

Adoption Service Annual Report 2019-20

OFSTED Registration: SC057941

1. Executive summary

The adoption service is considered to be a well performing area of Children's social care. This report sets out performance and achievements during 2019/20 and priorities for 2020/21.

The service joined the regional adoption service, Adoption Central England (ACE), as planned on the 1st July 2019. Full year data from ACE is not yet available and so performance information as at the end of quarter 3 is included to enable comparisons across the ACE region.

2. 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.

All local authorities were required to be part of a regional adoption agency, or to have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA, by 2020. Following Cabinet approval Herefordshire joined ACE on the 1st July 2019. ACE is a partnership between Warwickshire, Coventry, Solihull, Worcestershire and Herefordshire.

The service operates on a Hub and Spoke model of service delivery. The service is hosted by Warwickshire County Council which operates as one Hub with a second Hub across the south of the region. There are offices (spokes) in Coventry, Solihull, Warwick, Worcester and Hereford.

ACE provides the following services:

- Recruitment, preparation and assessment of adoptive parents.
- Family finding and specific recruitment.
- Matching support and post order support to adoptive families for 12 months.
- Non agency adoption - the provision of information and court reports.
- Assessment of need for adoption support including requests to the Adoption Support Fund.
- Direct support to adoptive families including therapeutic interventions.
- Training for adopters and support groups.
- Independent Birth Parent Support Services -Family Connexions

- Training for social workers.
- Duty and advice service.
- Co-ordination of Adoption Panels across the region.

This arrangement allows for a greater strategic approach to adopter recruitment widening the potential pool of adopters for children. Adoption support services have been enhanced including the provision of therapeutic interventions that are delivered and coordinated more consistently and effectively across the region.

The local authority engagement with ACE is underpinned by a Hosting and Partnership Agreement and through the governance arrangements and partnership working there is the opportunity to ensure that the best possible outcomes are secured for children in a timely way and that adoptive families receive high quality support when they need this.

Herefordshire chose to establish an Early Permanence hub on the 1st July 2019 using resource that had previously been used within our adoption team. This hub is based within our Child Protection and Court team and provides support to Social Workers and a link with ACE to ensure children's plans for adoption progress without delay.

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). If the ADM decides adoption is the appropriate plan, this will become the care plan put to the court.

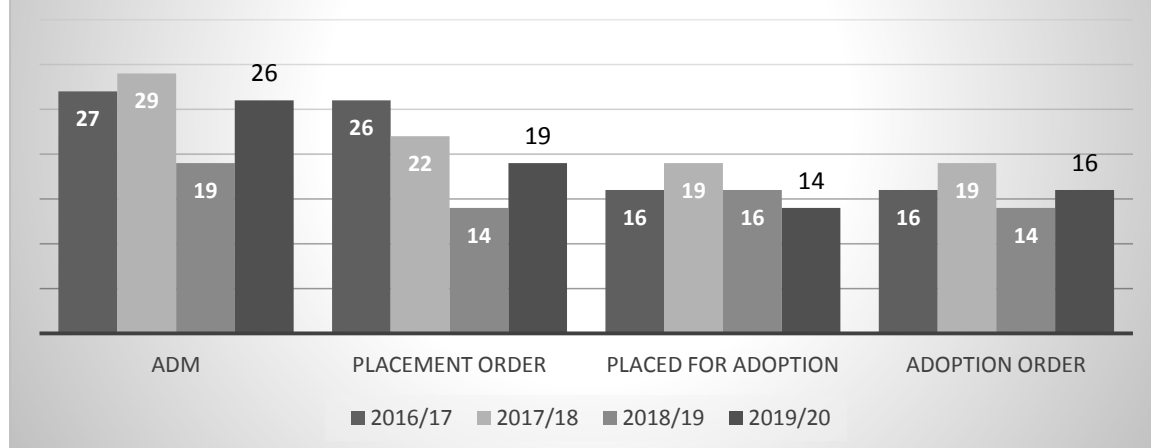
A child can only be placed for adoption if a court has granted a Placement Order or the parents have requested that their child is adopted and given their permission.

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 approved adopters who are also approved foster carers 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 2019/20 the ADM for Herefordshire adoption agency decided that adoption should be the plan for 26 children; plans for 6 of these children subsequently changed. This was an increase from 19 in 2018/19 but more in line with previous years.

19 Placement Orders were granted which is an increase from 14 in 2019/20 but again only a little lower than years previous.

ADM decisions, Placement Orders granted, children placed for adoption and Adoption Orders granted 2016-20



14 children were placed with adoptive families, which included 1 sibling group and two children being matched with their foster carers. 16 adoption orders were granted during the year.

As of 31st March 2020 there were 16 children where a Placement Order had been granted but they were not yet matched. The children who had been waiting the longest are a sibling group of 4 who had their Placement Order granted in September 2018. Their foster carer is being assessed as a prospective adopter for the children.

No adoption disruptions have occurred this year.

4. Early permanence hub

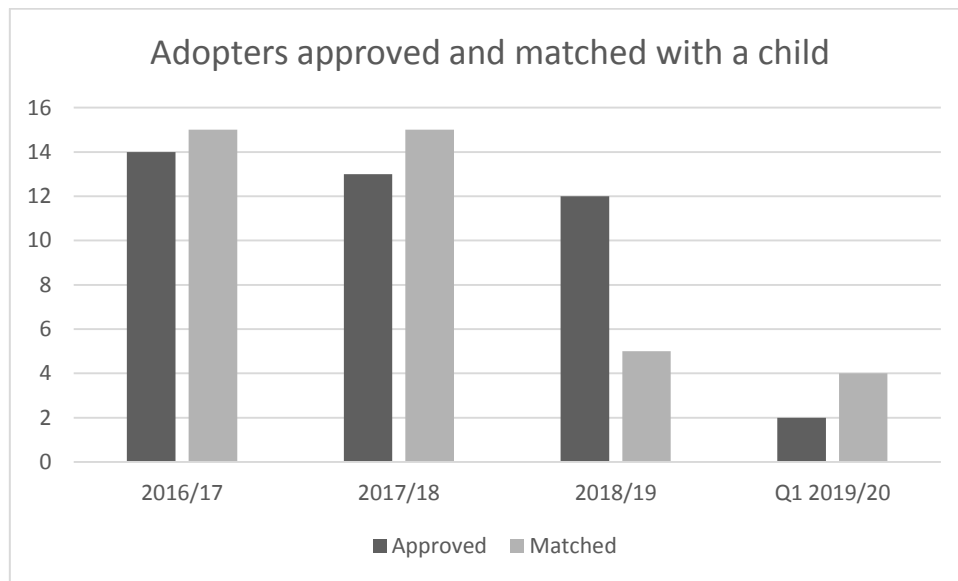
The Early Permanence hub is based within the Child Protection and Court teams and consists of a Senior Social Worker, a Family Support Worker and a Child and Adolescent therapist. All of these posts were part of our Adoption Service prior to joining ACE. It was identified during the planning for implementation that a number of important functions undertaken by our previous adoption service were not within the service specification for ACE. This included the Child and Adolescent therapist preparing children for adoption, quality assurance of adoption reports, tracking of children with a plan for adoption, matching of children who are not “hard to place” and support and quality assurance of adoption support plans.

The Early Permanence hub has proved invaluable in supporting the work of adoption – ensuring that assessments and reports are of good quality, family finding is completed in a timely way and children are well prepared for their move to adoptive families.

5. Recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters

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.

In quarter 1 of 2019/20 two families were approved as adopters. 8 families had been approved through Stage 1 and 5 families were approved but not yet formally matched with a child.



ACE have a target of approving 125 adopters during the year. At the end of quarter 3 there were 70 prospective adopters approved and so the target was unlikely to be met. Only 17% of adopters completed stage 2 of the assessment within the target of 4 months and 41% within 5 months. This is an area for improvement within ACE.

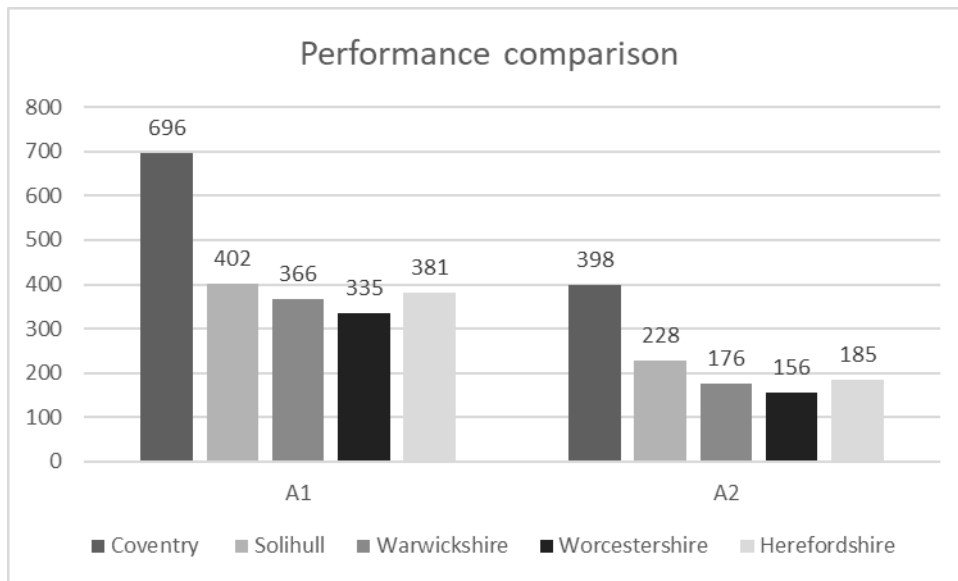
However the number of inter-agency placements made by ACE during the year is low with just 5 at the end of December 2019 which demonstrates that ACE are able to match most children from the pool of ACE approved adopters. During 2018-19 Herefordshire alone purchased 6 inter-agency placements so as anticipated joining ACE has resulted in a greater choice of adopters for Herefordshire children.

6. Performance and quality assurance

Regional and national data for 2019/20 is not available for comparison at the time of writing. However the graphs below shows performance for April to December 2019 within the ACE region in relation to key national performance indicators. Herefordshire is achieving better than the national indicators.

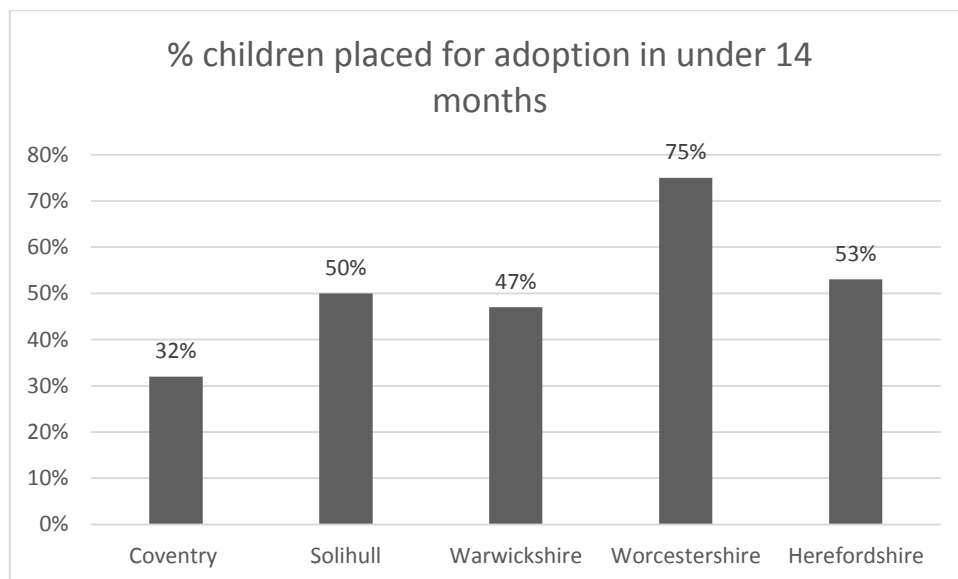
A1 – Number of days between the date child became looked after and date they are placed for adoption. Target is below 468 days.

A2 – Number of days between the Placement Order being granted and the match being approved. Target is below 244 days.



Herefordshire is a long way above the national target for the third performance indicator.

A3 – Percentage of children who are placed for adoption in under 14 months from the date they become looked after. Target is 100%.



Herefordshire has continued to have a large number of adopted children who have had to wait for life story books and later life letters. On the 31st March 2020 37 children were waiting for these important pieces of work. Work to reduce the backlog has been slow during this year due to increased numbers of looked after children and the consequent demand for supervised contact which has to be prioritised by the looked after children's support team. Additional resource has been agreed for the team and the recent Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for staff to work almost full-time on life story work as direct contact for children is not taking place. It is anticipated that the backlog will be cleared by 30th June 2020 and thereafter will be monitored closely to ensure that this difficulty does not re-occur.

7. Progress on key priorities for 2019-20

- Transition of the current adoption team into the regional adoption agency – this was achieved smoothly to timescale.
- Development of the early permanence hub to support and promote timeliness between court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family – Early Permanency hub is fully staffed and is effective in supporting care planning for children with a care plan of adoption and reducing delay.
- Improve early permanence planning to increase numbers of children placed in fostering to adopt placements - 4 children were placed in foster to adopt placements which increased from two during 2018/19.
- Improved timeliness of life story books and later life letters and quality of child permanence reports – there remains a significant backlog of life story books and later life letters although this has reduced a little during the year. Plans are in place to eliminate the backlog by end of June 2020. The support provided by the early permanence hub is effective in supporting Social Workers to produce child permanence reports of a good standard. Further work is required to enable Social Workers to produce reports of the standard required with less support from the early permanency hub.

8. Key priorities for improvement during 2019-20

- Pre-birth planning and increase in children placed in foster to adopt placements
- To improve timeliness of children placed for adoption
- Adopted children and their family are provided with a life story book and later life letter within 2 weeks of their Celebration hearing

Gill Cox

Head of service for looked after children