

Sheffield City Council: Annual Adoption Service Report for 2020/21.

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 This report is the Annual Report of Sheffield City Council's Adoption Service. It details the activity and performance of Sheffield's Adoption Service and the outcomes for Sheffield children needing adoption for 2020/21 and sets out improvement and development work planned for 2021/22.

2. Introduction

2.1 Sheffield City Council Adoption Service's remit is to recruit and approve prospective adopters; match and place children with approved adoptive families; and to provide adoption support to adopted children, adoptive parents and adopted adults.

2.2 It is a legislative requirement that the service provides reports on its activity and performance to Elected Members.

2.3 As for every area of work, this has been an extraordinary year due to the Covid 19 pandemic, but it has thrown up particular challenges in relation to moving children on to adoptive families and supporting them post placement. It has also impacted upon the recruitment and assessment of adopters. This has been a difficult year for adoptive families and demand for intense high level support services has grown significantly during the year.

2.4 As mentioned in the introduction, another significant development during the year (in addition to adapting to the impact of Covid 19), has been the creation of the One Adoption South Yorkshire (OASY) Regional Adoption Agency. Sheffield established the agency jointly with the adoption services of Rotherham, Barnsley, and Doncaster, and the agency went live on 1st January 2021. The Head of Service was appointed at the end of last year and took up post on the date the agency went live.

2.5 This annual report focuses upon the activity of Sheffield Adoption Service since for most of 2020-21, the service had not regionalised or impacted upon performance. The OASY Head of Service is writing a separate report on the first 6 months of the regional adoption agency activity.

3. Adoption Activity - Children 2020/21.

3.1 Table 1 below sets out the number of children who have been through different stages of the adoption process in Sheffield in 2020/21 compared to the previous three years:

Table 1

	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
Early permanence placements in year	7	3	11	4	5
Children made subject to SHOBPA decision	48	38	55	51	76
Children made subject to Placement Orders	35	37	41	38	56

Children matched to adoptive families	36	43	38	41	52
Children placed with adoptive families	37	41	38	44	44
Children adopted in year	33	42	40	39	51
Number of disrupted placements	2	2	1	2	3

3.2 As can be seen from Table 1, the number of children subject to a 'should be placed for adoption' decision increased during the year. This is in line with there being a slight increase nationally. However, Placement Orders are slightly lower, as is the number of Adoption Orders. Some of the decline in adoption orders can be attributed to delays in processing adoption applications at Court, due to Covid. The Courts were not able to prioritise these. These falls are mirrored nationally. The Adoption and Special Guardianship Leader Board (ASGLB), collates data from every local authority, regional adoption agency and voluntary adoption agency in England. The data for England for 2020-21 shows a decrease of 9% in the number of placement orders granted, along with a 17% fall in adoption orders. Alongside this there has been a further 4% increase in the number of special guardianship orders granted nationally during the same period. In Sheffield there were 44 children made the subject of special guardianship orders during the year which is higher than the number adopted. The majority of the special guardians were grandparents or other family members.

3.3 The percentage of children who left care via adoption in Sheffield in 2020/21 was 12%, which is a fall on previous years. In 2019/20 it was 15% which is similar to 2018/19 when it was 14.8%. This trend reflects a national fall in adoption plans. However, the combination of adoption orders and special guardianship orders in Sheffield, as permanence options for children, is above the national and statistical neighbour averages.

3.4 The number of Fostering for Adoption (FfA) placements increased over the year. The service made seven over the year. This compares well to the previous year when only 3 were made. However, we need to be rigorous in ensuring that this is considered as an option for all children entering care. The big advantage for the child is that it reduces the number of moves and means he/she is placed with their permanent family at a younger age. The benefit to the adopter is that they get a child at a very young age, sometimes immediately from hospital following birth, who has experienced fewer or no moves since entering care.

3.5 There were two children whose adoptive placements disrupted during the year. The service held disruption reviews to learn lessons from these and the learning has been shared across the service. The first was a little boy who was placed at the age of five with a single adopter. His behaviour deteriorated post placement and at the same time the adopter struggled due to the impact of covid upon her support networks and employment. There was a rigorous disruption review which highlighted several areas of learning. The second was the disruption of the placement of the eldest sibling (aged eight), of a sibling group of 2 girls. This was a very complex case but eventually it led to the difficult decision to separate the girls and the adopters have adopted the youngest child. This case has led to more robust scrutiny of how we best support adopters and work together across agencies to best support adopters who are willing to adopt older children or sibling groups. Within the Regional Adoption Agency, we have now built-in additional training for adopters willing to take sibling groups or older children. We also routinely ask relatives to attend a workshop to hear directly about the adoptive parenting task and their role in supporting a therapeutic parenting approach. Both of the children whose adoptive placements disrupted have now got plans of long-term fostering.

4. Adoption Timeliness

4.1 National scorecards for adoption agencies are used to compare performance of adoption agencies both nationally and with statistical neighbours. A low number of days represents good performance for the three primary indicators which are known as A1, A2 and A10.

4.2 **A1- ‘average time in days between a child entering care and being placed for adoption’:** Our average timescale in Sheffield for this indicator during the year 2020-21 was 421 days, which is strong performance given the circumstances. It is 5 days quicker than the government target of 426 days. The ASGLB data shows that the national average performance on this indicator increased by 34 days to 494 days, so the local performance was very good by comparison on this indicator.

4.3 **A2 – ‘average time in days between placement order being granted and the decision to match with adoptive families’:** Our average timescale for this indicator during the year 2020-21 was 151 days which is a big improvement on the previous year’s performance of 194 days. The national average for this indicator increased to 206 days, so again comparatively this is very good performance under challenging circumstances. However, we haven’t yet met the Government target of 121 days for this indicator.

4.4 **A10 is an adjustment of A1 which measures the average number of days between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions.** In Sheffield the average days is 363 days which is good performance, and stronger than the national average of 375 days.

4.5 **Characteristics of adopted children:** The definition of harder to place children nationally applies to sibling groups; children with disabilities; those aged 5 and over and those who are not from white British backgrounds. Some children fall into several of these categories. Of the 33 children adopted in Sheffield during the year, 23 of them fitted one or more of these categories. Sixteen were part of a sibling group, 8 were from ethnic minorities excluding white minorities and 9 were aged 5 or over. None were disabled. Of those adopted there were 15 girls and 18 boys; 25 were under the age of 5.

4.6 Below is a summary of the timescales linked to different groups of children:

	Overall Average for all adopted children	Overall Average for Harder To Place	Overall average for children from BAME backgrounds	Overall average for Siblings	Over all average for children over 5
A1	421	480	483	488	559
A10	363	414	313	392	463
A2	151	174	239	196	197
Children	33	23	9	16	8
A1 in time	20	12	6	8	3
A2 in time	20	11	2	8	3

4.7 To give a flavour of individual children, the child who took the longest from entering care to being placed for adoption (A1) was a little boy aged over 5 of white British origin. He was the subject of long care proceedings and the A1 was 954 days, although he was linked quite quickly once the Court had made the placement order. The shortest was a single, white British baby girl and the timescale was 150 days from entering care to placement. The child who was matched with adopters most quickly, once a placement order was made (A2) was a white British baby girl, placed at birth with a fostering for adoption family (A2 was 0 days). The child who took the longest to place was a little boy, who was under 5 years old, of mixed white/black Caribbean origin, part of a sibling group (A2 was 522 days). He was adopted by his foster carers.

5. Adoption Activity – Adopters 2020-21.

5.1 We continued to recruit and assess adopters during the year despite the challenges of covid. Training and assessment sessions transferred to virtual technology and where visits were carried out there was strict guidance on managing these safely. However, staffing issues and problems completing certain references did impact upon activity. Additionally, some families who were considering adoption could not proceed due to the impact of covid on their jobs or other circumstances.

5.2 We were also unable to carry out our planned recruitment strategy as the Communications Team were required to prioritise messaging in relation to the pandemic. We approved less adopters than last year. Yet given the circumstances we consider that we did well to continue to bring adopters through and support them.

5.3 Recruitment and approval of adopters

	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
Number of adopters approved	24	31	31	21	29
Number of Sheffield adoptive families with children placed in the year.	30	18	25	24	25

5.4 As stated this table shows we approved less adopters than last year. This is against the national trend which shows a 5% increase in approvals. However, in contrast to that we had more of our available adoptive families have children placed than previous years. There was a significant increase in the number of our Sheffield adoptive families matched to children. Of these 30 children placed with our adopters, 23 were from Sheffield and 7 from other agencies. This is a significant improvement in performance.

5.5 We approved 24 families while 35 children were granted Placement Orders. Some of these children were part of sibling groups so the number of adoptive families required would have been lower than that figure. However, the challenge is recruiting families who can meet the needs of 'harder to place' children: sibling groups; children with additional needs; older children and those of complex ethnic backgrounds. This is a challenge for all agencies and there is a national shortage of adopters available for these groups of children. This means that while we have adopters waiting, they do not always match with the children waiting. It also means we still need to use adopters approved by other adoption agencies, known as inter-agency placements. A key aim of the OASY Regional Adoption Agency is to help recruit adopters to meet the needs of the children waiting.

5.6 Use of inter-agency adopters

- In total, of the 37 Sheffield children placed, 14 were placed with adopters approved by external agencies during the year. Of these 6 were with other regional adoption agency or local authority adopters and 8 were with voluntary adoption agencies. There is a fee when we place our children with other agency adopters. The group of children placed externally included three sibling groups of two children as well as a sibling group of three, placed early in lockdown.
- The characteristics of children placed in inter agency placements are not dis-similar to those placed with Sheffield adopters, other than there are fewer young, single, white British children in the co-hort. This is because there are generally adequate numbers of adopters in house to provide families for these children.
- Sheffield Adoption Service have quickly agreed interagency fees for children where we have no suitable internal adopters in order to avoid delay for the child. This also means a child leaves care more quickly so achieving permanence more promptly and the costs are off set against this in the longer run. The agreement for this going forward will sit with the Head of Service for the OASY Regional Adoption Agency.
- At the same time as placing some of our children with other agencies adopters, we have provided 7 adoptive homes for 7 children from other local authorities under the same inter agency fee arrangements. One of these is a Fostering for Adoption placement.

5.7 Recruitment Activity Undertaken

- As mentioned above we have not been able to carry out planned recruitment activity during 2020-21. Despite this we received a healthy number of enquiries over the year: 179 in total. There is always a high dropout rate from enquiries and this number only converted in to 19 applications to adopt.
- Since the OASY Regional Adoption Agency went live we have had the support of a regional communications group, and this has led to the development of a shared website to receive enquiries. We have updated our branding and a regional recruitment strategy is being developed.
- We have continued to deliver our regional program of Preparation Training, including specialist training for adopters considering Fostering for Adoption, or those who already have children.
- Where enquirers are interested in inter-country adoption, they are directed to Adoption Yorkshire, which is a voluntary agency who provide specialist advice to those wishing to adopt children from abroad. Sheffield commissions this service along with other members of the One Adoption Hub.
- Direct recruitment based on children's profiles has been less than during normal years but there have still been some Activity Days. We have also run virtual South Yorkshire exchange events, specifically for local adopters and local children. During 2021-22 we will be able to use Link Maker (which is a national tool for linking children and adopters), to more effectively share information regionally about the available adopters in the RAA and the children in each authority, who require families. The National Adoption Register is still closed. Internally we continue to have regular Children Waiting Meetings to look at potential links between our own adopters and our own children.

- One of the key measures of the success of the OASY Regional Adoption Agency will be how effective it is in recruiting families for children in the region. It is too early to judge this yet.

6. Adoption Support 2020-21

6.1 Adoption support is an essential part of the service. As seen earlier in this report many children placed for adoption have complex needs and there are different challenges depending upon the child's early history, emotional or behavioral needs, as well as the need to understand their life story and identity. Adoption support is wide ranging from lower-level support groups and activities, assistance from universal services, up to specific multi agency and therapeutic packages. Some of the therapeutic support needs of adoptive children and families are met by the nationally available Adoption Support Fund. An accredited list of private therapeutic providers is maintained regionally through North Yorkshire County Council on behalf of Yorkshire and Humberside. This is currently being updated.

6.2 An integral element of adoption support in recent years has been the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), set up by the government to support adoptive families. However, the future of the Fund remains uncertain. At the time of writing, it has been further extended until March 2022. Beyond that it is subject to the government's budget review in the autumn. The ongoing lack of clarity about what will happen when the Adoption Support Fund ends is a cause for concern. Expectations have been created amongst adoptive families about being able to access therapeutic services for children and families via this route. If the fund were to end this would present difficulties, particularly while meeting the threshold for CAMHS services remains difficult. The future is unclear for both adoption agencies and families in this respect. The support provided by therapists funded by the ASF is often outside the skillset of staff employed in the adoption support team and CAMHS do not have the capacity.

6.3 As reported last year, we have become more robust as a service in reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of support provided via the ASF. The Fund is now asking agencies to be much more accountable about how funding is used. Covid presented difficulties to therapists in delivering support remotely and in several cases the therapy had to stop for a while. We did ask adopters for feedback on how providers had helped them during lockdown, but we had a very low response rate. We know that adoptive families already receiving high levels of support struggled during this period, particularly as young people were not in school and support services were not as available. There were more child protection referrals. Unfortunately, we did have a small number of adopted teenagers (6 young people including a sibling group of twins), admitted to care and covid 10 was certainly a factor in this. Those young people have multiple and complex needs, highlighting the need for a multi-agency approach to adoption support.

6.4. During lockdown the government provided grants via the adoption support fund to help families cope with the additional demands of Covid. In Sheffield this amounted to £49542. The criteria for this funding were slightly different to the normal ASF criteria. We used it to provide training to adopters on non-violent resistance; expanded Adoption UK membership to more adopters (they offered a range of workshops, advice and consultations); paid to increase the hours of the independent advice line and recruited a temporary part time worker to help us carry out new assessments of adoption support needs.

6.5 Many of the key challenges facing adoptive families relate to education or health. This led the service, at the end of 2019 to developing a multi-agency group, to look at how we respond to some of the issues raised by adoptive families. Unfortunately, this work was delayed due

to the impact of Covid 19 and then the decision to transfer adoption support to the Regional Adoption Agency. However, the Head of Service for OASY is planning to develop a strategic multi agency adoption support plan with relevant services across the RAA. This will involve engaging relevant agencies across the RAA region and achieving consistency/consensus with partners in education, CAMHS, health and SEND. Adopters in Sheffield have requested that the Head of Service understands the work started in Sheffield around this and a meeting is planned to look at this at the start of October. Alongside this, work is being done create consistency of our own core-offer to adopters so that whichever local authority area adopters live in, they get the same.

6.6 The data below provides information about adoption support referrals during 2020/21-20 compared to the two previous years.

- **New requests for assessments for post adoption support** made to the adoption support team during the year 2020/21: 72 requests for adoption support were received and 54 resulted in the provision of support. This compares to 77 in 2019/20 when 56 resulted in the provision of support. During 2018/19: 88 assessments were requested and 73 resulted in the provision of support. Surprisingly, given the impact of Covid 19 on families, this shows a drop in referrals. However, the adoption support team have had a very busy year with families who were already known to us as being in need of support, experiencing greater difficulties. As mentioned previously there have been a number of family breakdowns with young adopted teenagers entering care. Once in care, these young people have tended to need high levels of multi-agency provision, reflecting their complex needs.
- **Adult adoptee support:** there were 15 adopted adults in receipt of support, not one-off advice, compared to 31 **adults** during the year 2019-20. This compares to 40 during 2018-19.
- **Letterboxes contacts:** 489
- **Adoption allowances:** 255
- **Applications to the Adoption Support Fund:** There have been 87 approved applications to the ASF during 2020/21, compared to 119 in 2019/20; these include new referrals, current open cases, and further requests for ongoing therapy. Again, given the pressures of the pandemic on families, this is an unexpected fall. It may be linked to therapists not being able to deliver direct services during this time.

6.7 The most common requests for support relate to adopters asking for help in managing their child's behaviours and we provide support and advice on how to respond or request therapeutic parenting from appropriately trained therapists, funded via the ASF. Other frequent requests relate to identity and contact. Theraplay and life story work with children is provided. As discussed above, a significant number of families we work with have children on My Plans or EHCPs; or health issues which warrant us working closely with colleagues in MAST, CAMHS, health and education. Like many families, adoptive families are often frustrated by delays and resource issues.

Where families are in crisis, we work together with other elements of Children's Services such as Aspire, Early Help and fieldwork colleagues.

6.8 In normal times there are several support groups and activities in place to assist children of every age range (including teenagers), as well as their parents. Unfortunately, during 20/21 these have all been impacted upon by covid and it has not been possible to hold groups in person. We have had to rely on virtual or remote means. We have held virtual 'bake offs' for young people and a zoom coffee morning for new adopters. Newsletters have been provided on a quarterly basis to adoptive families, to inform them of events and give useful information about how the service is working during covid. We sent our last Sheffield newsletter in January

2021, and they are now OASY newsletters which provide updates about the developing RAA, useful resources, events etc. It is intended to develop a portal for adopters to access information on the OASY agency consistently throughout the year. In addition to the above, there are a range of adopter led groups with an active WhatsApp group. Adopters also use the Adoption UK Adopter Voice Facebook page to share ideas and opportunities. We are also members of New Family Social which provides support and advice to LGBT adopters. All LGBT+ adopters have membership of this organisation and the range of services it offers.

6.9 We have team members trained in different levels of theraplay, which is a therapy aimed at building attachments within adoptive families. They do group and individual work as well as training for adopters. One is a fully certified theraplay practitioner and member of the practicum. She does direct work with families but also through our Stars group, where she teaches theraplay techniques to adopters with young children. This group receives excellent feedback from those who attend. It has been run virtually during lockdown which raised some issues but was still well received.

6.10 We continue to benefit from the jointly commissioned (along with other Yorkshire and Humberside local authorities), adoption support service from PAC UK/ Family Action/ Adoption UK. This includes the following support services for adoptive families, adult adoptees, and birth families:

- An advice line for those affected by adoption: birth families; adopted adults; adopters provided 5 days a week for 3 hours a day with two early evening sessions up to 7pm. As stated earlier the ASF covid grant was used to extend the hours of this service during lockdown.
- 'ADOPTTEENS' - Support for adopted teenagers and including a website, online chat forum where support can be provided, a Youth Council across Yorkshire and Humber and social events. The Youth Council has the aim of using teenagers' views and experiences to help improve and develop policy and practice. Take up is not as high as we would like, and consideration is to be given as to how to improve take up within South Yorkshire and offer more local events.
- Improving the participation of adopters and their views (adopter voice) in service development and delivery of services across the region. South Yorkshire have a local coordinator who works hard to bring adopters perspective to the service. He also sits on the RAA board.
- Improving the participation of birth parents in service development across the region.
- Support and counselling for adopted adults wishing to access their records and intermediary services for those wishing to meet their birth families.
- Pro- active independent birth parent support and counselling; and
- Independent support for adoptive parents.

6.11 The Peer Mentoring Scheme went live in March 2020. Volunteers had been recruited and trained from October 2019 in preparation of the launch. There was a good response from Sheffield adopters. The aim is for volunteer adopters to support other adopters a bit like a buddying scheme. The service operates across South Yorkshire, with separate schemes in West and North. It is commissioned from Adoption UK who recruit and train the mentors and allocate to mentees. We now have 15 trained peer mentors in the region. 8 of these are from Sheffield and 6 from the other 3 areas (2 per agency). There have been 44 mentees: Barnsley

1x referral; Doncaster 5x referrals; Rotherham 11x referrals; Sheffield 24x referrals. Due to their being some spare capacity mentors have also supported 1 mentee in West Yorkshire and 1 in North Yorkshire. Adoption UK collate feedback from mentees regarding the impact of the service but report a very low response rate. The feedback they do receive comments positively on the opportunity to speak to someone who has been through a similar experience.

6.12 We offer an all-day duty service to members of the public regarding any adoption related matter.

7 Adoption Panel Business.

7.1 Business and Meetings.

- During 2020-21 Sheffield City Council has continued to operate a single adoption panel which met every two weeks. Since the creation of OASY Regional Adoption Agency we have introduced a shared Panel with Barnsley. However, this came into force outside the timeframe of this report.
- Credit must be given to the Panel to adapting to Covid so rapidly. A Panel meeting was planned the day England went into lockdown and this went ahead virtually at a time when everyone was still adapting to zoom meetings and how to manage them for complex meetings. There have been no delays related to Panel functioning and both they and the business support service should be acknowledged for achieving this. However, the Independent Chair does have reservations about delivering Panels remotely in the longer term and it is likely we will move towards a hybrid model going forward.
- In the period from 01/04/20 to 31/03/21 there have been 24 panels meetings. One panel was canceled due to insufficient business.
- The panel has recommended **24** approvals of adopters,
- There have been **36** matches considered by the panel.
- There has been **1** relinquished child presented to panel for consideration as to whether they should be placed for adoption. This was recommended by Panel and subsequently agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.
- Panel activity has been broadly in line with the previous year with just a slight increase in the number of matches considered. There were adequate Panel meetings to meet need. Only one additional panel was required at the end of March.
- The Panel deferred one match and one approval for further information. There were no non approvals.

7.2 Agency Decision Maker: we have 2 agency decision makers (ADM's) in Sheffield. Both are senior managers in Children's Services. One of them was appointed in January 2021, following the departure of one of our previous ADMs to work for Ofsted. The newly appointed ADM has attended CoramBaaf training on the role of ADM and has already demonstrated a robustness of decision making. The ADM is not a panel member but makes a considered decision based on the recommendation of the Panel. They also make decisions during care

proceedings about whether a child should have a plan of adoption. Since the RAA came into force the two Sheffield ADMs make decisions about children's care plans and matches but the Head of Service for OASY makes decisions about adopter approvals.

7.3 Panel Membership

- The panel has an experienced independent Chair who previously worked for the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). The medical advisers to the panel are very committed and knowledgeable in the field of adoption. They provide comprehensive and clear advice to the agency and to Panel- as well as adopters. Legal advice is readily available as required. Both the Chair and Agency Adviser have good relationships with these advisers.
- The central list of panel members is sufficient to meet need. It is in line with regulatory requirements. There are long standing, committed members who are very knowledgeable, and they have a range of skills and experience. Over the last few years, it has been recognised by the Panel that further diversity of panel membership would be welcomed and recruitment to the Panel central list bears this in mind. Additional social work members are always welcome. An adopted adult has been identified to join the list, which is welcome but there continues to be a need for greater diversity.
- The Agency Adviser retired at the end of March 2021. She had a long history in children's services and the field of adoption. She had good knowledge of the regulations and legal context of adoption. She has provided panel members with regular updates on cases as well as informing them of relevant case law and research. She has organised training for Panel members and provided regular information on relevant case law or research. She has ensured appraisals and DBS checks are all up to date.
- The Agency Adviser role is currently vacant, and the role is covered by a temporary agency worker.

7.4 Quality Assurance

- Panel provides feedback to workers and the agency on the quality of reports presented and the worker's presentation. Since October 2018 this has included a grading of the quality of reports in line with OFSTED guidelines. This is collated to give an overview of the quality of reports over time so that workers and their managers can be given a clear indication of Panel's view of the standard of reports.
- While there are many reports presented that are of high quality, this is not yet consistent enough. Team managers are key people in driving up standards so mandatory training has been provided to them on their role in effective quality assurance of adoption reports. However, this is an ever-changing group of staff so the training needs regular refreshing and repeating. Areas identified for improvement are the social workers written analysis of the child's identity and the sufficiency of the report as a document for adopters and adopted children to use as an accurate source of information in the long term.

- The Agency Adviser provides robust and thorough written and verbal feedback on reports which come through for both Panel and ‘Should be Placed for Adoption’ decisions made by the Agency Decisions Maker.
- It is an expectation of the service that no Panel recommendations or agency decisions are made on inadequate reports until the quality has been sufficiently improved.
- The Agency Decision Maker provides feedback to Service Managers if she has concerns about the quality of reports at both the care planning and Panel stages.
- Consultant social workers work across the service and support newly qualified staff as well as more experienced ones with adoption matters. Family finders from the adoption service also support children’s social workers with placement and support plans as well as advising on the preparation and transition of children from foster care to adoption. Panel report that where the family finders are involved, this often impacts positively on the quality of reports and support plans.
- Recently a strategic decision has been made for children on placement orders to transfer to the Children Looked After Service. These staff will have less experience in adoption work. The adoption team are providing advice and support to these workers to try to maintain good practice and establish expectations around the standard of reports presented to the Panel and ADM.
- Performance clinics chaired by the Director of Children and Families Services take place every month when there is challenge and oversight of all aspects of the service, including the panel gradings of reports.

8. Regional Adoption Agency Update

8.1 One Adoption South Yorkshire Regional Adoption Agency went live on 01.01.21 so has only been in operation for the final quarter of the year that this report covers. It comprises of Sheffield, Barnsley, Rotherham, and Doncaster Adoption Services.

8.2 Doncaster is the host agency, and they employ certain key posts- primarily the Head of Service, a performance analyst and a business support officer. All other staff have remained employed by their existing local authority. Regional Adoption Agencies nationally vary in the way they are structured and led.

8.3 The aim of the agency is to improve practice and processes and outcomes for children, from more efficient recruitment of adopters, faster matches and improved adoption support. It is very early days and the evidence base around impact nationally is still developing- given that many projects like ours have only just gone live and it takes time to become established. As with any partnership arrangement there will be opportunities and challenges. It will be important to capture the learning coming out of the arrangements and to use this to inform practice going forward. It is very early days, but the aim is to benefit from shared expertise, resources and processes.

8.4 The RAA is governed by the RAA Governance Board. The Board is chaired by the Director of Children’s Services from Doncaster Children’s Services Trust and is made up of Directors or Assistant Directors from the four South Yorkshire local authorities, a Director of a local voluntary adoption agency, a Virtual School Head from Doncaster Children’s Services Trust, and an adopter who is employed by Adoption UK, a national charity promoting the voice of

adopters. The Head of Service reports to the monthly Governance Board meetings. She has written a six-month report on the progress of the OASY Regional Adoption Agency so far. Monthly performance data is now being submitted in relation to adopter recruitment and children, but we are not yet able to include adoption support data, partly due to differences in how the services operate within the region. This is being addressed.

8.5 There is a big agenda of work to put in place within the RAA, to develop consistency of practice and achieve the aims of recruiting more adopters to meet the needs of children waiting so they can be placed with their permanent families more quickly. Also, in order to establish a consistent offer of support. This is being actively worked on through a range of workstreams and with the voice of adopters included. The Head of Service meets regularly with other RAA leads and this also informs development.

9. Other Developments in the Year: Covid has impacted upon developments during the year and obviously the main focus has been establishing and becoming part of the new Regional Adoption Agency. The work we had planned to work on a multi-agency adoption support strategy could not proceed as intended since services had to deal with the demands and adjustments of Covid. However, this is not forgotten and will form part of the OASY longer term strategy.

9.1 Fostering for Adoption: we have acted upon feedback from Fostering for Adoption carers to revamp our training in this area. We focus more on the potential risks and specific duties relating to managing contact with birth families and other 'fostering' elements.

9.2 Adopter voice engagement. This has continued as more and more adopters join the Adoption UK facebook page and make use of the independent adopter coordinator (who is an adopter himself), to raise issues and feed into developments. This is becoming more embedded as the pathway by which adopters can feed into service development and raise issues that they are facing is understood by adopters. The Head of Service has met with adopters from across the region to introduce herself and outline the vision for the RAA. This will continue.

9.3 The growth of the Peer Mentoring Scheme for adopters. This went live in March 2020, when it began to accept referrals for mentors who had been recruited and trained the previous winter. It is facilitated on behalf of Yorkshire and Humberside by Adoption UK. We have a local coordinator who recruits and trains the volunteers on an ongoing basis as well as dealing with referrals to the scheme. He provides regular updates to the service leads in South Yorkshire on the take up and growth of the scheme. Adopters have long requested such a scheme as an opportunity to speak to other adopters at various stages of their journey to get advice and low-level support. Like many other services it has had to be delivered remotely due to Covid 19. The scheme is being commissioned for a further two years and Adoption UK will continue to provide this service on our behalf.

10. Priority Actions for 2022/23

10.1 Continue to Develop and Embed the OASY Regional Adoption Agency: the way in which the RAA was set up in South Yorkshire has meant that it went live on the same day that the Head of Service took up post on 01.01.21. Much has been done to bring the 4 member agencies together but there is much more to be done with a strategic plan covering the short, medium and longer term.

10.2 Recruiting a More Diverse Range of Adopters. A key measure of the success of the RAA will be to continue to work on the sufficiency of adopters. The key challenge as seen above in the section relating to timeliness is to recruit a more diverse range of adopters, particularly those willing to take sibling groups. We shall be targeting our recruitment and marketing activity to address this as well as offering a comprehensive and competitive support package.

10.3 Adoption support: Core Offer: Work is currently being done to agree a core offer of support for all adopters across the region and this will help level out disparities across the region. Adoption support in general is a key concern of many adopters and is a growing area of need.

10.4 Multi – agency adoption support: this is a much more difficult and complex agenda which will take longer to establish than the core offer (which is in the control of the RAA), as it depends upon cooperation and collaboration with colleagues in health, education, CAMHS and SEND. Having consulted with our adopters, we know that they need and want a more joined up multi-agency support service. Additionally, Adoption UK complete a survey of their members annually, known as the Adoption Barometer. 2452 adopters responded and 159 adopted young people or adults. This also highlights the need for effective multi-disciplinary support nationally, with better understanding of the needs of adoptive families across all services. Consideration is being given to repeating this survey regionally, to see how we compare to the national picture.

10.5 Create OASY Adoption Panels: work is underway to increase panel capacity available to workers by sharing panels across the region. The Chairs will be employed by the RAA and there will be a pane meeting operating nearly every week in some part of the region. This will help improve timeliness for families and children. Panels, like other areas of the service will adapt to a new hybrid way of working.

10.6 Increase the number of children we place for adoption regionally: this will follow improved recruitment. We are already placing across the RAA but this will need to grow. It is beneficial for children as it improves support. We will be able to use Link Maker more effectively over the year to identify available adopters and children. It offers a shared data base, and it will also provide reliable data about children and adopters in the RAA. This does not mean inter agency placements will not be quickly agreed where there is no in-RAA match, but it is a measure of the success of the RAA to be able to recruit the right adopters for the children waiting.

10.7 Performance Indicators and management information: a RAA performance analyst is due to take up post in August. The RAA is already collating and sharing information provided each month by performance teams in each agency regarding adopter recruitment and placements of children, but this does not include adoption support. A key action is to identify performance indicators in relation to adoption support and start to collate this data.

12. Summary

12.1 The last twelve months have been like no other, with rapid changes needing to be made to the way services are developed and delivered. On top of this we have regionalised the adoption service. Despite this, performance in many areas has been maintained or improved. Children continued to move to adoptive families and a much higher number of these than last year were placed with our own adopters. There has been a continuation of good performance in relation to timeliness from when children enter care to being placed for adoption (A1). We are meeting the national target. When adjustments are made to allow for adoption by foster

carers (A10), we are doing even better. Timeliness from securing a Placement Order to a decision on a match (A2) has improved significantly. For the second year running the number of special guardianship orders has overtaken the number of adoption orders but the combination of these permanence outcomes means many children are leaving care to join permanent families.

12.2 The number of adopters approved this year has fallen, which is outside the national trend. We aim to improve that this year, back at least to the 2019/20 number of 31 approvals in our part of the RAA region. However, in contrast, more of our available, waiting adoptive families have been matched with children, than in previous years. They have primarily provided families for Sheffield children: of the 30 children placed with our adopters, 23 were from Sheffield and 7 from other agencies. This is a significant improvement in performance. Now we are part of the RAA it is anticipated that adopters will take even more children from the four member agencies.

12.3 The number of adoption plans for children has increased compared to last year, which might be linked to the increase in numbers of children coming into care.

12.4 Fostering for Adoption: numbers have increased this year, following the work done in 2019-20 around improving practice in this area. However, we need to ensure that Fostering for Adoption is being used as effectively and regularly as it can be. There are plans to repeat the training for fieldworkers and managers in the Autumn.

12.5 It has been a tough year for some of our adoptive families with a few who were experiencing problems pre-covid finding they could no longer manage. Remote working impacted upon how well we could support families. Many of our usual support groups were unable to function during covid. We replaced these by online groups where possible although adopters often reported that home schooling etc meant they struggled to accommodate these. Additional support services were provided by an ASF grant and this did help some families. Referrals to the ASF continued (slightly down on last year), but there were struggles with actually delivering the therapy

12.6 The long-requested Peer Mentoring scheme is now live. Regionally Sheffield has a good number of mentors, and the scheme is being utilised by adopters at different stages of their journey.

12.8 The Adoption Panel has completed slightly lower levels of activity to the previous year. They continue to take a robust quality assurance role. The quality of reports remains inconsistent, and Panel have particularly highlighted those issues relating to identity as a particular area for improvement. We are considering future training for staff with this in mind. At the start of the year the Panels had to change and operate virtually, due to Covid 19 and while this throws up challenges it is working well overall.

12.9 Regionalisation of the adoption services in South Yorkshire has taken place and the development of this service has been a big theme in the last quarter of the year. The Head of Service for OASY has provided a six-month report and statement of purpose which will compliment this annual report on the Sheffield Adoption Service.

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