

ADOPTION PANEL REPORT 1ST OCTOBER 2015 – 31ST MARCH 2016

Introduction

This report summarizes the work of Lancashire County Council's Adoption Panel over the 6 month period from 1st October 2015 – 31st March 2016. It is intended to complement the 6 monthly adoption agency reports provided to the council's executive under National Minimum Standard 25.

With regard to children's cases and the decision to place for adoption, this was removed from the panels remit, except in cases where there is no court scrutiny. However, this report also summarizes the work of these separate SHOPA panels (see section 2 of this report).

SECTION ONE

1. Composition of the adoption panels

The Agency is required to maintain a central list of persons who are considered to be suitable members of an adoption panel. This is essentially a pool of people with different skills, backgrounds.

The central list is designed to reduce delay through postponement of panels due to not being quorate, (requires a minimum of five members). One of the panel member requires a minimum of three years' experience as a social worker. During this period we have recruited additional independent and social work members from a range of personal and professional backgrounds in order to ensure diversity on our panels.

Each panel also requires an independent chair (or vice chair) and three other members, at least one of whom must be independent if the Chair is not present. During this period we have also recruited a second vice chair who is independent, our first vice chair being a manager within children's services. We also have 3 medical advisors who are available to sit on panel, access to a legal advisor as required, a panel advisor and a minute taker both of whom are also present for each panel. Currently, there are 3 Adoption panels held each month as a minimum.

2. Support and training available to panel members

During this period, panel members had access to: a development day, training for new panel members from an outside agency, briefings each and every month which are stored on the server, an appraisal, a buddy as required and supervision/support from the panel chair and/or the panel advisor on any particular issues raised.

3. Panel Functions

The Adoption Panels key function is to make recommendations to the agency decision maker on the following:

- The suitability of prospective adoptive applicants to adopt
- Whether a child should be placed for adoption with particular prospective adopters.
- To consider the review of approved adopters who have not been linked to a child in the first 12 months of approval
- To scrutinize cases where children are relinquished for adoption

The panels also look at any disrupted placements as a lessons learned exercise.

In addition, the National Minimum Standards 2014 states that:

- Panel's report every 6 months on the quality of reports presented
- Panel's report on the restrictions on preparing these reports

- Panel's report on the consistency of linking's, approvals and decisions to place for adoption (in the case of the later, as already noted this is reported on in section 2 of this report)

4. Composition of items presented to panel during this period

Number of assessment reports (PARs)	Number of linking reports (APRs)	Disruptions	Relinquished babies
35	27	3	1

The total number of items presented to the adoption panel during this period was **66**.

53% of all panel items presented were adoption assessments (PARs)

40% of all panel items presented were linking's (APRs)

5 The quality of reports presented to panel

The panels grade the paperwork for each item that is presented using an electronic feedback system. Of the 66 reports presented to panel during this period, 41 received this comprehensive feedback. That's **62%** of all items submitted. The lack of this feedback for the remaining **38%** of reports was due to technical difficulties. Please note that disruptions are not included in the grading system.

The grading system in use goes from 1 to 5, with 5 being excellent, 4 Very good, 3 Good, 2 Satisfactory and 1 Poor. The feedback is broken down and covers various aspects of the report and the oral presentation of the social workers who attend, however for ease, this report gives the details of the quality of written reports overall.

Reports where overall quality was excellent (5)	Reports where overall quality was very good (4)	Reports where overall quality was good (3)	Reports where overall quality was satisfactory (2)	Reports where overall quality was poor (1)
15	11	11	4	0

FURTHER BREAKDOWN OF THE ABOVE

- **36%** of the 41 reports that received feedback where graded as excellent
- Of the **36%** considered excellent, **54%** were assessments of prospective adopters and **46%** were linking's.
- Overall, **65%** of the 41 reports that received feedback were graded as above average (graded as above a 3)
- **26%** of the 41 reports that received feedback were graded as good
- Of the **26%** considered good or average, **54%** were assessments of prospective adopters and **46%** were linking's.
- **10%** of the 41 reports that received feedback were considered satisfactory.
- Of the **10%** considered satisfactory, **25%** were assessments of prospective adopters and **75%** were linking's.
- There were no reports deemed to be poor.

Of the reports considered to be only satisfactory, the reasons given for the low marks are a lack of analysis for the PARs, and a lack of robust matching evidence and generic support plans for the linking's.

ANALYSIS

Overall there is a consistently high standard of assessments and linking paperwork presented to panel, with **90%** of the 41 reports that received feedback gaining an overall score of good or above.

There is a consistently slightly higher proportion of assessments (PARs) that receive better grades than the linking paperwork (APRs), though this amounts to a marginal difference of only **8%**.

However, of the **10%** that required improvement, the majority were linking items and the issues that need feeding back to the service are:

- A need for proper analysis in all PARs
- A need for more robust matching evidence in the linking paperwork
- A need for more specific support plans tailored to the individual child within linking paperwork

All assessments and linking paperwork comes from a team that is centrally based, there is therefore no analysis of consistency across the different areas of Lancashire within these figures.

6. Timescales

Of the 35 adoption reports submitted to panel during this period, the overall timescales from Registration of interest to receiving a recommendation at panel were over 6 months in 14 cases, that's **40%** of assessments received at panel that were out of the overall 6 month timescale (this is prior to receiving an ADM).

Of the 27 linking's submitted to panel during this period, the number that did not obtain a match within 6 months of a decision to place for adoption were 14 cases, that's **51%** of all linking's brought to panel.

While 2 of the PARs were out of timescale due to being deferred and 1 was due to a negative conclusion being evidenced by the worker, in the majority of cases the reasons given are varied and include: delays in stage 1 due to statutory checks not being received, a change of circumstances for the prospective adopters, and the need to take more time due to complex issues.

Where linking's were out of timescale, many of the reasons were due to a change of plan (to split siblings) or due to the complex matching needs of the child.

ANALYSIS

While the reasons given for submissions being out of timescale are varied, given the high number of items (**40%** of PARs and **51%** of linking's) there is clearly a need for the service to look into this further and to take steps to reduce delay wherever possible.

7. Qualified Social workers

Panels are required to feedback on whether the social worker preparing the reports was suitably qualified under the restrictions on writing reports 2005 regulations. **100%** of cases presented were by a suitably qualified social worker. In the cases where a social worker was not suitably qualified, the work was overseen by a relevant qualified social worker/manager.

On occasions where a worker has little experience of attending or presenting at panel, team managers attended in a supportive role.

SECTION TWO

1. The composition of 'should be placed for adoption' panels

The decision to place for adoption is now considered by a separate panel which consists of an agency decision maker, a panel advisor, the social worker presenting the case and their manager.

2. The breakdown of business and grading of submissions

During this period, 28 cases were brought to SHOPA (should be placed for adoption) meetings. Of these, 9 were changes of plan leaving a total of 19 cases for a decision to place for adoption, however of these 19, 1 case was heard twice as it had to be deferred for a month due to the information presented being insufficient for the ADM to make a decision. That gives a figure of 18 cases. Where siblings are being considered for a decision to place for adoption and the paperwork is submitted together, this has been counted as 1 case.

The 18 SHOPA cases amounts to 24 children having received a decision that they should be placed for adoption.

The Agency decision maker has considered the quality and consistency of child permanence reports (CPRs) across the different areas of Lancashire, as seen below.

	Number of SHOPA cases from the East of the county	Number of SHOPA cases from the North of the county.	Number of SHOPA cases from the Central area of the county
	10	4	4
Number considered good	4	2	2
Number considered to require improvement	4	2	2
Number considered inadequate	2	0	0

FURTHER BREAKDOWN OF THE ABOVE

- **55%** of all SHOPA cases brought were from the East of the County
- **44%** of all SHOPA paperwork presented was considered to be of good quality
- However, that leaves **56%** of all SHOPA paperwork presented that was considered to require improvement or be inadequate.
- The East of the county has the highest number of cases presented that are considered to be less than good, **33%** of the total.

ANALYSIS

There is a considerably higher number of SHOPA cases presented from the East of the county, with **55%** of all cases being from this area. The East also has the highest number of cases considered to be less than good, with **33%** of their submissions requiring improvement or being deemed

inadequate. However, there is a need for improvement across all areas as **56%** of all paperwork received was considered to be less than good.

The reasons this paperwork was judged to be less than good are:

- Submission sheets not properly completed with regulatory information
- Medical information not analyzed
- Life story plans not robust
- The guardians views not always clear
- Many CPRs just don't tell the story of the child's life and thoroughly analyze the information. This was the biggest concern raised from the agency decision maker.

3. Timescales of submissions for 'should be placed for adoption' decisions

There were no specific issues raised regarding the timescale of submissions for should be placed for adoption decisions, with the majority of submissions meeting the required deadline of 6 weeks between the plan having been ratified by the Independent reviewing officer and the decision date.

A total of **66%** of submissions for should be placed for adoption decisions were within the above timescale.

The reasons cited for the **34%** that were not within this 6 week timescale were:

- The court requesting further assessments that were concluded as negative and the plan of adoption was then pursued
- Delay in receiving adoption medicals
- Further viability assessments having to be conducted

Where there is a change of plan from adoption, very often these cases are not brought back to the agency decision maker within a reasonable timeframe. As an example, 3 of the 9 changes of care plan submitted had not been returned to ADM within a year of the independent reviewing officer ratifying the change of care plan. That's a figure of **33%**.

There is clearly a need to ensure measures are put in place for the timely return to panel of any cases where there is a change of plan.

4. Qualified Social workers

The agency decision maker for should be placed for adoption decisions is required to feedback on whether the social worker preparing the reports was suitably qualified. There has been one submission during this period where the social worker didn't have the required post qualifying experience and where there was no indication that the report had been overseen by a suitably experienced social worker, this item was considered inadequate and was deferred by the agency decision maker. The item is yet to return to panel. Therefore **100%** of cases that received a decision during this period were either submitted by a suitably qualified social worker or were overseen by a relevant qualified social worker/manager.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above collated data there are a number of issues that require consideration:

1. A need for proper analysis in all PARs submitted to panel in order to achieve a minimum of a 'good' assessment rating
2. A need for more robust matching evidence in the linking paperwork to prevent submissions being considered less than good.
3. A need for more specific support plans tailored to the individual child within linking paperwork to prevent submissions being deemed less than good.

4. For measures to be put in place to address the significant delay that appears to be occurring with the submissions of prospective adopters (PARs)
5. For measures to be put in place to address the significant delay that appears to be occurring with submissions to link children to suitable adopters.
6. To consider the reasons for the significantly higher submission rate for decisions to place for adoption from the East of the county.
7. To take actions to improve the relatively low standard of child permanence reports (CPRs) submitted for a decision to place for adoption.

SUPPLEMENTAL

In addition to all of the above required data, during this period from 1st Oct 2015 – 31st Mar 2016, the adoption panel has gathered feedback on its own performance from social workers and adopters attending panel. While this is not regulatory, it demonstrates a commitment to by the panel to develop the service they offer.

The findings have been attached as appendices with appendix one being the feedback from social workers and appendix two from adopters. These appendices will be shared with the panel members along with this completed report.

During this 6 month period there has not been a consistent panel chair and therefore this report has been completed by the panel advisor.



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ACTION PLAN IN RESPONSE TO THE ABOVE :

- To address the quality of the support plans, the team has been trained on expectations on the quality of these reports, with a further development session planned and carried out On 25/5/16 on the linking documents, support plans and analysis. Guidance notes have also been re-issued.
- To address the delay in timescales, the team manager is now informed of any timescales that are potentially going to be outside of the regulatory timescales, who then scrutinises the reasons and develops systems to prevent where possible similar situations going forward. There is also much closer communication about delay between the Agency Adviser and the team manager which further enhances this scrutiny.
- The delay in timescales of matching children and progressing their care plans to permanence, are now more closely monitored via a spreadsheet shared between Children Social Care and the Children Awaiting Adoption team. There is also a monthly tracking meeting which tracks all cases of children with a care plan of adoption, in order to progress and minimises delay wherever possible.
- There are 12 new advance practitioner posts recently created within Lancashire, part of their role will be to mentor and support child care social workers when they are writing the child permanence reports (CPRs) in order to improve the overall quality of these reports.
- New guidance documents and quality assurance templates have been devised recently to assist child care social workers to complete CPRs in order to improve overall quality.

- A more robust grading and feedback system is now in place to give clearer feedback to child care social workers who present to the agency decision maker for a decision to place a child for adoption.
- A program of training and workshops has been devised and rolled out that should see an improvement in the quality of child permanence reports presented and this should be reflected in the next panel report.

TIMESCALES AND MONITORING OF THE ACTION PLAN

1. The monitoring for the above will be on-going but will be evidenced by the next panel report. The timescale for the completion of the next 6 monthly panel report is estimated as the end of October 2016.
2. There has not been a timescale applied to the action plan for implementing each measure as they are all already in place.

Action plan dated 9/6/16