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| Report title | Adoption Agency Interim Report | |
| Cabinet member with lead responsibility | Councillor Paul Sweet Children and Young People | |
| Wards affected | All Wards | |
| Accountable director | Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services | |
| Originating service | Children's Services | |
| Accountable employee | Dawn Deans | Senior Social Work Manager |
| | Tel: | 01902 550842 |
| | Email: | dawn.deans@wolverhampton.gov.uk |
| Report to has been considered by | Children in Care Council | 27 February 2019 |

Recommendation for action:

The Corporate Parenting Board is recommended to:

1. Receive and provide feedback on the City of Wolverhampton Council Adoption Service Interim Report.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 This report details the work of the City of Wolverhampton Adoption Service from April 2018 to October 2018.
- 1.2 The purpose of the interim report is to provide updated information in relation to adoption locally and nationally.

2.0 Background

Adoption Reform Agenda

- 2.1 Adoption concerns only a small proportion of children who are unable to safely return to their families, but they are some of the most vulnerable children in society. When the adoption reforms began Department for Education (DfE), (2011) there were over 6,000 children waiting to be placed for adoption; many of whom had been waiting years. There were delays and great variation in local authority (LA) performance (DfE, 2013). The reforms have seen improvements in the system with delays reducing, early permanence approaches becoming more mainstream, and the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) developed to meet children's therapeutic needs.
- 2.2 The regionalisation reforms as set out in *Regionalising Adoption* intend to reduce the large number of agencies providing adoption services by creating 25-30 regional agencies. The expectation is that larger organisations should be able to pool resources and share best practice resulting in: targeted and efficient recruitment of adopters; speedier matching with a larger more diverse pool of adopters; an improved range of adoption support services and potential for efficiency savings from operating at a greater scale.
- 2.3 From 1 April 2019 the City of Wolverhampton, Walsall and Dudley local authorities and Sandwell Children's Trust will operate as one adoption agency, Adoption@Heart. The overriding factors that influenced the four agencies to work together to form a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) were historic relationships, partnership arrangements and geography. It had previously been agreed that the RAA would be developed as a separate entity wholly owned by the four Councils, but in May 2018, concerns were raised about some of the complexities and uncertainties of establishing such a model for the RAA, including governance issues and the potential for escalating costs of the model and the minimal potential to expand for other public services. As a result, it was agreed to undertake some work to look at the feasibility of a "hosted" model as an alternative.
- 2.4 In June, the RAA Project Board considered the findings of the review and recommended that a move to a hosted model for Adoption@Heart be accepted by Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) on the basis that this would be a less risky approach given that delivering the RAA via a separate entity is relatively untested. A hosted model will also be less resource intensive to deliver and avoid irrecoverable VAT on purchases. The move to a hosted model was subsequently agreed by the four DCSs.
- 2.5 Whilst Wolverhampton will directly manage the service, all four agencies will be responsible for the RAA and will hold it to account through a Strategic Commissioning

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Board which will be responsible for monitoring the performance of the RAA. There will also be an RAA Management Board which will oversee and support the operational work of the RAA with representatives from all four local authorities/Children's Trust.

- 2.6 The launch of Adoption@Heart Recruitment and Assessment service commenced March 1, 2018 and the Adoption@Heart Regional Adoption Agency will be launched April 1, 2019.
- 2.7 The DfE has recently commissioned an evaluation to assess the impact of operational RAA's on improving the delivery of adoption services, with the potential to improve outcomes for children. The evaluation runs from the beginning of 2018 until the end of 2021. The findings will be used to ensure that future policy is developed in the most effective way, with annual reports to allow findings to inform emerging practice throughout the period.

3.0 Panel Business

- 3.1 Below are the number of adopters approved and the number of children matched with prospective adopters between April 2018 and October 2018:

| Approval of Prospective adopters | Matches of children with prospective adopters |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 9 | 19 |

4.0 Adopter Approval

- 4.1 Nationally there has been a fall in adopters waiting because of a contraction in adopter approval by local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies, one reason the DfE is suggesting is that there has been a growing narrative that there is insufficient support for the children in the system with more complex needs.
- 4.2 Wolverhampton aims to attract and support 25 new adopters during 2018-2019 through the approval stage and beyond, with a particular focus on recruiting people to adopt children in our pipeline; harder to place children and adopters who will consider early permanence placements. All recruitment since March 2018 has been completed as Adoption@ Heart to prepare for the move to the RAA. Enquiries from prospective adopters have been distributed to all four agencies for assessment.
- 4.3 The Adoption in the Black County (ABC) Marketing Officer continues to be imaginative and has devised targeted recruitment campaigns focusing on large sibling groups, Black and minority ethnic (BAME) children and early permanence placements.
- 4.4 As well as embedding BAME imagery and messaging in all our core marketing activities bespoke targeted campaigns have been developed to target specific groups. For example, targeting groups from Muslim background, social media marketing activity has been translated into Arabic. Digital adverts have then specifically targeted the identified groups driving footfall for an exact event held at a Mosque in Sandwell.



- 4.5 Targeting of Black Caribbean groups has also been through micro-marketing activity. A specific case study was identified to represent a significant cohort of the Children and Young People in Care (CYPiC) population from Black and minority backgrounds. A radio campaign and digital press article of a case story was created and rolled out on Free Radio and Birmingham Live. All enquiries drove footfall to two specific information events at the Merry Hill Shopping Centre (Dudley) and also the Bullring Shopping Centre (Birmingham). Please refer to Appendix One with additional marketing activity.
- 4.6 During this reporting period there have been nine mainstream adopter approvals and two notified adoptions. We are confident we will achieve 25 adopter approvals by the end of March 2019.
- 4.7 Early permanence placements can limit delay and secure good outcomes for children whether they are rehabilitated at home, or they are adopted, and the City of Wolverhampton continue to explore this option for all children. Wolverhampton has continued to improve practice in early permanency placements. The sufficiency strategy aspired to have six placements during April 2018-March 2019, however six early permanence placements via Foster for Adoption or concurrency have been achieved between April 2018 to October 2018.
- 5.0 Links of children with prospective adopters**
- 5.1 There have been 19 links between children and prospective adopters during this reporting period.
- 5.2 The A1 indicator measures the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family with a target set by Government of 426 days.
- 5.3 The A2 indicator measures the 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. The current target is 121 days.
- 5.4 Seven out of the 19 children met both the A1 and A2 indicator which equates to 37 per cent. Court proceedings concluded in a timely manner and suitable adopters were identified.

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- 5.5 10 out of the 19 children met the A2 indicator and were placed within four months (121) of a placement order which equates to 53 per cent.
- 5.6 Three of the 19 children linked at panel were part of a sibling group of two, two included children of Black and minority ethnicity.
- 5.7 Of the 19 children matched, three were over the age of five, one young person is aged 15 years and her sibling aged 10 years.
- 5.8 When considering the ethnicity of the children matched, nine of the 19 children were of Black and minority ethnic (BAME) background. This equates to 47 per cent of children matched. This remains significantly above the national average of five per cent.
- 5.9 Below is an example where the A1 and A2 indicator was met.
White British Female aged eight months at placement.

| Child A | Date became CYPiC | Should Be Placed for Adoption Decision | Placement Order granted | Date matched | A 1 indicator | A2 indicator |
|----------------------|-------------------|--|-------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| White British Female | 25/07/2017 | 06/11/2017 | 18/12/2017 | 15/03/2018 | 244 | 87 |

- 5.10 There are a number of children who are deemed as hard to place due to their age, ethnicity, and health issues, for example. These children therefore do not always follow the pattern of those children that are deemed as easier to place and are successfully linked within A1 and A2 indicator timescales, they can be referred in statistical data as outliers. An outlier can be defined as a piece of data or observation that deviates drastically from the given norm or average of the data set. An outlier can cause serious problems in statistical analyses. Below is an example of a sibling group of two where the A1 and A2 indicator were out of timescales; it can take longer to secure a link for siblings' groups.

| Child B and C | Date became CYPiC | Should Be Placed for Adoption Decision | Placement Order granted | Date matched | A 1 indicator | A2 indicator |
|---|-------------------|--|-------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| White British Female aged 5/ Male aged 3 | 05/05/2016 | 30/08/2016 | 23/09/2016 | 27/10/2017 | 567 | 399 |

- 5.11 In 2014 a new indicator was introduced; **A10**. This measures the average time between a child entering care and being placed with their prospective adopters adjusted for foster carer adoptions (where times for children who are adopted by their foster carers are stopped at the date children were placed with their foster carers).

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- 5.12 10 children matched were placed with adopters approved by the City of Wolverhampton; we continue to place at least half of the children with in-house approved adopters, which is in line with national figures. The remaining nine children were placed with adopters approved by other local authorities or voluntary agencies.
- 5.13 Exchange and activity events continue to be utilised, with three exchange events attended during this reporting period. Two targeted exchange events were aimed at featuring over fives and BAME children where we featured over 20 children. There were enquiries in relation to four children. Two activity events were attended with one group of siblings having a pre-link.
- 5.14 A range of "pre-meets" are starting to be used by agencies which include one -way viewings, whereby prospective adopters have the opportunity to observe children at play in the company of their foster carers prior to making a decision to proceed to adoption panel. We are also holding chemistry visits whereby adopters attend foster carers home and meet the child/ren prior to attendance at adoption panel. Both practice methods are evidencing positive placements and are in line with adopter led matches.
- 5.15 Three interagency placements were made with City of Wolverhampton adopters; all placements were single placements; two with ABC agencies and one with Birmingham Local Authority, resulting in £81,000 interagency fee being recouped.
- 5.16 Feedback regarding the family finding process was sought from adopters; with eight responses received. Six rated the service positively, either excellent or very good and one rated it satisfactory and one rated it positively but identified sharing of child's information as poor.
- 5.17 Comments included positive feedback in relation to the family finder; for example, "the matching process was good", "brilliant from the beginning, in respect of the child's social worker; lovely, child focused, supportive, and foster carer; very good, experienced, maintained professionalism". The feedback in relation to the satisfactory and poor comment have been addressed in supervision and via the formal complaint procedure and the learning has been incorporated into improvements for future practice.
- 5.18 The DfE has been working with the sector to deliver on the *Adoption: A Vision for Change* commitment to introduce Regional Adoption Agency Scorecards. LAs and RAAs will need data to understand their performance and share best practice. It also allows them to be accountable for what they have delivered. Therefore, from the 2016-2019 Scorecard, both LA and RAA data will be included.

6.0 Adoptions

- 6.1 There have been 22 adoptions during this period. The target number of adoptions for 2018-2019 based upon the children placed and waiting is 45 adoptions.

7.0 Children's Decisions

- 7.1 There have been 39 "Should be Placed for Adoption" (SBPFA) decisions made during this reporting period, this is an average amount at this stage in the year.
- 7.2 During this period 11 SBPFA decisions were rescinded.
- 7.3 The rescinds included three sibling groups, one child aged 11 years, three aged eight years and three aged nine years and two aged seven years old. They included five BAME children. The Care Plans have been changed to long term fostering.

8.0 Adoption Support

- 8.1 Wolverhampton Adoption Team recognises that adopted children and their families need to be able to access appropriate and sensitive adoption support at any time in their lives. Prior to an adoptive family being identified, Family Support Workers begin working with harder to place children including older children, sibling groups, and children with complex histories preparing them for a move to an adoptive placement.
- 8.2 During April 2018 and October 2018 moving on work has been undertaken with seven single children and two sibling groups of two and one sibling group of three. This is the feedback from the children's foster carers.

Did you find the sessions helpful with preparing the child for adoption?

- Very good, it was very positive and worked well for R.
 - Yes, it helped them to understand what was happening in a child understanding.
 - It helped them to understand that what was happening, and ARB took the time to talk things through making sure A understood everything.
- 8.3 25 assessment of need assessments have been undertaken between April 2018-October 2018. 31 adoption support fund applications have been made to date almost twice the amount at this stage last year, totalling £112,000. Adoption Support Fund (ASF) applications have funded the following provision; Therapeutic Life Story work, Occupational Therapy, Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Sustain specialist assessment and therapy, Creative play therapy, Family therapy, Psychotherapy, Circle of Security Parenting programme, Safe base parenting programme, and Developmental Dyadic Psychotherapy.
- 8.4 In October 2016 the Government introduced The Fair Access Limit (FAL), which requires local authorities to share the costs of therapeutic support with adopters above £5,000, through a match-funding approach. This measure was introduced because demand for support is more than double the level forecasted. Since April 2018 the City of Wolverhampton have matched funded £1,440.

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- 8.5 Currently, the average claim made for individual funding for Wolverhampton is in the region of £4,000.
- 8.6 A new portal which went live in June 2018 was designed to ensure that the application process better meets users' needs however, the fund have extended approval timescales to 20 working days, this can be problematic and can leave families in crisis.
- 8.7 During this period there have been no disruptions; given the children's ages and level of need this is very positive and is in part due to therapy being identified early in placements.
- 8.9 The post adoption contact (PAC) co-ordinator manages more than 400 letter box exchange arrangements and provides support to birth families in writing and by reading letters to provide good written contact for children.
- 8.10 The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team have several adoptions involving direct contact between siblings who have been adopted and Support is offered to adopters in setting up the initial contact and they then facilitate it between themselves thereafter.
- 8.11 The City of Wolverhampton has delivered a parenting programme based on attachment-based principles; The Circle of Security. All participants rated it four or five out of five and outlined it met their expectations and said they would recommend it to any parent. They were interested in the new way of thinking, it helped them understand their children and their behaviour. One of the key themes was the importance of attending the training and sharing experiences with adopters on a similar journey.
- 8.12 The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team continues to work in partnership with Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) incorporating Walsall, Sandwell and Dudley to purchase adoption support packages from Adoption U.K. and After Adoption. These support services provide services to adopters, adopted children, adopted adults and birth family members.
- 8.13 All Wolverhampton approved adopters continue to receive 12 months free membership to Adoption UK. Additionally, local adopters who access adoption support are also provided with 12 months membership. Adopters are invited to attend the Adoption Support Group run by Adoption UK on a bi-monthly basis, access training and access a lending library.
- 8.14 Complementary to the support offered through Adoption UK the City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team run an adoption support group, this is a group made up of adopters who have attended the Circle of Security parenting programme. This keeps adopters linked to the City of Wolverhampton Adoption team enabling additional support to be offered in a timely manner if required, as the group meets monthly.
- 8.15 ABC deliver a post approval training programme, the workshops are available to approved adopters who are waiting for a placement, those who have had a child placed,

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or those who have adopted. There has been one workshop on 'telling' delivered by Wolverhampton during this period.

9.0 Strategic issues and forward plans

- 9.1 Recruiting more adopters who will consider early permanence placements and harder to place children to ensure they are offered the opportunities they deserve, and adoption support is provided to families when needed.
- 9.2 The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team will continue to progress links in a timely manner and endeavour to improve the A1 and A2 indicators.
- 9.3 Devise policies and procedures in readiness for the launch of Adoption@ Heart.
- 9.4 The Adoption Service has demonstrated the ability to embrace new ways of working in order to improve outcomes for children. The model for Adoption@Heart with the *golden thread* of adoption support is similar to Wolverhampton's model and we will continue to practice in this manner in preparation for moving into the RAA.
- 9.5 The Government has committed to funding essential therapeutic support to adoptive placements until 2020; the challenge for Wolverhampton Adoption Team will be to provide further opportunities to increase the skill of the workforce so the previously undisclosed level of demand will be met in the future.

10.0 Financial implications

- 10.1 The total approved budget for the Adoption Service for 2018-2019 is £4.1 million.
- 10.2 All costs associated with the Adoption Service are contained within this budget allocation. [NM/14012019/C]

11.0 Legal implications

- 11.1 The relevant legislation is set out in the body of the report. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report. [TC/11092018]

12.0 Equalities implications

- 12.1 The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team seeks to recruit and purchase adopters who can meet the needs of a diverse range of children. This includes children of different Black and minority ethnic groups, both young and older children, male and female children. This is reflected within the recruitment strategy and all new policies have been subject to an equalities analysis.

13.0 Environmental implications

13.1 There are no environmental implications.

14.0 Human resources implications

14.1 Regionalisation will have human resources implications, and this will be considered as part of the consultation process.

15.0 Corporate Landlord implications

15.1 There are no Corporate Landlord implications.

16.0 Health and Wellbeing implications

16.1 The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team seeks to recruit and purchase adopters who can support and promote the health and wellbeing of children who are unable to remain in their birth family, adopters are recruited and matched with children who can meet their holistic needs including their health and wellbeing.

17.0 Appendices

17.1 Appendix 1 – Additional Marketing Activity.

17.2 Appendix 2 – Children in Care council questions to Dawn Deans.