

Adoption Service Annual Report 2018-19

OFSTED Registration: SC057941

1. Executive summary

The adoption service is considered to be a well performing team within Children's Social Care. This report sets out performance and achievements during 2018/19 and priorities for 2019/20.

The adoption team is staffed by an experienced and stable group of practitioners who are able to offer advice and support to colleagues within other teams in all matters relating to adoption. The number of children adopted during 2018/19 has remained relatively stable in comparison with recent years and there has been a very small reduction in adopters being approved. Timescales for children being adopted are longer than the national target however this is due to the successful adoption of older children who had been looked after for several years.

The service will join Adoption Central England (ACE) on 1st July 2019 and so the priority for this year is to ensure a smooth transition that achieves the anticipated benefits of greater choice of adopters for children and improved adoption support whilst mitigating the risk of the change impacting upon service delivery.

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.

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 were 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 RAA which went live on 01.02.18.

Whilst the proposal was initially considered at the ACE Executive Board in May 2018. In January 2019 the ACE Executive Board gave provisional agreement to Herefordshire joining ACE, with Herefordshire Cabinet approving the recommendation on 28th February 2019. Herefordshire is due to join Adoption Central England (ACE) on the 1st July 2019.

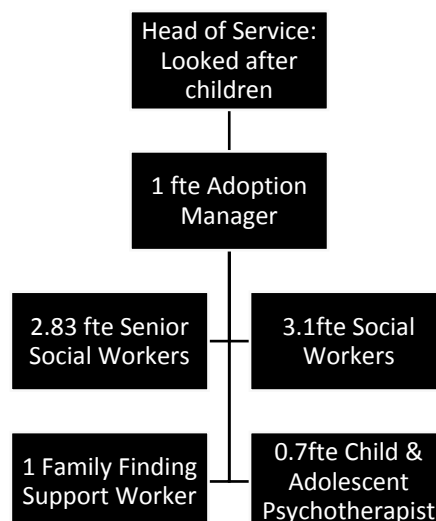
ACE is a shared local authority service based on a Hub and Spoke model of service delivery. The service is hosted by Warwickshire County Council which operates as the Hub and there are offices (Spokes) in Coventry, Solihull, Warwick and Worcester. When Herefordshire joins there will be a 'South' Hub and Spoke to cover Worcestershire and Herefordshire, with a base for ACE staff at Worcester and in our Hereford office, alongside the Child Protection and Court teams.

The gap between the current adoption service resource and funding to ACE will be used to carry out functions currently completed by our adoption service that will not be covered by ACE e.g. 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.

It has therefore been agreed that three posts from our existing adoption team (one social worker, one family support worker and the child and adolescent therapist) will be retained within Herefordshire and will move to work within our Child Protection and Court teams, as an Early Permanence Hub, with specific functions to support the work related to children with a plan for adoption.

3. Establishment

As of 31.03.19 the adoption team had no vacancies.



4. 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.

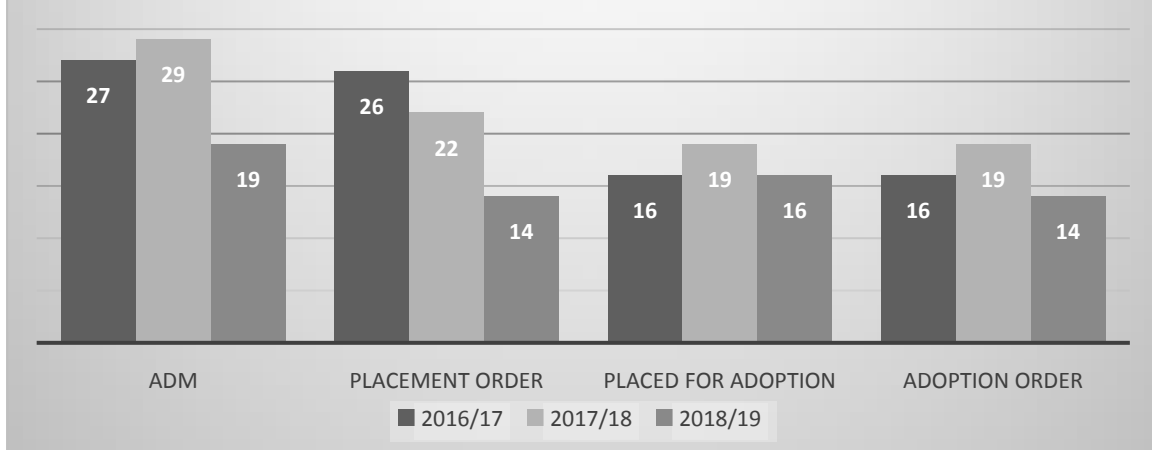
It is accepted that the younger a child is when placed for adoption, the better the outcome and local authorities are urged to consider placing children with approved adopters who are also approved foster carers so that the child does not have a change of carers. If this is not possible, an appropriate 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 2018/19 the ADM for Herefordshire adoption agency decided that adoption should be the plan for 19 children; plans for 3 of these children subsequently changed. In 2 of the cases the Court did not grant the requested Placement Orders and for the third the local authority agreed within the court process that further information regarding the child's medical needs were required before confirming a permanence plan.

14 Placement Orders were granted, down from 22 the previous year. Figures recently released by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) show that the number of care applications made by councils to family courts has hit a three-year low, falling five per cent year on year. Cafcass figures show a total of 13,536 applications made from March 2018 to April 2019, compared to 14,221 for the same period in 2017/18, a difference of 685 applications.

Cafcass has put the continuing fall in care applications down to improved edge-of-care support. The reasons for the reduction in Herefordshire are not clear but this will be monitored carefully during 2019/20 and joining ACE will enable easier comparisons with performance in other Local Authorities and shared learning from good practice.

ADM decisions, Placement Orders granted, children placed for adoption and Adoption Orders granted 2016-19



16 children were placed with adoptive families, which included 3 sibling groups, one foster to adopt placement and one child being matched with their foster carers who they had lived with since becoming looked after. 14 adoption orders were granted.

As of 31.03.19 we had 9 children with a placement order but not yet placed for adoption. This included a sibling group of 4 where it had not proved possible to identify a family for them together and 2 placements are subsequently being sought. One child was in a 'foster to adopt' placement and prospective adopters had been identified for 3 and were due to be presented to a matching Panel.

No adoption disruptions have occurred this year.

5. Recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters

We had 61 initial enquiries over the year, comparable to the 60 last year.

We have been holding quarterly information events, where people interested in adoption can meet with members of the team and 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. During Stage 1 prospective adopters attend an intensive 3 day 'preparing to adopt' training course, with a further one day training in Stage 2.

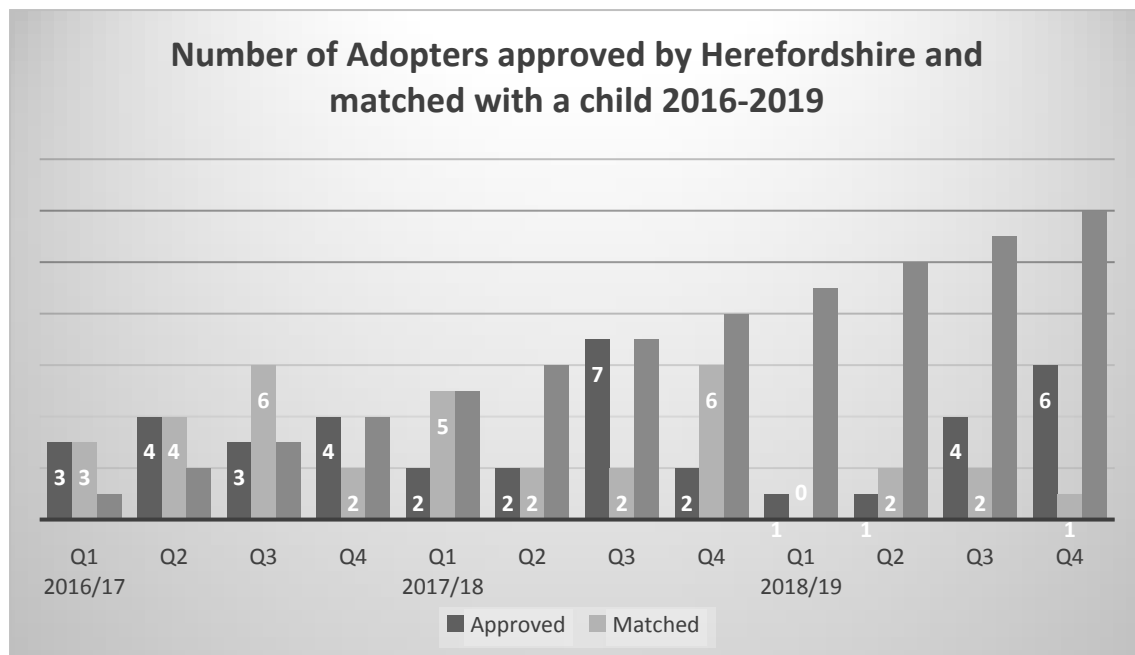
Over the year we accepted 14 Registrations of Interest (down from 18 in 2017/18) of which: 10 families have progressed to a Stage Two assessment, and the remaining 4 are due to progress imminently. One family withdrew from a Stage 2 assessment having decided adoption was not right for them.

3 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); 2 families being previously approved adopters and one being foster carers who wished to adopt the child already in their care.

In 2018/19 13 families were approved as adopters - the same number as in 2017-18 (compared to 14 families in 2016/17 and 15 in 2014/15).

At the end of the year we had 4 families in Stage 1 and 4 in Stage 2. We had 8 families approved but not yet formally matched with a child; 3 of whom were in the process of being matched.

During 2018-19 we had to purchase 6 placements at a cost of £160,500 however 2 children from other Local Authorities were placed with Herefordshire providing an income of £103,000.



6. 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 current 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 13 approvals coming to panel this year, the same as 2017/18.

Herefordshire continue to recognise the importance of bringing timely matches to panel in this year 19 children have been placed for adoption including three sibling groups. Placing siblings together where possible is shown by research to be highly beneficial to good outcomes for children and should be considered where possible. Disruptions to placements remain low indicating that careful matching processes are critical. It is recognised that one of the critical components of successful outcomes for adoption is the provision of adoption support post placement. Herefordshire have continued to use the facility of the Adoption Support Fund to aid children and families post placement.

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 offered by Adopt West Midlands event which this year focussed on placing siblings together and up to date research into contact arrangements. The training and understanding of up to date research assists the panel in making effective recommendations for children.

The panel fully understand the importance of Life Story Work for children and their adopters. This is critical in helping adopters to understand and 'tell' the child's story and for adopted children to make sense of their adoption. The panel are pleased that the agency has recognised the importance of this service and allowed additional resources to enable this work to be carried out by staff with this specific role. This indicated that the agency has listened to feedback from adopters and staff.

During the year discussions and decisions have been taking place with the Regional Adoption Agency Adoption Central England for Herefordshire to become a member. This will bring to an end the adoption panel in Herefordshire as it is currently constituted. Panel members will be offered the opportunity to transfer to that service.

On behalf of myself and panel members many of whom have served on the panel for many years with huge commitment, we hope that the children in Herefordshire who have a plan for adoption will be well served by this new service. We also hope the new service will continue to recruit and support adopters and birth parents. We were pleased to hear that some services will be retained by Herefordshire (including the child and adolescent therapist).

7. Post adoption support

During 2018/19 Herefordshire has secured over £52,000 of funding for specialised therapeutic support through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) this year to support our adoptive families, an increase of 131% from 2017/18.

We received over 40 contacts from adoptive families seeking support. Many of these contacts resulted in brief interventions, often just the opportunity to talk through particular issues has helped adoptive families through a difficult period, preventing the need for more intensive involvement or services, or signposting them to one of our workshops.

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, contact with birth family, emotional coaching, understanding children's behaviour, therapeutic parenting, Theraplay and educational needs of adopted children. Support has also been offered through consultations with our Child and Adolescent Therapist.

The Letterbox system is currently supporting the adopters of over 196 children to maintain contact with members of their birth families, involving approximately 678 exchanges of news per year. 76 new Letterbox agreements were made during the year.

The agency also has a statutory duty to make support available 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 whose child is likely to be or has been adopted
- 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, 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.

We received 20 referrals to provide support to birth parents whose children were in proceedings or had been adopted, 14 of whom engaged with the service.

The number of non-agency adoption enquiries (all from step-parents) again showed an increase – up by 7% to the previous year, with 35 enquiries being received. 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. At the end of the year we had 2 ongoing assessments.

8. Performance and quality assurance

Regional and national data for 2018/19 is not available for comparison at the time of writing however the adoption scorecard for year ending March 2018 has recently been released.

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 (2015-18)	541	227	55 (56%)
Distance from 2015-18 performance threshold (426 and 121 days)	115 days	106 days	n/a
1 year trend - Improvement from 2017 to 2018	Average time in 2018 was shorter than in 2017	Average time in 2018 was shorter than in 2017	n/a
3 year trend - Improvement from 2014-17 to 2015-18	Average time in 2015-18 was shorter than in 2014-17	Average time in 2015-18 was shorter than in 2014-17	n/a
England 3 year average (2015-18)	486	201	11010 (56%)

Whilst for Indicators A1 and A2 Herefordshire's 3 year average is slightly above the national average, the 1 and 3 year trend indicates timescales are shortening and as reported last year, our 3 year average figures will continue to be impacted by the cohort of children including a number of children who had been accommodated for a number of years prior to adoption becoming the plan. This includes two sibling pairs, one of which had been in foster care for more than six years and the other for 3 years. The 'headline' figure does not reflect the very positive outcomes for these children.

56% of our children were placed with their adoptive family within 14 months of being accommodated, with Herefordshire performing better than 8 of our statistical neighbours who ranged from 41 – 77 %.

The scorecard highlights that for Herefordshire the percentage of children aged 5 years and over leaving care who are adopted for 2015-18 was 7% compared to a national average of 5% and whilst the percentage of children leaving care being adopted remained as for the previous 3 year period at 22%, the England average dropped from 15% to 14%.

The OFSTED inspection in June 2018 identified several areas of good practice in Herefordshire's adoption service including timeliness of adoption decisions, matching decisions and post adoption support.

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 from other agencies 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 to 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.

No complaints have been received during the year.

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. However funding was agreed at the latter end of 2018 for a new 'team' within LAC Support Services, dedicated to clear the backlog which had accrued and to provide an on-going service. 7 later life letters and 9 Life Story books had been completed at end of year with a number more now nearing completion. There are 26 cases being actively worked on and 27 pending – a combination of adopted children, children placed but not yet adopted and children with a plan of adoption but not yet placed.

The feedback from adopters regarding the life story books they have received has been very positive and they value the information which will help their child to know their birth family and understand their life story.

9. Key achievements during 2018-19

- 15 children placed for adoption, including 3 sibling groups, along with a foster to adopt placement.
- 13 adoptive families trained, assessed and approved
- 14 adoption orders granted for Herefordshire children and 2 adoption orders granted for children from other local authorities placed with Herefordshire adopters.
- A 131% increase in funding secured from the adoption support fund enabling Herefordshire adoptive families to benefit from specialist therapeutic support
- 56% of our children being placed with their adoptive family within 14 months of being accommodated, performing better than 8 of our statistical neighbours
- 7% of children aged 5 years and over leaving care who are adopted for 2015-18 compared to a national average of 5%
- 22% of children leaving care being adopted in comparison with an England average of 14%.
- The OFSTED inspection in June 2018 identified several areas of good practice in Herefordshire's adoption service including timeliness of adoption decisions, matching decisions and post adoption support.
- Agreement for Herefordshire joining Adoption Central England (ACE) and being on target to achieve this by 1st July 2019.

10. Key priorities for development during 2018-19

- Transition of the current adoption team into the regional adoption agency, ACE
- 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
- Improve early permanence planning to increase numbers of children placed in fostering to adopt placements
- Improved timeliness of life story books and later life letters and quality of child permanence reports

Gill Smith

Children's Social Work Manager, Adoption team