

Adoption Service Annual Report April 2015 –April 2016

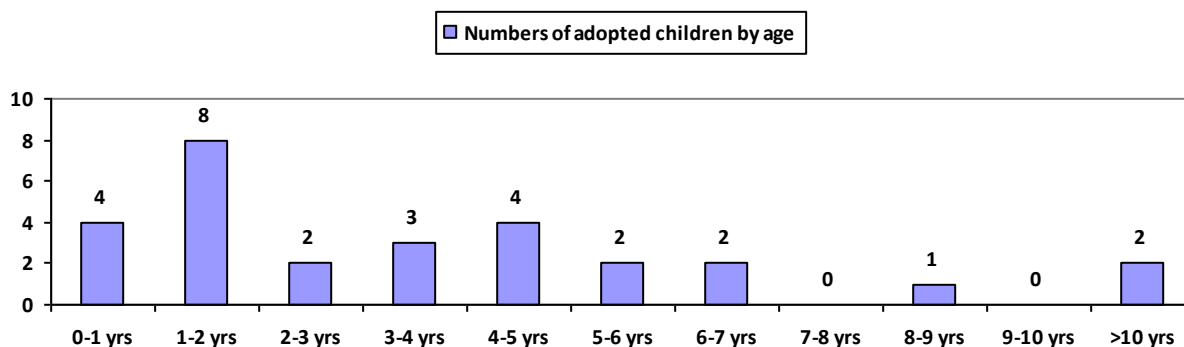
The children

For the year ending March 31st 2016 **29** children placed for adoption by Herefordshire Council were adopted, and **8** children are living with their adoptive families but adoption orders have not yet been granted. We are awaiting the outcome of legal proceedings in respect of a further **9** children who the local authority have decided should be placed for adoption. We have not yet identified a family for **2** children who we have permission to place for adoption.

Of the **29** children adopted during 2015/16

- **16** were boys and **13** were girls
- **19** children were placed singly
- **5** siblings groups of **2** children were placed together
- **7** of the children had older siblings who had previously been adopted
- **3** children were placed for adoption at the request of their parent/s
- **8** children were adopted by their previous foster carers, **2** of them had been placed under a Fostering for Adoption arrangement.
- **18** were adopted by families recruited and assessed by Herefordshire.

The majority of children (**24**) were aged 5 years or below at the date of their adoption, but we were successful in achieving adoptions for a small number of older children, the eldest being siblings aged 11 and 12 years old.



The agency decision maker decided that adoption should be the plan for **20** children during 2015/16. **6** of these children are now living with their adoptive families and court outcomes are outstanding for **10**. **4** children later had their care plans changed from adoption; 2 of these have

had permanent placements with relatives secured through Special Guardianship Orders and 2 remain in foster care as the Court felt that their relationships with siblings would be better promoted under this arrangement.

The adoption panel recommended matches for **19** children with adoptive families

- **13** were matched with adopters assessed and approved by Herefordshire
- **6** were placed with adopters assessed by other agencies. Adoption orders were granted for some of these children during the year whilst others are still awaiting the granting of the final legal order.

Changes of care plan

In April 2015 there were **13** looked after children whose care plan had been changed from adoption some years before but who remained subject to Placement Orders granted by the courts to enable them to be placed for adoption. By March 31st 2016, **7** of these had been revoked and **4** further applications had been made to revoke orders. Revocation applications are currently in preparation for the remaining **2**.

In this reporting period **4** children had their care plan changed from adoption. In two cases the Court did not want to sever the relationship the child had with their siblings who were in foster care. It is likely that these **2** children will remain in foster care. Kinship carers were assessed as able to meet the needs of **2** other children, and one is now subject to a Special Guardianship Order.

Timeliness

This is reported annually in the national adoption scorecards, which take a three year average. The 2014/15 scorecard reported Herefordshire's performance as better than both our statistical neighbours and the national average. Nationally the average time it takes between a child coming into care and being placed with their adoptive family is 18 months and the average time between a council having permission to place a child for adoption and matching them with their adoptive family is 8 months. Targets for 2016/17 are 14 months and 4 months respectively.

For the 19 children matched with adopters this year the average time between coming into care and placement was 21 months. Excluding the older siblings who had been in foster care for almost six and a half years, would bring the average time down to 14.5 months. Also excluding the siblings who had previously experienced a breakdown of their first adoptive placement and therefore returned to foster care would bring the average time down to 11.5 months.

Two babies were placed for adoption at the age of three months, though one had been placed with a fostering for adoption family and moved to their care at a day old.

The average time between permission to place and placement for all 19 was 9.2 months. If the same two sibling pairs were excluded, the average reduces to 4.2 months.

The adopters

Recruitment

A student social worker is undertaking her final placement within the adoption team and conducted a small survey to help us understand what draws prospective adopters to Herefordshire and to inform future recruitment activity.

The research consisted of collating qualitative data via an email questionnaire sent out in February 2016. Seven questions were asked in respect to recruitment to 138 successful Herefordshire adopters. We received 13 responses; two responses were received from registered foster carers wishing to adopt children already in their care.

The majority of prospective adopters came to Herefordshire because they lived in the county though 25% had also contacted other agencies. Having attended an adoption information event in another authority one applicant described how they felt the workers from Herefordshire 'talked to us, rather than at us' and praised the friendly 'pop in and ask if you have any questions' approach at Herefordshire's event.

Other comments:

"It was the first agency I contacted and I got the right 'vibe' from them and friends who adopted through Herefordshire said they were very good and had a good reputation amongst adopters".

"We chose Herefordshire because they were a cut above the rest"

Much positive feedback has been received about the 'Preparing to Adopt' course which has been designed and delivered jointly with colleagues from Worcestershire's adoption service, enabling us to provide eleven stage 1 three day courses and nine stage 2 one day courses.

Quotes from prospective adopters

"We felt so well prepared in the training and our social workers were fantastic"

"the whole procedure was well thought out and thorough".

The current assessment process is in two stages with the expectation that the first stage is completed within two months and the second part within four months, though prospective adopters can take time between the two stages if they choose.

Only a minority of cases met the target for Stage1, mainly due to waiting for the return of essential information from other agencies or the potential adopters themselves. **5** applicants met the target for completion of Stage 2 within four months, but **8** missed this by only a few days.

4 prospective adoptive families are currently in Stage 2 of their assessment.

9 prospective adoptive families are nearing completion of Stage 1.

16 adoptive families recruited and assessed by the adoption team were recommended for approval by the adoption panel and this was supported by the Agency Decision Maker during the year.

10 approved adoptive families are waiting to be matched with a child/ren, **1** of these has a child placed under a Fostering for Adoption arrangement.

3 families have links progressing towards matches in the next few weeks, **2** of these are with children from other local authorities and so will generate income for Herefordshire.

3 year comparison	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
ADM decisions for adoption	28	22	20
Children matched	22	26	19
Adoption orders granted	16	19	29
Adopters approved	19	16	16

Comments from Avriel Reader, independent chair of the adoption panel

“The panel continue to consider that the reports to the panel regarding approvals and matches are of a high standard. The Child Permanence Reports are generally very well completed, this document is a vital part of the child's ability to understand their adoption journey and to assist the adopters in telling the child about their 'story'. The administration of the panel is excellent.

There has been an overall improvement in the timeliness of matches coming to panel which benefits the child and the adopters.

The feedback to the panel about the experience of attending panel by prospective adopters and professional staff continues to be positive. It is also important to note that the feedback for the overall process is generally very good with one exception. Prospective adopters comment on the lateness of the 'Lifestory' Books, so vital in helping to answer questions from their children. Up until recently these were completed by other than the child's social worker, the change in this process could significantly affect this important work.”

Support to adoptive families

Adoption support assessments leading to applications to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) have secured funding for **14** families to receive therapeutic support which would not otherwise be available, amounting to almost £60,000.

Successful 'Family Fun' days have provided the opportunity for adopted children and their families to get together in an informal setting and regular workshops for adopters have been

held with subjects such as the Secure Base model, therapy surgeries and supporting children through primary and secondary education.

124 adoptive families comprising **159** children and **6** young adults are supported to maintain contact with birth family members via the Letterbox system.

Other statutory responsibilities

- Counselling, seeking and sharing information with adopted adults
- Counselling and supporting birth family members who have lost/are likely to lose a child through adoption
- Counselling and assessing those wishing to adopt through the non agency route- usually step-parents.

The national picture

The Department for Education published 'Regionalising adoption' in June 2015 and 'Adoption: A vision for change' in March 2016, outlining plans to radically redesign the whole adoption system- the structures, systems and workforce. Concern is expressed at the reduction of the numbers of children local authorities have put forward for adoption since September 2013.

In order to deliver their vision:

- new service models are proposed, delivered through Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) working together to deliver adoption services. By 2017 local authorities are expected to have effective plans and proposals in place and by 2020 all local authorities are to be part of a RAA or will have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA;
- action will be taken to change the law to ensure that quality of care and stability of placement are properly prioritized;
- there will be a new focus on equipping the workforce with the requisite skills;
- there will be investment in the development of a national matching infrastructure and innovative matching methods and an increase in the use of early placement;
- provision of effective, multi-agency support to adoptive families is expected, supported by an extension of the Adoption Support Fund, access to mental health services for vulnerable children and expansion of the role of virtual schools heads and training for teachers on the impact of trauma and loss on children's learning;
- strong performance management and accountability will be embedded by sharper use of data and a revised inspection framework alongside enhancing the voice of adopters to shape the future design of adoption services.

Next steps for Herefordshire

Following the decision not to proceed with the West Mercia adoption project in March 2015, we have continued to work collaboratively with Worcestershire adoption service in delivering training for prospective adopters and in securing matches for our children and adopters.

However, it is not thought that the two authorities working in this way in collaboration with a VAA will meet the DfE's criteria as a RAA. Discussions are ongoing with Birmingham to consider whether a partnership with them and a combination of VAAs would benefit Herefordshire children and families and meet the DfE's objectives to radically improve adoption provision through swifter placement of children in permanent homes and a better range of support services for adoptive families.

A new Children and Social Work Bill to be announced in the Queen's speech in May 2016 is designed to further speed up the adoption process and address the decline in numbers of decisions being made by councils to pursue adoption and the number of placement orders being granted by the courts.

Interpretation of recent court judgements (re B, June 2013 and re B-S, September 2013) is believed to be responsible for this decline. The central message from these judgements is that adoption decisions must be based on strong evidence and a later judgement (re R, 2014), stated 'where adoption is in the child's best interests, local authorities must not shy away from seeking, nor courts from making, care orders with a plan for adoption, placement orders and adoption orders'.

In order to achieve this, the care planning process for looked after children has to be robust and transparent, with social workers in all teams equipped and supported by managers and legal advisors to gather and present evidence and realistic care plans which will be accepted by the courts, including timescales for family finding. When placement orders are granted, progress of the child's care plan is monitored via the LAC review process at 3 months and then 6 months later, when consideration must be given as to whether adoption is still the appropriate care plan or the plan should be changed and an application made to revoke the placement order.

Hilary Hale

Adoption service manager

04.05.2016