quickly to the pandemic and their first concern was the well being of families they support and ensured that families were aware quickly about support available. The teams have continued to work with families via virtual means and also undertake risk-assessed home visits where it is considered to be necessary from a well-being point of view, in addition to those where there is a risk of breakdown or potential safeguarding concerns. As part of the virtual contact with families we have been able to continue to complete Adoption Support Assessments as well as keeping in touch calls. As we anticipated we have seen an increased number of calls to the duty and advice line since the schools re-opened in September. Comments from adopters about the way the teams have adapted has been positive:
- *The fact that this support was offered so quickly was fantastic;*
  - *It felt very reassuring to know we weren't on our own & if we needed additional support, we knew we could ask & we knew who to ask.*
- 3.21 The Adoption Support Fund COVID packages have proved popular with families, in particular workshops in relation to Child to Parent Violence, support to adopted teens, Adoption UK webinars and support groups and the offer of EMDR sessions to parents. We still have a number of free memberships to Adoption UK and National Association of Therapeutic Parenting available as well as some sessions with Relate and now the deadline for use of these specific-funded packages has been extended to the end of December we are hopeful they will all be utilised. It is anticipated that through these additional packages we will have been able to provide support to over 2,500 families.
- 3.22 Applications to the Adoption Support Fund have continued to be made by workers. Some of the therapy provided to children, young people and families has been able to be delivered by providers via virtual means and where this hasn't been an appropriate method, therapy has paused by agreement and the therapist has had a minimum contact to keep in touch and maintain relationships. Some providers have been able latterly to explore with families safe means for therapy to be delivered face to face again.
- 3.23 The Foundations for Attachment programme has been adapted as a virtual model and had been planned to be delivered this Autumn – the bonus of offering an online version means that locations is no longer a barrier to access – however early indications are that families aren't wanting to take up online training programmes at present; alternative means of delivery are being considered. Online versions of

NVR and the AdOpt programme are also being planned at present. A small scale resumption of Stay and Play support groups, focussing on the newly formed families (those matched since March) has commenced via meeting up in small groups outdoors. The single adopters group has resumed, with a mixture of outdoors meet-ups and online support. A virtual support group is being considered for trialling in November and then to be rolled out across the region if successful.

3.24 Access to records work virtually ceased at the start of the lockdown and the archivist has been working with the information governance teams across the areas to review this and make arrangements with offices being closed and practical arrangements are now in place. A revised protocol has been agreed and shared with the local authorities.

3.25 The Letterbox service has been impacted and there is a delay in processing this work due to COVID-19 with issues in accessing the post, accommodation availability and staffing issues. Much of this has been moved to electronic exchanges where possible. There are 75 exchanges waiting to be progressed and the staff are working through these as quickly as possible.

### 3.26 *Audits*

3.27 29 audits were completed across the service during Q1 and Q2 by Service & Team Managers. The result of each audit is recorded as either excellent, good, satisfactory or requires improvement. Any actions identified from the audit are feedback to the worker to support improvement. Of the audits:

- 16 (55.17%) were good;
- 11 (37.93%) were satisfactory;
- 2 (6.9%) required improvement.

3.28 An independent auditor has been appointed to undertake specific audit work across the recruitment and assessment teams to ensure that the quality of the casework, decision making and management oversight is safe and appropriate. The work carried out to date has provided some reassurance about this and this work is ongoing. A report will be provided to management board in due course.

## **4.0 Continuous Professional Development and Service Development**

### 4.1 *Feedback*

4.4 Annual adopter survey - in the last quarter the annual adopter survey has returned. In summary:

- 59.77% of respondents are satisfied with the services that have been provided by One Adoption West Yorkshire, this is up 9.77% from 2019. 26.44% are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 13.8% are dissatisfied.
- 63% of respondents were satisfied with the content of the adopter's newsletter, 36.36% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 1.14% dissatisfied.



- 50% of respondents were satisfied with the support provided by OAWY during COVID-19, 34.78% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 15.22% dissatisfied.

Comments from adopters state:

- *You do what you say you are going to do and you're good at keeping in touch*
- *Social Workers appear to relate to our problems and are approachable and supportive*
- *If there are more support workers support could be offered quicker and timely to help children and stressed parents*

4.5 Annual staff survey – in summary the results of 8 of the 12 questions we ask staff each year have improved. The questions with the most significant levels of improvement are:

- I feel supported by my manager, up 13.34% to 94.37%;
- I feel I have access to high quality training and development, up 11.97% to 61.12%;
- I enjoy working for One Adoption West Yorkshire, up 11.78% to 85.92%;
- I am proud to be part of One Adoption West Yorkshire, up 11.54% to 86.11%.

4.6 The results of 4 of the 12 questions we ask staff each year show a less favourable result. However, only 1 question's result had a significant drop:

- I feel I can put children at the heart of what I do, down 6.32% to 83.33%

4.7 When asked 'what do we do well?' the top theme from responses was – Supportive environment; caring, friendly, flexible.

4.8 When asked 'what could we improve on?' the top theme from responses was – more specific training.

4.9 The report card regarding the voice and influence of adopters and children is attached at Appendix 4.

#### 4.10 *Staff Skills Development*

4.11 Staff development during the first 6 months of the year has been challenging. The focus with staff has been on self care and emotional well being for themselves and the families they are working with. A staff event was held in June and featured guest speaker Lisa Cherry. The focus of the day was relationships, trauma and adversarial growth. The next event is scheduled for November and the focus will be Black Lives Matter agenda and hearing from those with lived experience and how we can improve our practice as well as support staff regarding these issues.