



Report of Director of Children and Families

Report to West Yorkshire Adoption Joint Committee

Date: 26th January 2021

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: Appendix number: 1	X Yes

Summary of main issues

1. This report provides a summary from the Head of Service on the developments in the service since October 2020.

Recommendations

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

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1 This report sets out the developments within One Adoption West Yorkshire since October 2020.

2. Background information

- 2.1 Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees and Wakefield adoption functions as specified in the partnership agreement were delegated on the 1st April 2017 to Leeds City Council. One Adoption West Yorkshire formally opened on this date.

3. Main issues

1. Use of Resources

1.1 Staffing & HR

- 1.1.1 Staff have continued to work hard during the pandemic and during December it was clear that staff were tired and morale across the teams was low, no doubt a similar picture in children services more generally. Staff were hopeful at that time of the ability to move back in the New year to being able to meeting in offices and teams and the fact that there has been issues with accommodation in a large part of the region has contributed to their frustrations.
- 1.1.2 Moving into the New Year there are more staff off sick with Covid across the region as well as extended family bereavements as a result of the pandemic. Staff are understandably anxious about the new variant and the second lockdown has brought about more pressures for staff, with the majority of the staff having children at home due to schools being overwhelmed and unable to take all the children of key workers.
- 1.1.3 There has been a number of new staff recruited in the last couple of months which has been positive, particularly for business support and the recruitment teams. Two social workers are expected in the New year within the family finding teams across Calderdale and Kirklees which will help ease some of the pressures in these areas.

2. **Partnership working**

2.1 **Multi- disciplinary team**

2.1.1 The Early Years practitioner is now in post and appointments have been offered to candidates for the speech and language and occupational therapist positions. The interviews for the psychologist are planned. A partnership board has been set up with representatives from the local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, OAWY, the service provider Leeds Community Health Trust and adopter representation. It is due to meet in early February and will oversee and provide strategic oversight and direction for the team.

2.2 **Financial Support in adoption**

2.2.1 The work developing a regional approach to financial support in adoption has been completed and agreed to be progressed by the management board. Calderdale and Leeds have agreed the proposals regarding the implementation of the proposed changes and work is ongoing with the other 3 local authorities to seek agreement to the proposals.

2.3.1 **Special Guardianship regional work**

Financial support

The work regarding developing a regional approach to support for Special Guardians is being progressed. The approach is based on a welfare principle to deliver better outcomes for children through leaving care in special guardianship arrangements. Calderdale have agreed the proposed arrangements and Leeds have sought legal advice and are progressing with consultation and taking through their governance arrangements. Bradford and Wakefield have taken some legal advice and whilst agreeing with the principals of the proposals there are a number of issues needing to be addressed before taking these through

their local governance arrangements. Kirklees have this booked onto cabinet for discussion.

- 2.3.1.2 The work regarding a new financial assessment tool is completed and ready to use. It has been tested by all LAs (Wakefield is testing next week). Feedback from 4 of the LA's is very positive in that it is more straightforward to use and takes into account more recent changes in welfare benefits. Further testing will be carried out in the next couple of months to consider transferring the existing arrangements to the new approach in light of costs, process and timescale.
- 2.3.1.4 A meeting is taking place with Department of Education next week and the Department of Works and Pensions to look at the benefits issue and the financial assessment and in particular the Child Element of Universal Credit to see if this can be clarified for this to be taken into consideration in the financial assessment.
- 2.3.1.5 One key issue has been capacity to undertake welfare benefit checks on behalf of carers which is critical. Some local authorities have staff who can do this in Kirklees and Leeds, others do not. Grandparents Plus who currently offer a welfare benefits check and budgeting advice as part of their Response service and we are exploring whether they can do this within existing resources as part of the contract and is awaiting a proposal. There are GDPR issues to check around sharing advice with the local authority.
- 2.3.1.6 Local decisions will also be needed on annual reviews, post 18 arrangements, existing SGO arrangements (retrospective challenges), framework for off policy decisions and legal advice. Given the individual needs and stages of the different LAs consideration implementation will need to be carried out in a phased way. The aim of implementation across the region by 1st April 2021 will have to be put back as this is no longer achievable with a target date of October 2021.

2.3.2. ***Other work regarding Special Guardianship***

The SG Support Plan is in the process of being rolled out across the region and feedback is positive.

The Grandparents Plus project is progressing well and we reached our target of 120 families reached using the additional support provided from the ASF Covid 19 funds. The regional Facebook group is growing daily (currently 163 members) which allows us to connect with special guardians in the region and hear their views. We are also exploring an advocacy group for young people with possible involvement from a local youth worker.

Commissioned services

2.3.3 OAWY has commissioned training in Non-Violent Resistance for the kinship teams across the 5 LAs. Support workers and managers across the region will receive four days virtual training in January with ongoing workshops to support embedding the learning. Two of the workers from Grandparents plus will also attend, adding to the support they are able to give to Special Guardians in the region.

2.3.3.1 OAWY has commissioned a therapeutic parenting programme designed for special guardians and will make a group application to the fund on behalf of the region. The programme is called 'Guiding Guardian's and will run in March, July and October.

3. **Performance**

3.1 The third quarter report is due in early February. The half yearly report provides the most up to date performance information.

4. **Practice, quality of provision and management oversight**

4.1 **Recruitment and Assessment**

4.1.1 The recruitment and assessment teams remain under a great deal of pressure due to the number of people in the assessment process. In January we have begun accepting enquiries again for people considering children under the age of 2 years old and the 3 information

events, held on Zoom are now fully booked. A number of sessional assessors are now in post and have really helped in reducing the backlog of assessments. 4 assessments were transferred to the voluntary adoption agencies who will undertake the assessments and will be provided back to us at a reduced cost as part of the contract.

- 4.1.2 The training available to adopters has increased with the sibling training, EPP training and experienced adopter and foster carer training up and running virtually. The preparation course is currently being re-adapted to move back to a 3 day preparation training on Zoom and work is underway to develop the twilight sessions with birth parents and therapeutic parenting approaches.
- 4.1.3 Medical assessments remain an ongoing issue with GP availability to undertake these. We continue to use the flexibilities within the regulations to move applicants through to stage 2 without these in place.

Adoption panel

- 4.2
- 4.2.1 Adoption panel capacity has been a challenge and we continue to regularly review this. The fact that we no longer have flexibility in the regulations has caused issues and panels are booked up until April. The managers and panel team constantly problem solve and aim to get items on in timely way. We are operating a new system for those needing an urgent panel space for matches as items sometimes fall off at the last minute. Social workers are being asked to complete all the paperwork and then if an item falls off they can be slotted in. We now have 2 panels a week and generally speaking these are working well on zoom. A trial of panels focussing on approvals only has been beneficial as this means more items can be considered and I can, where possible, attend and observe these, making swift decisions.

Advertising and marketing

- 4.3
- 4.3.1 The revised website is now live and One Adoption South Yorkshire have gone live on the 1st January and have joined the One Adoption Brand, contributing to the costs of the marketing of the brand. I would ask

committee members to review the website and provide any reflections and comments regarding this.

- 4.3.2 It is likely that further funding will be made available from the Department of Education regarding the national recruitment work with OAWY holding these funds on behalf of the Regional Adoption Agencies. It is not clear on the amount of funds being provided but will likely be similar to last year, subject to the national spending review.

4.4 **Family Finding**

- 4.4.1 127 children have been placed for adoption between April and December 2020, this is only a slight reduction in comparison to the number of children placed for adoption in the same period in 2019/20 and is commendable given the pandemic. The staff have continued to work creatively in undertaking family finding and achieving matches for children.

- 4.4.2 Transitions have remained a challenge during the national and local restrictions with individual risk assessments being carried out to do these safely. The staff have continued to be creative in trying to progress transitions and often the anxiety about these are about foster carers circumstances. Discussions have taken place with fostering services across the region to promote transitions and look at how these can continue to be undertaken during the winter months. The Family Finding and Recruitment and Assessment Teams have also held a practice forum to look at how we can creatively continue transitions during the winter months.

4.5 **Virtual Profiling Event**

- 4.5.1 Our latest profiling event took place at the beginning of December with adopters attending from OAWY, local Voluntary Adoption Agencies and a local authority from the Yorkshire and Humber region. 11 children were profiled (including two sibling groups). 6 children (including one sibling group) received expressions of interest with a total of 26 expressions of interest. Two linking meetings have been arranged following the profiling event.

- 4.5.2 From the three previous profiling events during the year, four children have been matched with adoptive families and two matches (sibling group) are progressing to adoption panel.

Inter-agency Adoption Placements Service

- 4.6 The inter agency contract was awarded at the end of May to provide a minimum of 30 placements per year and 27 placements have been identified with 23 (including 1 EPP) children having been placed and 5 booked into matching panel in early 2021.
- 4.6.1

- 4.6.2 The lead for the VAA is engaged in tracking meetings to allow for early identification of children who we will need to access the service and work is ongoing to provide early information of adopters being approved by the VAA's.

4.7 Link Maker

- 4.7.1 We revised our ways of working in relation to Link Maker at the end of the summer with Link Maker being used to share children's profiles with our approved adopters and wider where appropriate, including the voluntary adoption agencies within the region. Further work is being undertaken with Link Maker and the voluntary adoption agencies within the region to refine the visibility of profiles shared with the VAA's in the region.

Adoption Support

- 4.8 We have continued to work over virtual platforms with families for the most part, with risk assessed face to face visits where needed. What has become more apparent over the past couple of months is the impact that restrictions relating to Covid is having on families, meaning workers are often dealing with some complex and quite desperate situations at times. On a more positive note we have been able to resume most of our delivery of support groups via a mixture of face to face in bubbles (stay and play groups across the region, single adopters group) or via virtual means (regional adopter support group, teens/tweens

groups). We have been mindful that whatever we offer has to have flexibility built in at the moment to either be a scaled-down face to face meet-ups and/or delivered via virtual means, depending upon what local restrictions are in place at the time.

4.8.1 We had hoped to deliver an online 'Foundations for Attachment' programme in the Autumn, but take up from families was poor and feedback was that they ideally wanted this to be delivered face to face. We continue to explore delivering other parenting programmes via virtual means including NVR and a new 'Talking Teenagers' programme (based on the old Safebase for Teens programme), both to be offered this spring.

4.8.2 However, families appear to be more interested in short seminars and workshops due to spending a lot of time on zoom with children and home learning and therefore we have worked with Adoption UK who are staging a festival of activities for families in West Yorkshire.

4.8.3 From Monday 18th January they are hosting a week-long festival of fantastic webinars and include topics such as:

- An introduction to FASD
 - Preparing for Primary School
 - Looking at the map of recovery from complex trauma
 - Parenting Teens
 - Life Journey work
-and more!

4.8.4 There is also a mid-week meet up for all adoptive parents in the West Yorkshire region to have a chat and unload/support each other.

5. **Continuous Professional Development and Service Development**

5.1 **Audits**

5.1.1 An independent auditor carried out an audit of 32 prospective adopter files in October and November with 46 % being rated as outstanding or Good. 40% were rated at satisfactory and 12% required improvement. An action plan has been developed to address issues raised from the audits and has been shared and discussed with the management board.

5.1.2 Internal audits have continued with 15 audits completed in Quarter 3.

- 3 (20%) were excellent;
- 9 (60%) were good;
- 3 (20%) were satisfactory.

5.1.3 Joint audits are being undertaken within each LA on the children's and family finding files and the learning from these is currently being collated.

5.2 **All staff event**

5.2.1 The Winter conference held in November was timely bringing staff together to consider the Black Lives Matter agenda. The speakers including an academic overview of Black Lives Matters and 3 speakers with lived experience, including two adopted adults and one adoptive parent shared their perspectives with the staff group in the morning. The afternoon session the staff had time to network and reflect on the issues raised and consider this in relation to their work and the organisation and idea and shared view and thoughts as to how we can improve the service. These views were captured and a working group and action plan is in the process of being developed and a report will be provided to the board in due course.

5.3 **Forward Planning**

5.3

5.3.1 The 3 year plan comes to a conclusion at the end of March and a review of the plan is attached at **Appendix1**. This includes a revision of the plan which has been developed in consultation with adopters and the

adopteens group and staff and this draft is presented to the board for consideration.

4. Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and engagement

4.1.1 There has been ongoing consultation and engagement with staff and the staff. Consultation with service users is ongoing to inform the development of the service design and delivery of the agency.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

4.2.1 There are no specific implications for this report but the Black Lives matter action plan will be part of the updated equality impact assessment regarding the service and the organisation.

4.3 Resources and value for money

4.3.1 At the end of December 2020 there is a projection of a slight overspend of £25k. There are some pressures on the budget with regards to a reduction in income from the Adoption Support Fund and income from families not been matched with children outside the area. This has been challenging and action has already been taken to mitigate this projected overspend whilst being able to ensure a safe and responsive service and we are predicting that the budget will be balanced at the end of the financial year.

4.3.2 The proposed budget for 2021/22 has been recommended by the Head of Service and agreed by the management board and the 5 local authorities, with the revised funding formula arrangement to commence from April. Three additional social work posts have been agreed to help manage the increase in adopters coming forward to the agency for approval. It is hoped that this will result in savings on the Inter agency budget moving forward.

4.4 Legal implications and access to information

4.4.1 There are no implications for this report.

4.5 Risk management

There is a small potential financial risk with regards to the budget. However, regular financial monitoring is in place and the management board have good oversight of this

5. Recommendations

5.1 The Joint Committee is requested to:

- a) Note the progress of the agency; and
- b) Support the progression of these arrangements.

Background documents¹

None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.