

Adoption Service Annual Report 2016-17

OFSTED Registration:

1. Introduction

Under the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014 (NMS), cabinet should receive updates on the management, outcomes and financial state of the adoption service; it is open to cabinet to identify additional or alternative actions to improve performance but in doing so regard must be had to the resource implications of additional actions.

The NMS are issued by the Secretary of State under sections 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000 and are issued for use by Ofsted who take them into account in their inspections.

Standard 25.6 states that:

The executive side of the local authority

- receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months;
- monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users;
- satisfies itself that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

Standard 18.3 states that:

- The executive side of the local authority formally approves the statement of purpose and children's guides and reviews them at least annually

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. In order to deliver their vision new service models were 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.

During 2016 Herefordshire and Birmingham City Council explored the potential of jointly becoming a RAA, alongside partners from voluntary adoption agencies. This proved not to be viable and Herefordshire have now expressed a formal interest in joining Adoption Central England (ACE), currently comprising Coventry, Warwickshire, Solihull and Worcestershire. ACE's plans to 'go live' as a RAA are well advanced and as a late entrant Herefordshire will be expected to accept plans already agreed by their board.

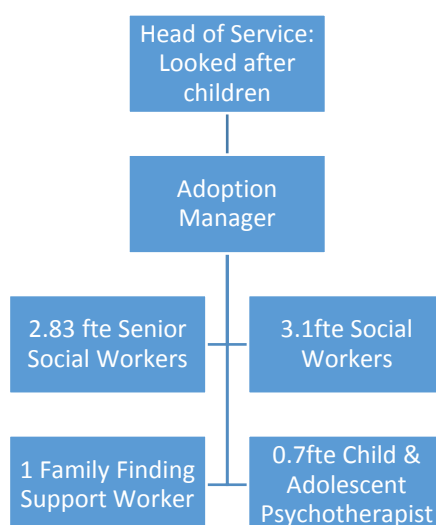
A provisional draft plan has been presented to the ACE Executive Group which proposed a separate but aligned project to consider Herefordshire, and Birmingham who have also expressed interest, joining after the RAA goes live. Given that this would double the size of the RAA, discussions took place with the DFE regarding funding this project. The DFE has indicated that this seemed to be a sensible approach and that they would be receptive to a request for funding the work necessary for Herefordshire to make the transition, but unfortunately the announcement of a general election has resulted in a period of purdah and delay in signing off any further monies until September.

2. Establishment

In January 2017 a consultation on proposed changes to the management structure within the Children's Wellbeing Directorate was announced, resulting in a new post of children's social work manager (CSWM), combining elements of the previous team manager and service manager roles and deletion of both previous roles. A senior practitioner role was introduced to offer advice and support to social workers and to give managers more time to focus on the core aspects of the new role. Each CSWM will have responsibility for a social work team and some strategic duties. In the adoption service this has resulted in the loss of the previous service manager post and from March 1st 2017, confirmation of the previous team manager Gill Smith as CSWM for adoption. A decision was made that rather than introduce a senior practitioner role into the adoption team, the senior social worker posts (who are a grade below senior practitioners) would be retained; minimising change given the likely future changes which will be required when we join a regional adoption agency.

The posts of Letterbox co-ordinator and Panel co-ordinator have been removed from the adoption team establishment and some of their administrative functions are now undertaken by business support. Social workers in the team have taken on other tasks previously undertaken by these post holders to ensure the service provided to adoptive and birth families is not compromised.

The adoption team currently has no vacancies.



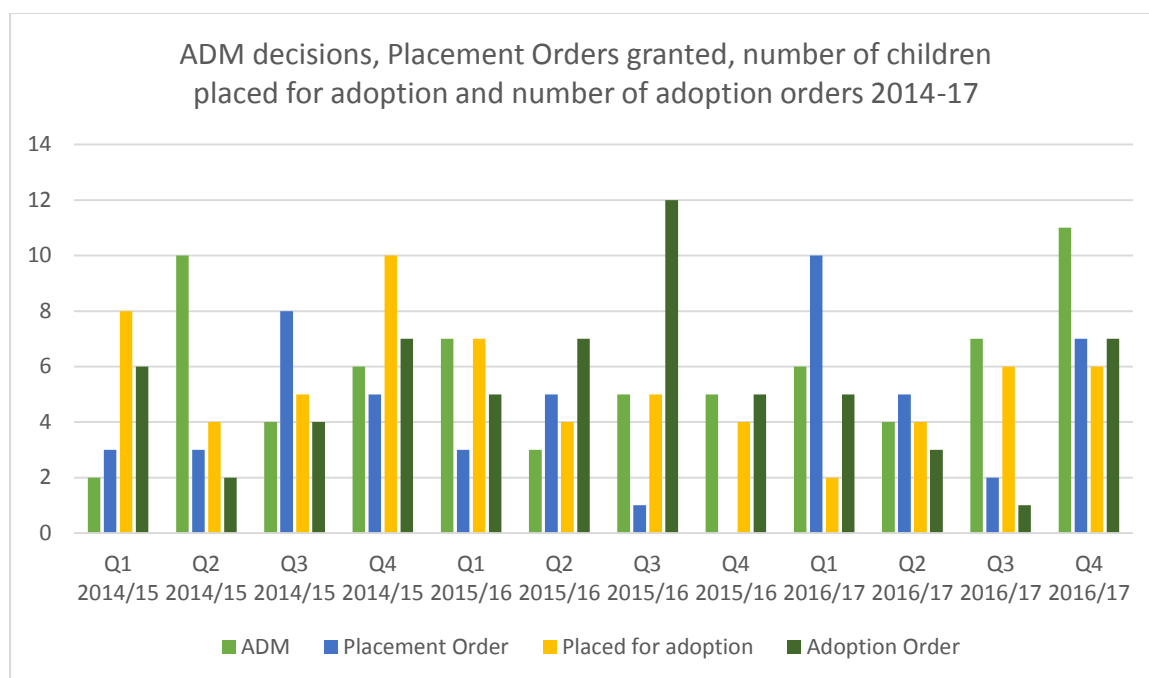
3. Children

After four months of being looked after, all children should have a plan for permanence ratified at their second LAC review. When the plan is for adoption, a child's permanence report (CPR) outlining the family history, the child's needs and why adoption is the intended plan is prepared by the child's social worker and presented to the agency decision maker (ADM). When the ADM decides adoption is the appropriate plan, this will become the care plan put to the court.

A child can only be placed for adoption if a court has granted a Placement Order or the parents have requested this and given their permission.

It is accepted that the younger a child is when placed for adoption, the better the outcome and local authorities are urged to consider placing children with foster carers who are also approved adopters so that the child does not have a change of carers.

If this is not possible, an appropriate match with prospective adopters should be identified as soon as possible, ideally by the time permission to place the child for adoption has been obtained.



The ADM decided that adoption should be the plan for 28 children in 2016/17; plans for 5 of these children have since changed. In one case concerning two siblings the court did not grant the required placement orders. In another a special guardianship order has secured the child's placement with a connected person and in two other cases the children are expected to stay with carers known to them, with their situation secured by legal orders at a later date.

24 placement orders were granted and 2 birth mothers gave consent to their children being placed for adoption. This contrasts with permission given to place 11 (9 placement orders and 2 relinquished) children in 2015/16 and a corresponding reduction from 29 adoption orders granted in 2015/16 to 16 in 2016/17.

18 children were placed with adoptive families, 2 of these joined siblings previously adopted.

4 children were matched for adoption with their foster carers and all had lived with their foster carers since discharge from hospital following their birth. 2 were placed on a fostering for adoption basis with approved adopters who were approved as foster carers for these specific children, the foster carers of the 2 other children were assessed as adopters when this became the care plan for the child after extended periods in care.

We were successful in placing two children over six years of age at time of placement, one of whom has a particularly complex history and attends a special school. We also placed a younger child thought to be affected by foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Placement orders

We have the court's permission to place 12 children for adoption. Two of these have been subject to placement orders since 2008 and their care plan changed from adoption some years ago, but the orders have not yet been revoked. Prospective adopters have been identified for the remaining 10 children.

4. Recruitment and assessment

The assessment process for adopters is in two stages with the expectation that the first stage is completed within two months and the second stage within four months, though prospective adopters can take up to 6 months between the two stages if they choose. During Stage 1 prospective adopters attend an intensive 3 day 'preparing to adopt' training course, with a further one day training in Stage 2. We provide this training in collaboration with Worcestershire adoption service, which enables us to offer Stage 1 and Stage 2 training on a monthly basis, in line with the timescales for each stage.

We had 72 enquiries over the year. 27% of those came via the website with all but one subsequently not responding to attempts to contact them, suggesting they were in the very early stages of seeking out information. Reasons for not proceeding with an expression of interest included families who had very recently finished fertility treatments, second time adopters whose children had not been placed with them for very long and couples who were in the early stages of a new relationship – all of whom were advised to take more time before commencing the adoption process.

We held an information event in the autumn of 2016 which was attended by 4 families, 2 of whom expressed interest in proceeding. One needed to complete building works on their home and the other was advised to take more time given they had only recently completed IVF treatment. We have a further event planned for June 2017.

During the year we accepted 14 Registration of interests (ROI), all of whom progressed to a Stage 2 assessment, with a further 2 ROI's issued to families who had previously been approved by Herefordshire but have not yet been returned. A further 3 families will be commencing Stage 1 within the month.

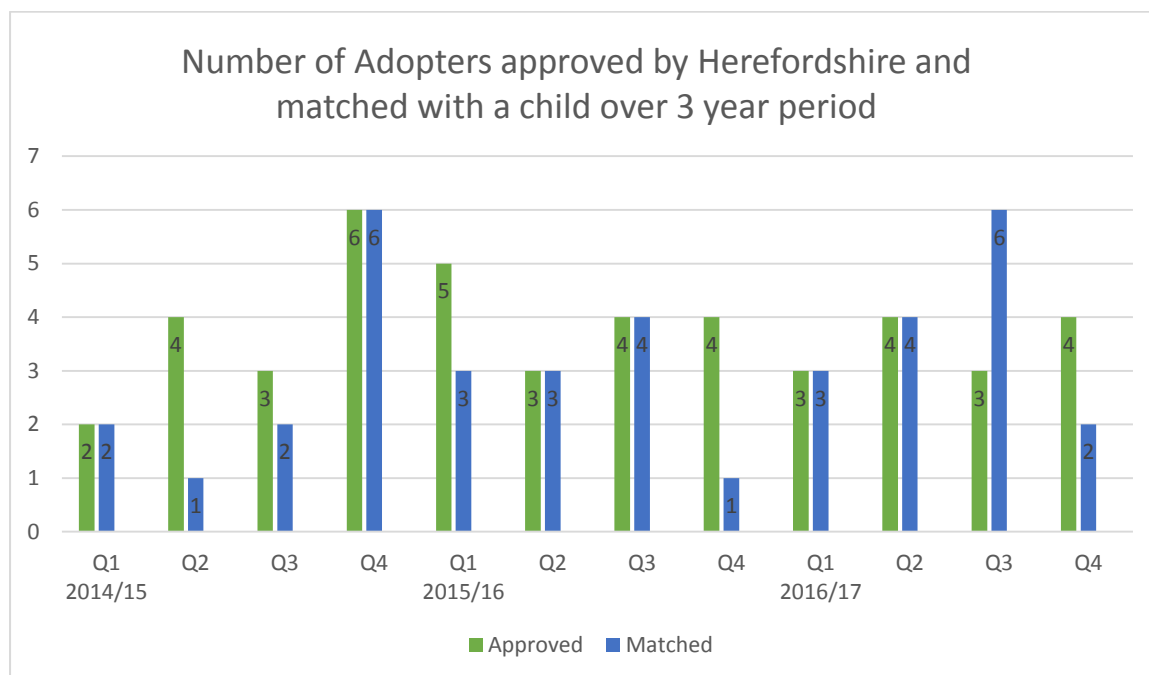
6 of the 14 were 'fast track assessments', a process whereby certain previous adopters and foster carers bypass Stage 1 and enter the process directly at Stage 2. Four of these were previously approved adopters (3 previously approved by Herefordshire and 1 from a neighbouring authority) and 2 were foster carers wishing to adopt the child they were caring for.

At the end of the year we had 6 families in stage 1 and 2 families in Stage 2.

In 2016-17 14 families were approved as adopters (compared to 15 in 2014/15 and 16 in 2015/16) and at the end of the year we had 6 families with children placed but adoption order not yet granted and one family providing a foster for adoption placement. 6 families were still waiting for a match although 2 are due to go to Panel in May and June and one is actively being explored as a potential match for a Herefordshire child.

During this year 4 families left the process. 2 withdrew from their Stage 2 assessment following concerns regarding their suitability to adopt being raised by the assessing social worker and 2 families withdrew following their approval, having decided that adoption was not the right way forward for them as a family.

Of the 15 matches made with Herefordshire approved adopters over the last year, 13 were with Herefordshire children, 2 of which were with their former foster carers. 3 Herefordshire adoptive families were temporarily approved as foster carers to enable them to provide a fostering for adoption placement and 2 children from other LA's were placed with Herefordshire approved families, which will provide income of £54,000.



5. Adoption panel

Report from Panel Chair, Avriel Reader.

As in previous years the panel consider reports regarding approvals of prospective adopters and for matches are of a consistently high standard. Child Permanence Reports (CPR) on children are generally well completed, in the main they contain a good level of information about the child's family background. These are vital documents for the child/young person and the adopters in enabling them as much understanding as possible about the adoption journey.

Herefordshire continue to recognise the importance of bringing timely matches to panel and this is reflected in their performance against other adoption agencies.

Excellent matches continue to be made for children and there continues to be a very low disruption rate. A recent example was the impressive matching of five children from one family which included children with additional needs. The birth family consistently failed to meet the needs of several of the children over a long period of time, leaving them confused and traumatised. Considerable efforts were made to secure adoptive families who would support direct contact in the future.

Additional members of the panel have been recruited recently including an adopted person, experienced social worker and adoptive parent. Panel members continue to be very committed to attending panels which are always quorate. We need to continue to attempt to recruit further

members to increase the diversity of the membership and would particularly welcome expressions of interest from those from the minority ethnic communities in Herefordshire.

Feedback to panel by attendees is regularly sought and remains positive.

By way of constructive comment to aid continuous development the panel have noted the following concerns at times:

- Given recent changes in management arrangements the panel is concerned that the quality assurance role of supervisors to all reports may not be seen as a priority given the pressures the roles bring. As mentioned earlier the quality and accuracy of reports is essential in the long term for all parties in the adoption process.
- Of particular concern are the changes in the coordination and administration of the panel. In the past the adoption service had a dedicated and an experienced coordinator and minute taker (this included back up for occasional emergencies or very long panels). More recently we have seen several different minute takers who have very little knowledge or experience of the context or regulations relating to this important function (it is on the basis of accurate minutes and the panel paperwork that the Agency Decision Maker makes the important decision to approve adopters or matches, to defer or to not approve). At present with several minute takers the chair has to spend considerable time amending/changing the minutes. To address this issue in a positive way the chair of the fostering panel (where the same issues apply) and myself have offered to assist all potential minute takers with some additional specific training with support from the agency advisors.
- Previous comments to the panel directly have highlighted the lateness of 'Lifestory Books' which along with the CPR and the 'later life letter' are the key elements in a child/young person's growing understanding of their adoption journey. Getting this right is essential for a child's future self-esteem and mental health given the trauma and complexity of their early life experiences. We hope that social workers will be allocated sufficient capacity to complete these important tasks which are inevitably time consuming. This is particularly critical where older children are placed as they will be asking questions of their adoptive parents at an early stage in their placement.
- The panel have noted a trend recently where children having plans for adoption have been at home with birth parents and were subject to Local Authority safeguarding scrutiny processes but continued to be subject to 'significant harm' prior to becoming looked after e.g. the previously mentioned large sibling group.

6. Post adoption support

11 applications have been made to the adoption support fund (ASF) this year, resulting in adoptive families receiving specialist therapeutic support to the value of £25,497.76. Since its implementation in May 2015 Herefordshire families have benefitted from £89,345.46 worth of therapeutic support through the ASF.

The adoption support worker has completed five adoption support assessments and has provided intensive ongoing support to 12 adoptive families over the year. In addition to this there have been many contacts with families where brief interventions, often just the opportunity to talk through particular issues, has helped them through a difficult period, preventing the need for more intensive involvement/services.

Two 'Family Fun' days have again provided the opportunity for adopted children and their families to get together in an informal setting, with the summer event being held at Hampton Court Castle, near Leominster, who kindly gave our families free admission to the grounds.

Regular workshops for adopters have been held covering subjects such as the Secure Base model, understanding children's behaviour and an introduction to therapeutic parenting using the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) approach.

Monthly support groups were offered up until December 2016 but given dwindling numbers we are consulting with adopters as to future frequency and format.

Two adopters accompanied members of the adoption team on a training day, 'Why can't my child behave?' provided by AdoptWestMids.

The Letterbox system is currently supporting the adopters of 150 children to maintain contact with members of their birth families, involving approximately 500 exchanges per year. We have also facilitated, and supervised, direct contact between 2 adopted children and their birth families.

The agency also has a statutory duty to make available support for anyone living in Herefordshire who have been affected by adoption. This includes

- Counselling, seeking and sharing birth record 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.

We received 19 enquiries from adopted adults wishing to access their birth records, 13 of which progressed to a referral. Locating and securing adoption files from across the country can be a time consuming activity and we have experienced a lot of delay with some agencies providing records.

The team has provided counselling and support to 3 pregnant women who expressed a wish to relinquish the care of their child at birth. 2 progressed with the babies being placed in foster for adoption placements and one child returned home.

We received 9 referrals to provide support birth parents whose children were in proceedings – 3 of whom engaged with adoption social workers. This is an area we need to promote, with social workers advising birth parents of the service, and encouraging them to make use of it, as early as possible in proceedings.

We received 25 non-agency adoption enquiries - all from step parents. The team have made a concerted effort to encourage people to consider alternative ways of obtaining parental responsibility and initial discussions with families focus on the lifelong implication of adoption for the child and of the need to focus on the child's needs, not the adults. If families decide to pursue an application to the court they have to give us 3 months' notice. 4 such 'notifications of intent to apply' have been received this year but only 2 have progressed to an assessment to date.

7. Training

Monthly preparation training for prospective adopters for Stage 1 and Stage 2 has been possible through working collaboratively with colleagues from Worcestershire adoption service.

Adoption workers regularly present training to foster carers on the process of family finding and moving children on to adoption.

Three members of the team undertook training in level 1 Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) through AdoptWestMids and one also completed further training to enable them to train others in the techniques. Level 2 DDP training will be available in July 2017.

Two members of the team providing support to adoptive families attended a day's course in therapeutic parenting for troubled teenagers.

Social workers from the LAC team and CP/Court teams attended training in therapeutic lifestory work.

Training on inter-country adoption has also been provided by AdoptWestMids and a very successful conference was organised by them in October 2016 for prospective adopters awaiting placements. It is planned that this will be repeated in 2017.

Workshops on planning for adoption and the preparation of Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) have been provided to the Child Protection and Court teams and AdoptWestMids will be providing training in June 2017 on CPRs, sibling assessments and the Social Work Evidence Template.

A 'buddying' system has been introduced whereby adoption social workers support children's social workers without adoption experience through the process.

Performance and quality assurance

Regional and national data for 2016/17 is not available for comparison at the time of writing. Draft adoption scorecards for 2015/16, which include three year averages, have been circulated and were due to be published in May 2017 but with the recent announcement of a general election this will be delayed. It is reported that 29% of Herefordshire LAC children were adopted in 2015/16, which is an improvement on the preceding two years and on the England average of 15%. The 3 year average was 21% with the England average at 16%.

56% of Herefordshire's children (3 year average) are reported as waiting less than 16 months between becoming looked after and moving in with their adoptive family, compared to the England average of 55%.

The target for 2016/17 is 14 months.

No of days	14/15	15/16	16/17	Target	3yr average
Becoming LAC to placement for adoption	515	706	467	426	561
Permission to place to match with adopters	245	333	132	121	238

As reported in the annual report for 2015/16, the cohort of children placed for adoption included two sibling pairs, one of which had been in foster care for more than six years and the other had previously been placed for adoption but had returned to foster care before being successfully placed the second time. This resulted in an average of 706 days between coming into care and being placed for adoption. The length of time between coming into care and moving in with their adoptive families and between having permission to place and match for these four children will impact on

the adoption scorecard for the next two years, creating poor 'headlines' for what are very positive outcomes for these children.

The average for 2016/17 is similarly affected by the placement of a six year old with additional needs who had been in care for almost three years; the original plan had been to place for adoption with a sibling and time was taken to assess the effect of placing the children separately and then testing this out before seeking separate adoptive placements.

Complaints, compliments, comments

Feedback is sought from prospective adopters, adoptive parents and social workers from within the council and from other agencies at various times throughout the adoption process. The preparation training for adopters is universally praised in terms of content and presentation and social workers involved in introductions of Herefordshire children to their adopters report very favourably on the thoroughness of the planning and the support provided during the transition from foster family to adoptive family, with the intervention of the child and adolescent therapist very much appreciated. Adopters overwhelmingly express their satisfaction with the service they have received from the adoption team and many compliments are received about individual social workers and the joy brought to them by becoming adoptive families.

No formal complaints or LADO's have been received, but there continue to be frustrations about the time taken for life story books and later life letters to be provided for children placed for adoption. To meet regulatory requirements these should be provided within ten days of the celebration hearing following the granting of the adoption order.

8. Key achievements during 2016-17

- Placement of 2 children over 6 years of age, 2 children placed with siblings already adopted, 2 relinquished children placed from birth
- 2 children were adopted by their foster carers
- Placements found for 4 siblings from a BME background
- 24 placement orders granted
- 18 children placed for adoption
- 3 fostering for adoption placements made for infants under 8 weeks old.
- Applications to the adoption support fund enabling Herefordshire adoptive families to benefit from specialist therapeutic support worth £25,497.76

9. Key priorities for development during 2017-18

- Acceptance into a Regional Adoption Agency
- Whole system approach to fostering for adoption and its consideration for all children
- Training for CP/Court workers in planning for permanence and adoption
- Improve timeliness between becoming looked after and placed in adoptive families