

Adoption Service Annual Report 2017-18

OFSTED Registration: SC057941

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

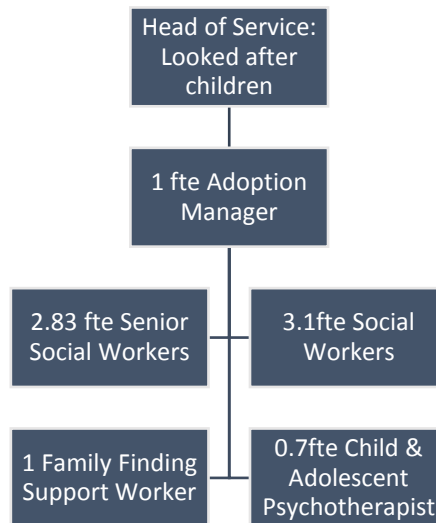
The Department for Education published 'Regionalising adoption' in June 2015 and 'Adoption: A vision for change' in March 2016, outlining plans to radically redesign the whole adoption system- the structures, systems and workforce. In order to deliver their vision new service models were proposed, delivered 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 to 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 then expressed a formal interest in joining Adoption Central England (ACE), comprising Coventry, Warwickshire, Solihull and Worcestershire.

A provisional draft plan was 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 went live. The DFE were approached to consider additional funding for this however this decision was put on hold with the announcement of a general election last year. Discussions recommenced in late autumn 2017 and Herefordshire's application is due to be presented to the ACE Executive Board on 15th May 2018. ACE went live on 1st February 2018. Pending the views of ACE Executive Board a decision report regarding Herefordshire joining ACE will be brought to Cabinet in due course.

2. Establishment

As of 31.03.18 the adoption team had no vacancies.



3. Children

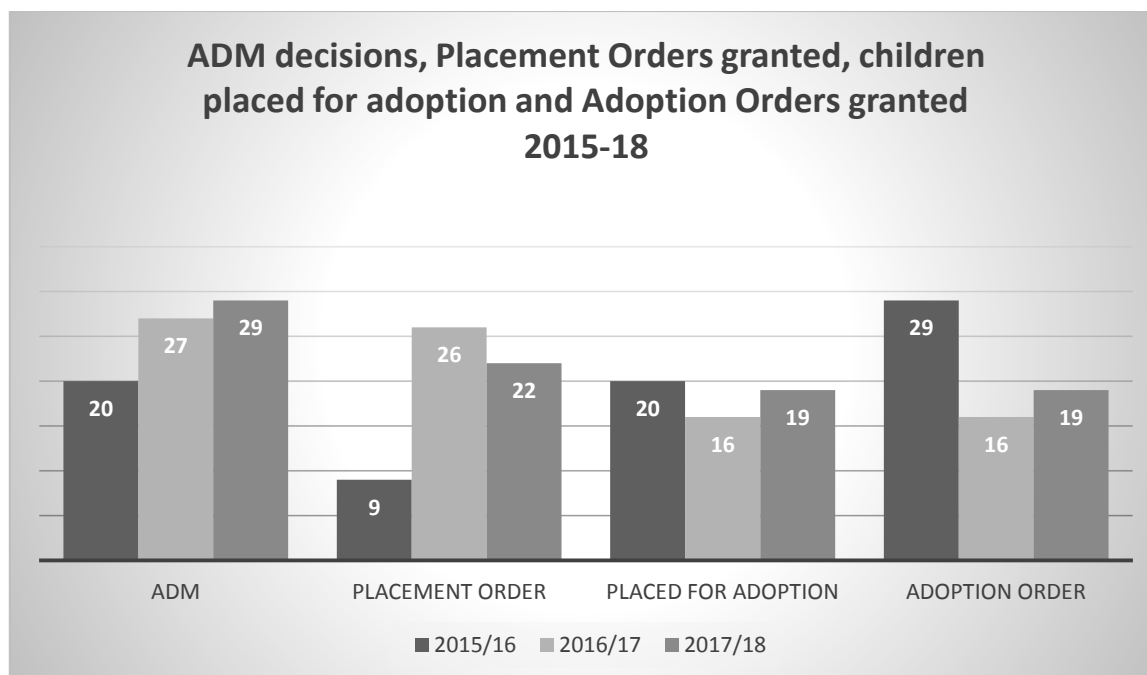
After four months of being looked after, all children should have a plan for permanence ratified at their second LAC review. When the plan is for adoption, a child's permanence report (CPR) outlining the family history, the child's needs and why adoption is the intended plan, is prepared by the child's 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.

In 2017/18 the ADM decided that adoption should be the plan for 29 children; plans for 7 of these children subsequently changed. In 5 cases the Court did not grant the requested Placement Orders and for 2 children the plan was changed through the LAC Review process.

22 Placement Orders were granted and 2 birth mothers gave consent to their child being placed for adoption.



19 children were placed with adoptive families which included a 6 ½ year old with significant emotional difficulties and 2 sibling groups. A sibling group of 5 were placed over the end of last year/beginning of this year – 2 were placed together and 3 were placed separately, and whilst the placements are nationwide all the adoptive families are very committed to maintaining regular meaningful contact for the children, promoting and maintaining the sibling relationship. One child was matched for adoption with their foster carers, who they had lived with since becoming looked after.

Placement orders

As of 31.03.18 we had 12 children with a placement order but not yet placed for adoption. Prospective adopters had been identified for 5 of these children and active family finding was ongoing for the others.

One child has been subject to a placement order since 2008 whose care plan changed from adoption some years ago, but the order has not yet been revoked.

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. Up until February 2018 we provided this training in collaboration with Worcestershire adoption service, enabling us to offer Stage 1 and Stage 2 training on a monthly basis, in line with the timescales for each stage. With Worcestershire joining the regional adoption agency, ACE, we are now providing the training as a sole agency.

With the timing of progressing to Stage 2 in the adopter's hands it is difficult to plan service delivery but to date no adopters wishing to progress have had to wait for an allocated social worker.

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We had 60 initial enquiries over the year, down from 72 last year which reflects a national trend.

We have been holding quarterly information events, where people interested in adoption can meet with members of the team and adopters.

Over the year we accepted 18 Registration of Interest (up from 14 in 2016/17) of which: 7 families have progressed to a Stage Two assessment, and a further 6 are due to progress imminently. 4 families withdrew during Stage 1 of the process and we decided not to proceed to Stage 2 with one family.

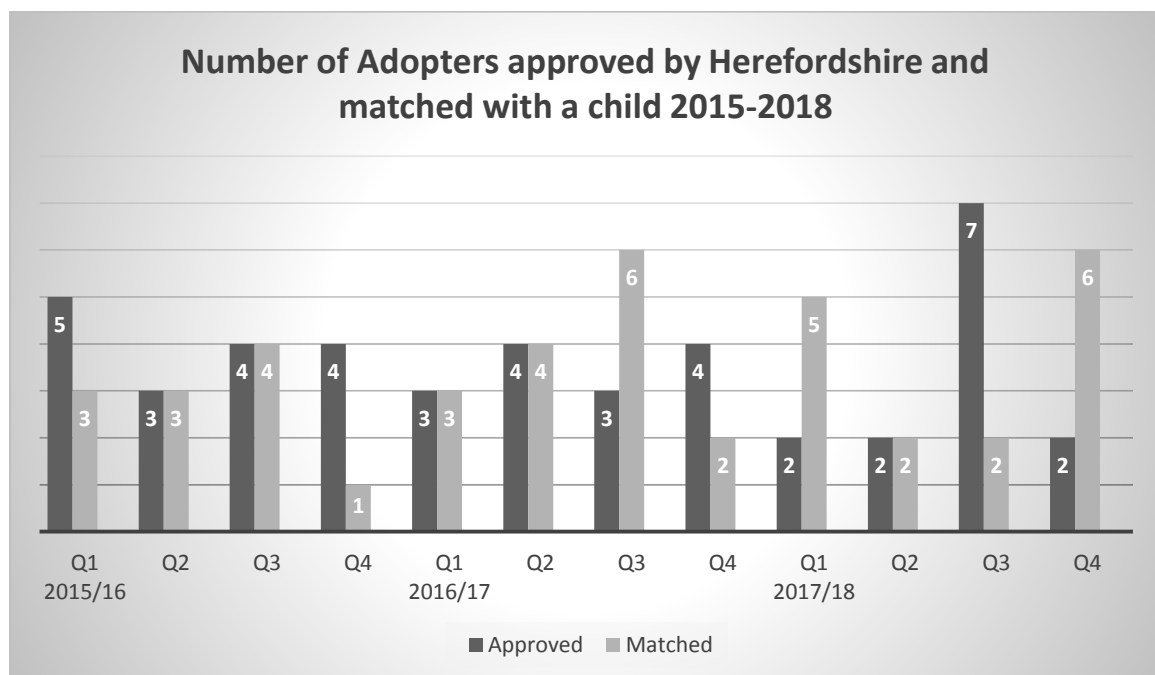
5 were 'fast track assessments', a process whereby certain previous adopters and foster carers can bypass Stage 1 and enter the process directly at Stage 2. Two of these were re-assessed specifically to enable them to be considered for a sibling of their adopted child and 1 family were in the middle of a second assessment when it was discovered that a sibling to their adopted child had been born in another LA and had a plan of adoption (they have subsequently been matched).

In 2017/18 13 families were approved as adopters (compared to 14 families in 2016/17 and 15 in 2014/15).

At the end of the year we had 9 families in Stage 1 and 2 in Stage 2. We had 4 families approved but not yet matched with a child, 2 of whom were being considered for a child.

The 2016/17 adoption scorecard indicates that 46% of Herefordshire adopters waited less than 3 months from being approved to being matched with a child; this compares with the England average of 26% and compared to our 10 statistical neighbours Herefordshire performed better than 9 others.

During 2017/18 we purchased 6 placements at a cost of £151,000. 2 children from other Local Authorities were placed with Herefordshire approved families, providing an income of £54,000.



5. Adoption panel

Report from Panel Chair, Avriel Reader.

“The role of the Adoption Panel is three fold

- a) to make recommendations to the Agency Decision maker(ADM) regarding adopters suitability to adopt
- b) to make recommendations to the ADM regarding the suitability of approved prospective adopters to be matched with a child
- c) to make a recommendation the ADM regarding whether a child relinquished by birth parent/s should be placed for adoption

The Adoption panel also has a responsibility to quality assure reports brought to panel and report on a regular basis to the Agency regarding quality and adherence to standards and regulations.

Child Permanence Reports (CPR) which are presented to panel at matching are generally of a good standard and in the main contain a good level of information. Sometimes gaps in knowledge about a child and his or her birth family could be more thoroughly researched. This information is critical to enable a good match to be made, to ensure the adopters have sufficient information to enable them to ‘tell a child their story’ and to enable the child/young person to understand their adoption journey. This understanding is critical to their self esteem and sense of self.

The adoption team is fortunate to have a very stable, experienced and committed group of staff who are clearly well managed. The reports prepared to assist in the approval process – Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR) continue to be of a very high standard which assists the adoption panel in making strong recommendations to the ADM. The number of prospective adopters coming to panel remains similar year on year with a slight reduction this year at 13.

Herefordshire continue to recognise the importance of bringing timely matches to panel which is reflected in the reducing timescales from becoming looked after to being placed for adoption (381), this is now well below the national target(426). Reducing this timescale is critical for enabling children to be placed as young as possible in their permanent home. Disruptions to placements remain low. It is recognised that one of the critical components of successful outcomes for adoption is the provision of adoption support post placement. Herefordshire have successfully bid for funding from the Adoption Support Fund, this year to £22,500 which is similar to the previous year and marks the commitment to adopted children and their adoptive families.

One of the key strengths of the Herefordshire adoption service is the continued employment of a child and adolescent therapist. This service is of considerable benefit in assessing children’s needs prior to placement and assisting with transitions for the child from foster care to their adoptive placement. This service has assisted many children to make what is in many cases a very traumatic change to their new family. In some cases children who have experienced traumatic early lives and several moves are helped to try and make sense of this change and begin to make new attachments whilst being supported emotionally by the therapist, the social workers and the foster carers.

The adoption panel continues to have a committed core membership and panels are always quorate and supported by the agency advisor. The panel would benefit from inclusion of members from different ethnic and cultural groups which represent the local community and we will continue to seek new members where possible. Members of the panel have attended training based on the new methods used by the adoption team when training prospective adopters. We also attended an

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Adopt West Midlands event featuring the latest research on Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and the impact of Domestic Abuse in the developing brain of a child. Both were extremely valuable.

The panel are also supported by business support who hopefully benefitted from some training on administration of panels earlier in 2017.

By way of constructive comment in a learning organisation the panel raise the following issues.

- Sufficient time for quality assurance of all reports to panel continues to be important in maintaining standards and to ensure best available information on children is available to ensure the most suitable matches with prospective adopters.
- The panel have noted that Life story work/books continue to be the responsibility of the allocated social worker. Feedback to panel from adopters continues to indicate that this work is not done in a timely fashion or not done at all. Social Workers need to be allocated sufficient time for this critical task or offered support. These 'books' along with the CPR and the later life letters are vital to a child's/young persons growing understanding of why they were adopted and if well done are critical in building self esteem and emotional health, without them key building blocks to their understanding will be missing. It is particularly critical that this information is available early in placement for older children as they will be questioning their adopters at a very early stage in their development. It is continuing good practice that adopters are offered the opportunity to attend 'telling courses'. Many local authorities are reviewing their support to this vital service recognising that social workers need support to achieve the standards required"

6. Post adoption support

We have secured £22,500 of funding for specialised therapeutic support through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) this year to support 10 of our adoptive families.

We received 24 requests for adoption support assessments, which resulted in the provision of 8 adoption support assessments (and applications to the ASF) alongside ongoing support from an adoption social worker. 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.

Regular workshops for adopters have been held covering subjects such as 'talking to your child about being adopted', understanding children's behaviour and therapeutic parenting. Support is also offered through consultations with our Child and Adolescent Therapist.

With dwindling numbers at monthly support groups we consulted with adopters as to what they would find helpful. In response an adopter has now set up a support group run by adopters for adopters. This is a relatively new group but initial feedback is very positive.

The Letterbox system is currently supporting the adopters of over 150 children to maintain contact with members of their birth families, involving approximately 500 exchanges of news per year. 52 new agreements were made during the year.

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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 17 enquiries from adopted adults wishing to access their birth records, 14 of which had progressed to a referral by the end of the year. 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 and Courts 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 accommodated and one child returned home.

We received 12 referrals to provide support to birth parents whose children were in proceedings.

We received 31 non-agency adoption enquiries (all from step parents) – an increase from 2016/17 of over 25%. We continue 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. It is encouraging to note that whilst the number of enquiries has risen the number of applications made to court has decreased, with only one being made during the year.

7. Training

In addition to the 'preparing to adopt' training for prospective adopters, adoption social workers also contribute to the training programme for foster carers on the process of family finding and moving children on to adoption.

Two members of the team undertook training in level 2 Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) and two completed Theraplay Level 1 training – both through AdoptWestMids. This training will be cascaded throughout the service, promoting understanding of the benefits of an attachment based style of parenting.

Workshops on planning for adoption and the preparation of Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) have been provided to the LAC and Child Protection and Court teams and training on sibling assessments is planned for the near future.

Adoption social workers continue to offer a 'buddying' system to support children's social workers without adoption experience through the process.

8. Performance and quality assurance

Regional and national data for 2017/18 is not available for comparison at the time of writing however the adoption scorecard for 2016/17 has recently been released.

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Children			
	A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)	A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days)	A3: Children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)
LA's 3 year average (2014-17)	547	255	50 (50%)
Distance from 2014-17 performance threshold (426 and 121 days)	121 days	134 days	n/a
1 year trend - Improvement from 2016 to 2017	Average time in 2017 was shorter than in 2016	Average time in 2017 was shorter than in 2016	n/a
3 year trend - Improvement from 2013-16 to 2014-17	Average time in 2014-17 was longer than in 2013-16	Average time in 2014-17 was longer than in 2013-16	n/a
England 3 year average (2014-17)	520	220	11120 (53%)

As reported last year, our 3 year average figures for indicators A1 and A2 will continue to be impacted by the cohort of children including 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. The 'headline' figure does not reflect the very positive outcomes for these children. Similarly the successful placement of 2 six year old siblings within the last 12 months, who had been accommodated for almost 3 years prior to moving in to their adoptive family, will 'skew' future figures. However this should be celebrated as a great achievement for these children.

Without these 'legacy' cases, figures for 2017- 18 show the average number of days for indicator A1 reduced to 381 (well below the threshold of 426) and A2 reduced to 134 days.

	Number of days					
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	3yr average	Target	2017/18
A1 Becoming LAC to placement for adoption	515	706	467	547	426	381
A2 Permission to place to match with adopters	245	333	132	255	121	134

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22% of Herefordshire LAC children were adopted from care over 2014-17 compared with the England average of 15%. In comparison with our 10 statistical neighbours Herefordshire performed better than 9 others, with percentages ranging from 8 to 23.

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 support offered by them in becoming adoptive families.

Prospective adopters often comment that they have approached a number of adoption agencies and chose to proceed with Herefordshire due to the friendly, efficient response they received during their initial enquiries.

One complaint was received in relation to the Letterbox process, but was not upheld.

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.

9. Key achievements during 2017-18

- 22 placement orders granted
- 19 children placed for adoption including 2 sibling groups and 2 children placed with their sibling who had already been adopted.
- 13 adoptive families trained, assessed and approved
- 29 ADM decisions for children
- 19 adoption orders granted for Herefordshire children
- Applications to the adoption support fund enabling Herefordshire adoptive families to benefit from specialist therapeutic support worth £22,500

10. Key priorities for development during 2018-19

- Acceptance into a Regional Adoption Agency
- Improve early permanence planning to increase numbers of children placed in fostering to adopt placements and improve timeliness between court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- Improved timeliness of life story books and later life letters and quality of child permanence reports
- Develop therapeutic support available for adoptive families