

# **Agency Report to Adoption Panel**

**May 2013 – October 2013**

## **Introduction**

There is a requirement that Adoption Agency activity is reported twice a year to the Executive.

The service manager for Fostering is the Agency Decision Maker who makes the decisions about adoption cases after she has considered the recommendation of the Adoption Panel. There have been no cases during the period where the decision has differed from that recommended by the Panel.

The plan for a child will come before the Agency Decision Maker on two occasions – firstly for approval of an adoption plan for the child and second to approve the match. The Panel will consider the suitability of particular prospective adoptive parents for the child (approval of match).

Panel also recommends the approval of prospective adopters following assessment. Applicants are invited to attend the Panel when their approval is considered and when a match is proposed. As part of legislation the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) has been set up, where adopters may have their applications reconsidered when the Panel has not recommended their approval and the Agency Decision Maker is minded to turn down the application. The recommendation from this Panel then goes back to the Agency Decision Maker for a decision.

In some cases, where appropriate, cases have been presented to the panel for approval of prospective adopters, followed by a linking to a specific child.

Under the legislation, the Adoption Panel can also consider a brief assessment report, where it is felt that the assessment of prospective adopters should not continue. Brief reports only apply to Stage two. Applicants can also apply to the IRM if the Agency Decision Maker is minded to turn down an application in these circumstances. Applicants have forty working days to make this decision. There were no applications to the IRM during the period May 2013-October 2013.

The Adoption process in England and Wales is subject to a series of Government led changes to address delay, both for children who are waiting to be adopted and prospective adopters who wait to be assessed, approved and matched with the children who wait. This includes the focus on concurrency (A concurrent placement project is in place and successful in Lancashire), fostering for adoption (new legislation that is currently being looked at to devise appropriate policies around its implementation), the shorter timescales, new prospective adopters report and two stage process (all of which is now in place with the first cases now being presented to panel) and adoption reform grant funding that has been made available to address the shortage of adopters and related adoption issues.

## Children

<b>Information about children with a plan of adoption</b>	<b>Number</b>
How many children were presented at ADM Consultation meeting?	100
For how many of these children was adoption recommended?	92
For how many of these children was the care plan of adoption revoked?	8
How many recommendations for SHOPA were agreed	69
How many SHOPA recommendations were agreed within timescales	41
Current situation of children with SHOPA agreed between May – October 2013:	
5 x placed with adoptive family	
4 x matched at Panel but not yet placed	
8 x on hold with confirmed matching in progress	
16 x on hold awaiting Placement Order	
1 x change of plan in progress	
35 x family finding in progress	
How many children were made subject to a Placement Order?	50
How many children were matched with adopters?	65
Number of linkings presented within timescales (6 months of SHOPA)	13
How many children were placed with adopters?	63
How many children were placed within the required 6 month timescale from recommendation?	11
How many children were placed within 6 months from Placement Order?	16
How many children were subject to a final adoption order?	36
How many children were living with adopters, where the final adoption order had not been made? (as at 31 October 2013)	84

<b>Equalities information on children presented to ADM CONSULTATION (based on number of SHOPA decisions) TOTAL OF 69</b>	
<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Number (individual children)</b>
<b>White</b>	
British	64
Other	
<b>Mixed</b>	
White and Black Caribbean	
White and Black African	
White and Asian	2
Other mixed	
<b>Asian</b>	
Indian	1
Pakistani	2
Bangladeshi	
Other Asian	
<b>Black</b>	
Black Caribbean	
Black African	
Other Black	
<b>Chinese</b>	

Chinese	
<b>Other</b>	
Any other background	
No information available	

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Number (individual children)</b>
Buddhist	
Christian	12
Hindu	
Muslim	3
Jewish	
None	
Other	
No information available	54

<b>Age (at time of SHOPA)</b>	<b>Number (individual children)</b>
0-1 year	32
1-2 years	13
2-3 years	9
3-4 years	9
4-5 years	2
5+ years	4

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>
Male	38
Female	31

<b>Number of children who have a disability:</b>	<b>Number (individual children)</b>
How many children have a disability?	0

<b>Information about sibling placements (based on placements for the period)</b>	<b>Number</b>
How many sibling groups were assessed to be adopted together?	24
How many sibling groups did you place together?	23
How many sibling groups were not placed together for adoption when the assessment was for them to be together?	1

<b>How many adoption placements have you made using the following?</b>	<b>Placements</b>
Lancashire County Council	40
Voluntary adoption agencies	11
Other local authorities	12

<b>Other information about all children and young people and their placements</b>	<b>Number</b>
How many unplanned endings of placements occurred?	0

<b>Comments:</b>
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### Adopters

<b>Recruitment of adopters</b>	<b>Number</b>
How many initial enquiries to become adopters did you receive?	249
How many applications from people wishing to adopt did you receive?	Information not available
How many of these applications for approval as an adopter are still being assessed?	Information not available
How many applications did you approve?	27
How many applications for approval as an adoptive family were refused by the decision maker?	1
How many applications for approval were withdrawn?	0
How many applications or refusals were decided within 8 months of receipt of application?	Information not available
How many applications were referred to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)?	0
How many referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism resulted in recommendations being made for your agency to review a decision?	0

<b>Approved adoptive families</b>	<b>Number</b>
How many approved adoptive families did your agency have at 31/10/2012?	61
Of the total number of approved adoptive families, how many were matched to children at 31/10/2012?	40
Of the total number of approved adoptive families, how many had a child in placement where the final adoption order had not been issued at 31/10/2012?	38
Number of recommendations for Approval of Prospective Adopters	27
Number of applicants approved within 6 months of application	8
Number of applicants approved within 7 – 9 months of application	16
Number of applicants approved 9+ months of application	3
How many adoptive families were granted a final adoption order?	21
How many adoptive families withdrew prior to a placement being made?	0

How many adoptive families withdrew following a placement being made?	0
How many foster carers were approved to adopt the child/children they were fostering?	4
How many families were approved under the Concurrency Scheme	1
<b>How long did adoptive families wait to be matched to a child? (based on the number of families matched in period)</b>	<b>Number</b>
Less than 2 months	7
At least 2 and less than 7 months	25
At least 7 and less than 11 months	3
11 months or more	0

<b>Equalities information on approved adopters (based on the number of families approved in period)</b>	
<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Number (individual adopters)</b>
<b>White</b>	
British	50
Other	1
<b>Mixed</b>	
White and Black Caribbean	0
White and Black African	0
White and Asian	0
Other mixed	0
<b>Asian</b>	
Indian	0
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	0
Other Asian	0
<b>Black</b>	
Black Caribbean	0
Black African	0
Other Black	0
<b>Chinese</b>	
Chinese	0
<b>Other</b>	
Any other background	0
No information available	0

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Number (individual adopters)</b>
Buddhist	0
Christian	46
Hindu	0
Muslim	0
Jewish	0
None	5
Other	0

No information available	0
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Sexual orientation	Number (individual adopters)
Heterosexual	47
Lesbian	0
Gay	4
Bisexual	0
Other	0
No information available	0

Number of adopters who have a disability:	Number (individual adopters)
How many adopters have a disability?	1

**Definition of 'disability':** Section 6 of the Equality Act 2010 defines a disabled person as someone who has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities. Examples include cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis and heart conditions; hearing or sight impairments, or a significant mobility difficulty; and mental health conditions or learning difficulties.

Relationship status (per adoptive family)	Number (adoptive families)
Single	3
Married	18
Civil Partnership	2
Cohabiting heterosexual	4
Cohabiting same sex	0
Other	0

**Comments:**

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### Adoption Support

Requests for adoption support assessments	Number
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How many requests for adoption support assessments did you receive?	Information not available
How many requests for adoption support assessment resulted in the provision of support?	Information not available
How many adoptive families are in receipt of financial support?	<b>115</b>

<b>Comments:</b>
-

<b>Contact – information to be obtained</b>	<b>Number</b>			
How many new letterbox plans have been made?	Information not available			
How many new direct contact plans have been made?				
How many existing contact plans have ceased?				
How many of these are as a result of:				
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>the child reaching 18 years</td> </tr> <tr> <td>the child's request</td> </tr> <tr> <td>the birth parent's disengaging</td> </tr> <tr> <td>the adopter's disengaging</td> </tr> </table>		the child reaching 18 years	the child's request	the birth parent's disengaging
the child reaching 18 years				
the child's request				
the birth parent's disengaging				
the adopter's disengaging				

<b>Birth parent counselling</b>	<b>Number</b>
How many referrals for birth parent counselling were made?	Information not available
How many birth parents engaged with the service?	

<b>Comments:</b>
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### **Monitoring the quality of the adoption agency**

<b>Children and young people subject to an adoption plan, matched or placed for adoption</b>
<b>How do you ensure that adoptive placements that will meet children's needs are provided?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Workers, Foster Carers and Reviewing Officers all focus on promoting children to express their views and for this to be acted upon where applicable.</li> <li>• Reviews take place during the period of introductions and post placement in order to ensure that the adoptive placement continues to meet the needs of the child/ren, undertaking direct work with children to ascertain their views in relation to the qualities they view as being important in their permanent carers, age appropriately.</li> <li>• Ensure Child Permanence Reports are updated and accurately reflect the needs of the child.</li> </ul>



- Carry out Child Appreciation Meetings for older children to ensure that adopters have a good understanding of a child's needs prior to Adoption Panel and placement.
- Clear advice and an understanding of the medical and educational needs of children are given, through discussions beforehand and then followed up with discussion by the medical advisor and educational psychologist on panel.
- Thorough screening of prospective adopters in being able to meet the children needs for who they have a preference.
- Use all available resources to identify adoptive placements for children including the Adoption 22 Consortium, National Adoption Register, Exchange Days and Be My Parent publications. Planning of Lancashire County Council's first adoption activity day is now ongoing, which is scheduled for early next year in collaboration with 2 other local authorities from the North West and 2 adoption agencies.
- Adopter families with children newly placed are invited to groups held around the county for adopters with children just placed to attend – run by the post adoption support team.
- Prospective adopters have the opportunity to access a baby and beyond course that has been developed in coordination between a child care centre and the fostering service in preparing foster carers and adopters to understand their role in caring for babies in the safest way.
- Training and preparation of adoptive parents is extensive and prepares them with an understanding of some of the difficulties children experience as a result of their previous experiences and the impact of this on how they would parent their adopted children.
- Post approval training is offered to adopters to support them in meeting children's needs, including workshops on attachment, adoption and adolescence, nurturing based on thera-play techniques, education and adoption, contact, life-story books and telling issues.
- Post adoption support includes therapeutic intervention to adoptive families.
- Currently social workers within the adoption service are being trained in the Solihull approach for foster carers and adopters, which will then be rolled out so that all social workers in the adoption service will be trained in this approach. This will allow them to prepare and support adopters in understanding the challenges children face and learn ways in which to build relationships within the context of challenges, with better management of behaviour following.
- Post adoption support is provided to adoptive parents through a day-time support group to provide advice and support in relation to meeting children's needs. There are currently three groups geographically spaced across Lancashire. Regular visits are undertaken to children placed for adoption. These visits take place weekly for the first four weeks of placement and thereafter at a minimum of four weekly. This ensures that adopters are adequately supported in meeting children's needs, and also that the child/ren are having their needs met.
- Even though children awaiting adoption is fast tracked on a traffic light system (from time of placement order) to avoid delay, all children that are identified as needing adoptive placements are offered this opportunity where a family is sought for them, despite their complex needs. This might at times imply a delay in terms of timescales, and although cases are not allowed to drift, a longer timescale at times results in a successful match and therefore a better outcome for children.
- A backlog in the children awaiting adoption has necessitated that some assessments have now been outsourced to an independent agency (paid from grant funding), with assessments likely to conclude at panel in March 2014. There is also an increasing amount of assessments being completed independently by social workers from a pool, ensuring we recruit enough adopters within the coming year to meet the needs

of the children. When enough adopters are recruited, the placement choice is also widened ensuring more stringent matching. Alongside this there has been the opportunity to use the grant funding for placements outside of Lancashire and the North West, which has led to an increase in the amount of children placed.

- Post adoption adopters who have adopted children with complex needs and struggling within this, are invited to attend a support group to allow for reflection and having their emotional needs met.
- Continuous and clear adoption marketing strategies in line with the needs of children awaiting adoption, currently coinciding with the national adoption week and being promoted through various forms to reach a wide variety of people.

### **How well do children progress in their health, learning and emotional and social development?**

- We have links with the Education Support Team for looked after children and Education Psychology Service, allowing accessing a range of activities for children within and outside educational settings.
- The adoption service commission in house therapeutic services via SCAYT+. This is an in-house educational facility staffed with two educational psychologists and other staff trained in thera-play and therapeutic intervention techniques.
- Access for children in adoptive placements before an adoption order are granted, to the children looked after nurses, with regular health assessments undertaken.
- We prepare clear Adoption Support Plans addressing educational issues for children placed with adopters.
- We address the cultural and religious needs of children who are placed in foster care and when being matched with adopters.
- Post adoption support assessments consider the educational and social needs of adopted children.
- Preparation Groups address the social and educational needs of children. Post adoption training for adopters helps them to develop knowledge and skills on meeting the emotional needs of their adopted child/ren.
- Child Permanence Reports record the educational and social needs of children.
- Assessments of prospective adoptive families consider their participation in activities suitable for a child including healthy pursuits e.g. walking, swimming.
- Robust health and safety audits are carried out as part of the assessment of both foster carers and adoptive carers.
- Advice is offered to schools on a one to basis to support the educational agencies in understanding the needs of adopted children. This is often in partnership with SCAYT+. This includes focussing on the triggers surrounding transitions.
- It is planned that a joint partnership will be undertaken with Caritas Care, whereby schools will attend workshops to offer a more in depth approach that will also be preventative to maximise placement stability. No update information on this available.
- All children placed for adoption should have life story books and a later life letter to inform their sense of identity and give them an understanding of the reasons for them being placed for adoption. This contributes to the emotional wellbeing of adopted children. There is a protocol, which is currently being looked at to ensure that practice within Lancashire County Council is in line with National Minimum Standards.
- The concurrent placement scheme enhances the child's emotional security and well being by minimising placement moves. This scheme has been successful to date with no disruptions and no rehabilitations to date, although contact was supported.

Alongside the concurrency, the local authority is now planning towards a policy on fostering for adoption, after legislation changed in July 2013. This should be concluded and ready for use by end of 2013.

- The process of bridging from foster care to adoption has at times been strenuous. This is being looked at as a training course by the fostering service to support especially new carers in this role so that the placement move can be made positive for the child that will enhance their ability to attach appropriately with their new parents. In the meantime foster carers are supported by experienced foster carers in this role.

### **How do you ensure that the adoption agency contributes to promoting good outcomes for children and young people?**

- The adoption team makes use of appropriate local resources such as Children's Centres. We have developed closer links with Education Psychology Services in supporting children placed for adoption.
- Close working relationships with children centres, hosting support groups at these venues, and working in partnership re the baby and beyond preparation course.
- All children placed for adoption by Lancashire County Council have an adoption support plan which identifies their needs, the support needed, by whom to allow them to reach their full potential. Adoption support needs can be reviewed at any time until the child reaches eighteen years.
- The concurrent placement scheme is enhancing placement stability through minimising placement moves of the child thereby enhancing the child's emotional security. Fostering for adoption will offer similar positives to the children.
- A diverse training programme is continuously rolled out, also for the wider services and teams the adoption agency works with. This included training of the child permanence reports, children whose care plan changes from adoption, contact, legislation, life story work, difficulties children who are placed for adoption could experience, and managing such difficulties, working with birth families, and attachment. A new revised training on a holistic view of the principles underlying adoption is now being devised, that will offer social workers an understanding of how from an early stage in being involved with a family, certain aspects of adoption needs to be considered in order to avoid delay for the child.
- Advice is followed from legislation guidance and guidance from BAAF. At the moment changes are being developed in terms of fostering for adoption, activity days and the recruitment of more carers which are enabling more placements, all contributing to better outcomes for the children.

### **What do children and young people say about your service and how do they contribute to its development?**

- Every effort is made to ensure children's participation in their reviews in an age appropriate way; verbally, through a DVD, a picture etc.
- Children with a plan for adoption who are placed with Local Authority Foster Carers participate in health assessments which facilitates the identification of Action Points, focusing on the views and needs of looked after children.
- Children placed with adoptive carers pending the making of an Adoption Order are seen within the national government guidelines by their allocated Social Worker from the Adoption Team. During these visits, children are seen on their own, if of an appropriate age, and their wishes and feelings are ascertained.
- The views of children/young people are ascertained when Social Workers prepare

Child Permanence Reports and Adoption Support Plans. These plans are scrutinised by the agency advisor, the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker.

- Assessments for Post Adoption Support take account of the wishes and feelings of children and young people. We listen to young people about their wishes and feelings and as far as possible incorporate these in their support plan.
- Where children are being prepared to move to an adoptive family, their views are considered and individual work is undertaken with young people, taking account of their particular interests, views and feelings. This is undertaken by their social worker who is in close and regular contact with the assessing social worker, following such individual work with children.
- When planning and facilitating direct contact with parents, siblings and members of their extended family pre and post adoption, the views of young people are sought and considered. We undertake work re contact and the child's wishes pre court proceedings and advice is given about contact when seeking a decision that a child should be placed for adoption.
- We hold the Adoption Celebration Event which is very well attended by adopters and their children both birth and adopted.
- Feedback forms are being developed in the post adoption support team, to collate feedback on the support and quality of this. No update on this available.

## **Working with adopters**

### **How do recruitment, assessment, training and supervision of adopters promote positive outcomes for children and young people?**

- Monthly Information Evenings are held for prospective adopters. This ensures that adopters have an understanding of some of the issues facing adopted children and adoptive parents prior to committing to the process.
- Part of the assessment process now includes a support group visit. Prospective adopters are now encouraged to bring people from their support network to learn more about adoption. Feedback from both adopters and their support network has been positive.
- A shorter time frame for adoption assessments became legislation July 2013. This allows now for a speedier process and a more concise prospective adopters report. The first of these have started being presented at the adoption panel. The detail and thoroughness of the assessment process has remained the same.
- Lancashire County Council provides training to adopters both prior to and post a child being placed with them. This training includes support and advice in relation to building positive relationships with children and communicating with them about difficult issues.
- Adopters in Lancashire County Council are now able to access various training in the form of workshops as well as more specific support through SCAYT+. Feedback in relation to the training and support offered to adoptive parents has been very positive.
- The adoption panel central list has a good mix of experiences, both professional as well as direct experience of adoption (as adopters and adoptees).
- Adopters are supported by their social worker throughout the assessment, approval, matching and post placement. Social workers maintain regular contact and undertake visits to adopters, allowing them to seek advice and support where needed.

- As part of the assessment process adopters are asked to seek out resources within their locality which will support them as parents and provide positive opportunities for their adopted child/ren.
- Lancashire County Council has developed with the appointment of a concurrent planning social worker, processes and procedures supporting concurrent planning for children. This involves close working relationships between adoption and fostering and children's integrated services teams, identifying the right applicants as concurrent carers and the right children that would enhance placement stability. To date there has been very positive feedback from the service and the carers.
- Adopters are given the opportunity to provide feedback after their attendance at panel.
  - Currently only 5.5% have completed a feedback sheet. Of those, adopters are saying they are happy with the panel process. Only 1 specific comment was received stating that 'the room was a bit big and it was difficult to hear the questions from the chair person'.

The panel room set up has been looked at to ensure everyone's needs are met.

### **How do you involve adopters in matching and linking subsequent planning?**

- Social workers consult with adopters in relation to how they wish to proceed with matching to ensure that it meets their needs. For example some adopters choose not to attend Exchange Days due to the emotional impact; others feel able to consider the profiles of more than one child.
- After being approved as adopters, a follow up visit is made to reflect again on their preference.
- Adopters are provided with up to date photographs of children and in the majority of cases a DVD to assist them in the matching process.
- Adopters are offered the opportunity to meet with the Agency Medical Advisor to discuss any health issues the child may have as part of the matching process.
- In the majority of cases relating to older children, a Child Appreciation Meeting takes place prior to Matching Panel allowing the opportunity for adopters to meet all those who have played a significant role in the child's life.
- Following the match being agreed, adopters attend a Placement Planning Meeting to plan their introductions to the child. The planning takes account of the needs of adopters while ensuring that the needs of the child remain paramount. Care is taken where there are existing children within the adopters' household to ensure that as far as possible all needs are met by the plan. Adopters are given the opportunity to offer feedback in relation to their experience of Matching Panel. A minimum of one review takes place during the period of introductions to allow adopters the opportunity to offer their views in relation to the planning and for changes to be made as appropriate. Looked After Child Reviews take place within 20 working days of the child moving in to their adoptive placement. This allows adopters to offer their views to an independent person in relation to the matching and introductions process.
- Lancashire County Council is currently planning their first activity day. This is a new format for linking adopters to children, focussing on children who are generally more difficult to match. This will be in conjunction with other local authorities and voluntary agencies, to enhance the success of the day. The idea is that adopters meet a variety of children, other than just having written or visual profiles of children, with the hope that an emotional connection might lead to a successful match. Pilot studies elsewhere undertaken had a better success rate than traditional family finding

activities normally used in the UK.

- Prospective adopters in the assessment stage are invited to exchange events in house so they have a real understanding of actual children waiting for placements. More recently there has been an increase in adopters showing an interest in a child see for the first time at one of these events and subsequently later linked to them.

### **How do you involve adopters in the development of your agency?**

- There are a number of adopter and adoptees on the central list of the adoption panel.
- Through adoption support groups adopters are encouraged to identify areas for service development. Through newsletters adopters are encouraged to contact identified workers within the team if they are interested in developing particular areas of the service, such as the buddy system.
- Experienced adopters are invited to act as buddies supporting newly approved/matched adopters.
- When closing the case of adopters, at whatever stage of the process, a letter is sent to them offering the opportunity for them to offer feedback in relation to the service they have received from Lancashire County Council.
- Adopters are encouraged to offer feedback in relation to their experience of Adoption Panel in order to develop and improve the experience for future prospective adopters.
- Approved adopters are asked to attend the preparation training of prospective adopters. This gives prospective adopters a realistic account of the experience of being assessed by Lancashire County Council and of becoming adoptive parents.

### **What do adopters say about your agency?**

- Adopters have provided positive feedback at every stage during the assessment process. This occurs at after information event, after interview, after training, mid way through assessment, after panel and after closure. Some comments received are as follows:
- Initial Interview
  - The information was clear and comprehensive;
  - Venue was not particularly warming, but in a good location. Adopters were greeted at front entrance on time, which was appreciated;
  - Staff created a nice relaxed atmosphere.
- Mid Assessment
  - No issues with the process other than the length of time it took, particularly as they were already foster carers
  - Cost of medicals – too expensive
  - At this stage feel it is natural to have some anxieties or concerns. Hope that as their confidence grows these will be alleviated.
  - Appointments made at their convenience
  - Level of homework was just right
  - Felt comfortable and at ease with the process

- Post Adoption Order

- Overall positive experience, although maybe took a bit longer than anticipated.
- Felt frequency of visits suited their needs, but knew that if they needed assistance they were able to contact their social worker.
- Process was made easier due to the fact that they got on well with the foster carers and that the child responded well to them when they met him.
- At the time they felt that introductions were quite long and tiring, although with hindsight felt it was probably right.
- Following approval they were allocated a different social worker and felt that the first 3 profiles presented to them were not right for them and felt that this could have been due to the fact that the social worker did not know them as well, although, this is not a criticism against the social worker.
- Before bridging the timescale was incredibly long.
- The assessment process was felt too long.
- Would benefit from completing data electronically.
- Felt resources would be used more efficiently (however no suggestion provided as to how).
- Well informed throughout the whole process – from assessment through to matching, although not as efficient pre-assessment.
- Training provided a valuable insight into the adoption and assessment process and enabled them to make the right decisions and were subsequently matched to their perfect child.
- The decision was made in their own time, they did not feel rushed.
- The weekly post adoption playgroup is a great support to them and helps to share experiences with other adopters.
- Regular contact from both their social worker and child's social worker.
- Bridging felt a little long, with a lot of travelling, which could have been minimised.
- Strong links made with the foster family and hope to stay in touch.
- Initial meeting focused very much on negative issues and worst case scenarios, this could have been more balanced.
- Admin could have been more organised – their medical forms had been misplaced.
- Waiting a number of months following the initial meeting and a further number of months once their application had been submitted. They rang numerous times and were eventually told 'don't call us, we'll call you!'.
- Child's passport was missing for months. Also delayed being able to complete the court application as they did not have the child's birth certificate.

**How do you involve staff in the development of your agency?**

- Team meetings take place on a monthly basis for half a day. Staff are encouraged to set the agenda and discuss any developments within the agency. Guest speakers are also invited to attend from other agencies, which can offer knowledge and information which results in improved practice within the team.
- A Service Development Day took place in October 2013. Feedback was provided about the general trends within the local authority and directorate, but also more specific from every team within the adoption service.
  - Uncertainty re restructure and the effect on service, teams and service delivery affecting morale – regular progress meetings needed
  - Opportunity to catch up with what is happening in other parts of the service and what issues are impacting on them
  - Fostering to adopt requires clarification
  - Benchmark needed re assessments, if objective of central care proceedings (CCP) Team is met with implementation of Public law outline (PLO) – is this effect of PLO or CCP Team?
  - Would like to celebrate successes and achievements to boost morale
  - Clarity needed re objectives
- Team managers within the service have a lead role in developing policies and procedures relevant to their specific functions. Team managers and the service manager regularly attend BAAF briefings, workshops, conferences and meetings of the Adoption 22 consortium, more recently specifically focussing on recent legislative changes. This allows for maintaining up to date knowledge in relation to local and national adoption issues. Information is cascaded to adoption social workers in team meetings.
- Social workers within the team are encouraged to regularly attend training and to feed back learning in team meetings. Staff are then able to incorporate this into their practice and the future development of the service.
- Rolling out of the Solihull training through train the trainers.
- Involving adopters and panel members in the marketing campaign and related media, tailoring this to the strength and preference of those wanting to be part of this campaign.

#### **What plans for improvement and development are currently in place?**

- We have a rolling specialised recruitment campaign in order to increase the number of adoptive parents in Lancashire County Council. So far this has included advertisements on billboards, internet advertising and features in newspapers. Marketing is structured around the profiles of children awaiting adoption. A new marketing campaign has centred on including recruitment of Asian adopters to meet the needs of our non White British children as well as a campaign with a marketing firm.
- The adoption team is seeking to become involved in family finding for children at an earlier stage, as placing children for adoption swiftly promotes positive outcomes for them. This will be even more evident with the setting up of the new central care proceeding team. This team will take cases from children integrated services where children (at least one if part of a sibling group) fall into the age group 0-4 and having a early identified plan of adoption or a high likelihood of this., This will fast track the child's case in proceedings and develop the expertise of the social workers.
- Seeking to improve timeliness of adoption for our children. We are now placing more children than before in areas outside of the close vicinity to Lancashire. Timeliness of placing children will also increase with the expected increase in approved adopters for this year.



- Continue to develop and refine our adoption support services. Significant recent improvements have been made to the service in relation to processes, procedures and standardisation of tasks, as well as performance management. There are plans to continue with these improvements.
- Use of the funding from central government in such a way that it addresses shortcomings in the service. It is planned that another agency advisor is recruited, a case progression manager, a programme manager, two more assessing social workers, an additional family finder, an additional concurrent social worker and an Independent reviewing officer adoption lead.
- Continuation in improving the service meeting the regulatory timescales. Stringent tracking and processes in place, that are continuously being developed and refined, will maximise the opportunities.
- Further development of new processes to support the shorter timescales for the assessment of adopters.
- There have already been improvements to the council's website in relation to adoption; this is continuously being updated.
- Continuation of training the whole service in the Solihull approach.
- Further refining of gathering feedback and performance data.
- Launching of the first activity day.
- Addressing the challenges faced with staff shortages, number of approved adopters and number of children awaiting adoption, through specialised application of the funding received from central government.
- Refining procedures relating to panels and the processes underlining this, ensuring compliance with legislation and good practice.

### **Panel and ADM Consultation process activities**

#### **Panel membership:**

1 Independent Chair, 2 Medical Advisers, 1 Agency Adviser, 9 Social Work Members (3 of whom are non-LCC), 2 Independent members specialising in Education/Education Psychology and 9 Independent members that have wide ranging experiences of having adopted, having been adopted, having fostered or worked within children's services or the nursing profession, each adding their own valuable experiences to the panel process.

#### **Observers:**

Panel observers range from student social workers on placement within adoption and fostering teams, social workers from other teams i.e. child care, initial assessment.

#### **Panel administration:**

We have a dedicated team of central business support who is meeting the timescales for completing panel minutes, sets agendas, liaises with and supports the agency advisor, coordinates all submissions, collates feedback sheets, writes guidelines related to their work processes, produces data performances related to panel and the wider service.

#### **IRM**

There have been no cases referred to the Independent review mechanism panel during the period May 2013-October 2013.

#### **Achieved:**

- A guide on the role of buddy to support for newly appointed panel members.
- A joint panel development day between some members of the service and the panel members of the adoption and fostering services. This was well attended and focused on
  - Update on legislation that has come into effect since the last development day
  - New PAR
  - Fostering Regulation 24
  - Concurrent Placement Scheme Update & Foster to Adopt Briefing
  - Public Law Order (PLO) and Activity being undertaken to support delivery
- There has been another child permanence report training session this year. Some relevant feedback related to the venue and the amount of time given to discuss the topics, which will be taken into account with the next planning.
- Joint training with the judiciary, CAFCASS, the fostering service and the central care proceedings team offered on seven days to discuss the new Public Law Outline and how adoption and permanence planning falls within this. This was presented to child care social workers, independent reviewing officers, fostering and adoption social workers.
- Briefings to child care social work teams on new case law where adoption must be clearly evidenced as the only adoption suited to the child, the significance of including all relevant medical information and the qualifications needed to be an author of the Child Permanence Reports.
- Panel member appraisals highlighted the following pertinent comments:
  - Panel considered to be very positive and rewarding;
  - Positive feedback re Panel Business Support, Independent Chair and Panel Adviser;
  - Some concerns expressed re possible difficulties in respect of the forthcoming shift to electronic panel papers and the reading of papers;
  - Positive comments re panel papers going electronic;
  - Length of time it takes to read panel papers for longer panels;
  - Length of time allocated to each item;
  - Suggestion to look at the necessity of all the documentation that is presented to panel;
  - Table set up remains daunting to panel members;
  - Positive that any questions come through the chair;
  - Expression of interest to adoption training;
  - Ensure panel members who alternate receive approved minutes;
  - Positive comments regarding the panel minutes being non-judgmental and the focus being on the child;
  - Good working relationship between panel members;
  - Supportive environment for challenging views;
  - Learning environment;
  - More information in respect of disruptions and learning from this;
  - Good balance of experience within the panel

Feedback from appraisals is always looked at carefully to see where further development/change can take place.

**Panel Member Feedback in respect of items presented to panels over the last 6 months:**

### **Comments re APR:**

- Several comments stating that APRs are missing views of potential adopters;
- Several comments that APR on the brief side - not much detail in respect of the adopters;
- APR should have included something regarding names;
- APR reflects views of birth child;
- APR easy to read and gives balanced picture of child's presentation;
- Poor report - some content not appropriate for APR i.e. re older sibling;
- Adopters have set out their views in the APR in organised and reflective manner; This has been helpful in clarifying the match;
- Repetition in APR re background;
- Very good APR;
- Very good/excellent APR which addressed issues very well;
- A number of reports provided little or no evidence of why a child should be matched with particular adopters;
- Info re adopters limited;
- Well written analysis of matching criteria;
- Applicant didn't appear to know what was written in their section of APR;
- Would have liked more specific examples of how adopters will meet child's needs;
- Would have been helpful to get adopter's views re each child, not just collectively;
- Adopters leave needed clarification;
- Adopters contribution to report really good;
- Very good contribution from the adopters, including why adopters felt they were a good match, rather than having generic statements;

### **Comments re CPR:**

- CPR's missing important information e.g in relation to siblings, no information in respect of birth father, despite comment that birth father had been visited; medical information which hasn't been updated etc.
- CPR disjointed in parts with misuse of words, which doesn't read well. Number of comments noted that CPRs have not been amended;
- Too much cut & paste from CPR which was not updated;
- SW presentation very good;
- A number of reports were said to provide contradictory information e.g. the child was abused, however, the child had been removed at birth; A child was reported to having more than one foster carer, which was incorrect.
- No ref by SW of views of mother's MH background or health of father;
- Analysis required in response to birth children's views.

### **Comments re PAR:**

- Pages missing from the back of the PAR;
- New PAR a little confusing in layout & content, but information provided was very good;
- Text on Family tree too small;
- Also information difficult to follow in respect of the children belonging to prospective male adopter. Acknowledged this may be due to the new form rather than the fault of the social worker;

- Difficult to comment on approval of a couple who have already adopted;
- Adopter's contribution is well presented;
- Well written from both social worker & adopter;
- More information needed in respect of why they wanted to adopt a 3rd child;

### **General Comments:**

- A number of reports need to go into more detail/not concise enough/information not clear enough
  - Information that should be provided early on is not always provided until well into the report
  - If using cut and paste to produce reports, the information needs to be checked afterwards to ensure information is correct and relevant.
  - A lot of comments in respect of spelling and grammatical errors and that reports would benefit from proof reading/quality assurance.
  - Some incorrect factual information.
  - Several comments in respect of incorrect child's name used within report.
  - Clear and concise report
  - Good report although lengthy in places.
  - Fantastic knowledgeable presentation;
  - Social worker made up for poor report with the presentation.
  - Social worker had good knowledge of the adopters
  - Good presentation.
  - Would have benefited from quality assurance prior to submission.
  - Names used in reports and not always made clear who they are;
  - Clear & concise knowledge of case from both social workers. Clearly covered all areas.
  - Clearly detailed, well signposted report.
  - Complex well described case;
  - Very detailed report. Provides clear, factual information.
- Monthly briefings to the panel, which has covered:
    - Aims of Adoption Preparation Course
    - Briefing note for DCSs: key messages from a judgment handed down by the Court of Appeal (civil division) on 17 September 2013.
    - Temporary approval of prospective adopters as foster carers:
    - Difference between Residence Order and a Special Guardianship Order
    - Briefing to adoption panel members June 2013
- Briefing to Adoption Service
    - Advice for social workers regarding completing adoption BAAF health forms and medical advice
    - Prospective Adopter Report (PAR)-Advice for social worker
    - Advice for General Practitioners for completing AH forms for prospective adopters
- A regular newsletter covering all the latest changes and happenings in the panel

process and adoption service.

- Electronic processing of adoption medicals to the medical advisor, as far as possible.
- Reports are quality assured before they are presented at panel or considered CPR's. A consultation session is available on a monthly basis for social workers to gain specific feedback/guidance in the writing of these reports.
- There is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of the suitability of prospective adopters.
- There is continuous dialogue with minute takers, the chair and the panel members, ensuring panel minutes are of a high quality.
- Link provided to panel members to access e-learning training.
- Most panel member appraisals now concluded.
- Panel member files now being audited after many corrections undertaken, with the majority of outstanding items amended. Files are now also being scanned to be available electronically in its entirety.
- Minutes are now being agreed before the decision maker makes a decision, which is compliant with National Minimum Standards.
- There is a thorough, consistent, rigorous and fair approach in the assessment and approval of the suitability of prospective adopters.
- Reports are quality assured before being presented to panel. The reports are often of a high quality with feedback being provided regarding shortcomings/amendments/suggestions.
- Panel members receive paperwork in the majority of cases at least 5 days before panel day.
- Streamlining of the feedback of panel reports by three panel members at any given panel.

**Still in progress and/or needing to be developed.**

- A second agency decision maker for the role specific to the ADM Consultation meetings.
- A flowchart indicating the timeframe from panel to the decision being communicated to the adopters.
- Adoption forum.
- Developing profiles of all panel members that will be available to applicants/adopters attending panel, to determine if there is a conflict of interest from their side before they enter the panel discussion.
- Closer working relationships between fostering and adoption, with specific reference to concurrent planning and fostering to adopt.
- Electronic system re panel process.
- The change of care plan from adoption training was cancelled due to reduced interest. The next training course is scheduled for early 2014.
- Feedback has been collated on the quality of the reports being presented to panel as well as the verbal presentation. This is still in the process of being fed back to the social workers.

**Strengths and weaknesses:**

- Robust, stable and balanced panel memberships.
- Same chair and advisor to cover the fostering and adoption panels to allow for continuity and stability.
- Successful concurrent scheme.

- High level of support and training offered to applicants and approved adopters from various sources.
- Rigorous assessment of adopters.
- High level of experience within the workforce offering skills and stability in the assessment, linking and support of adopters and children.
- Stable and experienced management evident throughout the service.
- Dedicated training and assessment.
- Processes being put in place to achieve targets set and address the high level of children awaiting adoption placements.
- Continuation in addressing the streamlining and gaps in processes and procedures to result in more effective working and meeting the needs of the children and adopters in line with legislation.
- Dedicated and committed adopters enhancing the opportunities and experiences of the children they care for.
- Careful matching ensuring children's needs are being met to a high standard.
- Challenges being set by changes in legislation, but these are being met by dedication and continuous improvements, including a wide variety of training, briefings, development days and discussions.
- Capacity difficulties across the service have led to higher levels of challenges being placed on staff, but this has been dealt with proactively and with more recent support of appropriate use of the Adoption Reform Grant. Posts are currently being advertised for a variety of positions that will support high case loads and allow for more effective tracking of the child's journey hence minimising delay. Assessments have also been allocated to an independent agency and a pool of social workers has now been recruited that do independent assessments. This will allow for an increase in 15 additional assessments being completed and at present we have placed more children in adoptive placements than at this point in 2012.
- Concurrency is successful within Lancashire and another social worker in this role will further develop this placement type. Work is being undertaken to enhance the use and effectiveness of fostering for adoptions.
- Enhanced level of marketing and publicity. This now also includes material related to a non White-British child.
- Continued stable placements with no disruptions in the last six months.
- Flexibility in panels to accommodate the increased level of panel business.

**Specific issues:**

-

**Chair's comments on panel membership, working relationships and overall function (highlight any gaps in membership experience) as well as recommendations regarding the operation of panel and the provision of adoption services**

No comments received.

**Service manager's comments on panel membership, working relationships and overall function (highlight any gaps in membership experience) as well as**

## **recommendations regarding the operation of panel and the provision of adoption services**

I should like to acknowledge and thank everyone involved in Lancashire's Adoption Panel. The Panel has an extremely important role to provide independent scrutiny of the proposals presented and to determine whether all the issues have been appropriately clarified and whether the proposal is sound. We are fortunate to have strong and committed membership of the central list of panel members who are well informed about their role and responsibilities, adhere to standards of good practice and who are keen to participate in the training opportunities afforded to them.

Good administrative arrangements are in place which support the effective functioning of the Panel and the Agency Advisor ensures that panel members are kept well informed in relation to the Adoption Reform programme and associated changes to legislation, guidance and practice by producing regular briefings.

In order to further strengthen membership of the Adoption Panel the Service is seeking to recruit additional social work representatives to join the central list over the forthcoming weeks.

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