



Dudley Adoption Service Annual Report



1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014

Dudley Adoption Service Mission Statement;

To find and support lifelong adoptive families for Dudley's 'Looked After Children' whose needs can be best met through adoption.

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- 1. Setting the scene – adoption service statutory duties**

This report is to update the Directorate of Children's Services, highlighting the successes and challenges that the service is seeking to address.

Service Overview

The Adoption Service provides a comprehensive range of adoption services to carry out the responsibilities of the Directorate in its role as an Adoption Agency. The service offers specialist advice, skills and information on adoption and permanency matters to children's social workers and others in the Directorate.

Family finding social workers assist Care Management colleagues in managing skilled transitions of children into carefully matched adoptive placements. They provide initial assessment to inform the agency's acceptance of an application to adopt and then undertake comprehensive assessment using the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Prospective Adopters Report format to enable the Adoption Panel to assess suitability to adopt. They also provide counselling of all individuals wishing to adopt, and for birth parents who are considering relinquishing a child to adoption. In addition the service provides support, advice and activity in relation to non -agency (step parent) adoptions which can include an inter-country element.

Our adoption support service assesses and provides tailor-made support to all those affected by adoption, prioritising families at risk of breakdown where children are under 18 years of age. Close working links are established with universal and specialist provisions in the borough. Dudley Adoption Service remains responsible for all its former 'Looked After children' (LAC) placed with adopters for a 3 year period after the making of an Adoption Order and Adoption Support Plans are in place for these families to cater for their particular needs. Other adoptive families approved by neighbouring boroughs or by Voluntary Adoption Agencies, resident within the borough become eligible for service post 3 years. Increasing emphasis is being placed on early notification of these placements to assist prediction of future service needs. The adoption support social workers facilitate a small number of face-to-face contacts with birth relatives and all adoption staff service the Letterbox Service that enables safe exchange of news between growing numbers of birth families and adoptive parents, and their children.

Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) consortium service level agreements are in place to provide effective adoption services to all affected by adoption. **Adoption UK**, an independent non profit making adopter lead organisation provides a range of support services including adopter support groups at venues in the Black Country. Other services include Family Support Services that maximise peer support and the Piece of Cake post placement training programme.

After Adoption provides a dedicated independent service to birth parents of children where adoption is proposed or has taken place. It also undertakes all adult related adoption work for Dudley residents to tracing adopted relatives or access to their adoption records with an Intermediary Service, to support all parties to reconnect in a well managed safe way.

A regular newsletter enables adopters to remain informed and self selected the services that most support their family's current needs.

Initial counselling interviews for those individuals adopted pre 1976 is provided by the Dudley Adoption Service.

The promotion of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) as a permanence option for LAC who are in stable family placements is high on the Directorate's current agenda in addressing escalating LAC numbers. The Assistant Team Manager provides information packs and surgery sessions for interested parties. The support needs of this group are becoming more apparent and will require further investment if this option is to be promoted to many stable permanent families.

2. Profile of adoption service staff group

Management Team	
37hr	Adoption Service Manager-Ofsted Registered Manager
37hr	Assistant Team Manager (Adoption support and SGO lead)

Family finding for children, recruitment and assessment of future adoptive parent/s and duty work	
37hr	Senior Practitioner
37hr	Social Worker
30hr	Social Worker
30hr	Social Worker
18.5hr	Social Worker
18.5hr	Social Worker

12.5	Social Worker
37 hr	Fixed term contract social worker 1yr post (Adoption Reform Grant)

Adoption support and contact including letterbox and duty work	
37hr	Adoption Support Social Worker
22.5hr	Adoption Support Social Worker
37 hr	Fixed term contract social worker 1yr post (Adoption Reform Grant)
22.5 hr	Clinical Psychologist
4hr	Sessional social worker- letterbox contact
37 hr	Adoption Lifeworker from January 2013 (12 secondment contract extended)

Administrative support	
37 hr	Senior Admin Assistant / Panel administrator
37 hr	Senior Admin Assistant / Panel administrator
37hr	Admin Assistant /Letterbox Assistant

NB all financial means testing for Adoption allowance, SGO and Residence Order (RO) are completed by the senior admin assistants, in addition to specialist adoption panel administrative roles.

Adoption in the Black Country Consortium (ABC)- Recruitment and Marketing Service	
37 hr	Marketing and Recruitment Officer (Part funded by Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall) - Managed and administrative support from DMBC Adoption Service.

Sessional Social Work Staff	
3 independent Social Workers (HCPC registered) Completing adopter assessment work, non agency adoption court reports and adoption support work	

3. Service Activity Levels

During the review period the service was involved in the following activities to meet the Directorates responsibilities as an Adoption Agency

3.1 Children's case progression

Number of children accepted for adoption from 1.4.2013 to 31.3.2014

2013-14	45
2012-13	40
2011-12	36
2010-11	47

Ethnicity of children accepted for adoption from 1.4.2013 and 31.3.2014

Asian/British	0
White/ Asian British	3
White/Black British	7
White/British	32
White British other	3

Number of children placed with approved adopter/s from 1.4.2013 to 31.3.2014

2013-2014	40 children matched (37 placed before 1st April)
Number placed within 8 months of court orders (Scorecard A2 criteria)	15 of 37

2012-13	27
2011-12	27
2010-11	14

Scorecard performance indicators.

	1st scorecard	2nd scorecard	3rd scorecard
Number of children with plan of adoption on 1.4.2014	35	70	79
Number of children subject to legal order to place on 1.4.2014	Not Avail	Not avail	72
A1 indicator ; Average time from LAC entry to joining adoptive family	651days	639 days	723 days
A2 indicator :average time from legal order to matching with approved adopter	220 days	213 days	246 Days

- **this is a cumulative total over a 3 yr period**
- **Data for this year submitted late due to relocation of service**

Proportion of children placed with in 21 months

2011 – 2014 new target	Official data not available
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2010 – 2013 Dudley Scorecard	44%
2008-11 Dudley Scorecard	52%

* This is a cumulative total over a 3 year period.

Number of children placed through inter-agency arrangements

2013-2014	19 children in 15 families 10 VAA (3 sib pairs) 5 LA single
2012-13	14 children in 7 placements
2011-12	9 children in 6 placements
2010-11	13 children in 10 placements

Number of children adopted from LAC from 1.4.2013 to 31.3.2014

2013-2014	24
Placed < 14 mths of Placement Order	18 (75%)
2012-13	30
2011-12	19
2010-11	21

Percentage of children leaving LAC through adoption 1.4.2013 to 31.3.2104

2013-2014	14.8%
2012-13	18.6%
2011-12	14%
2008-11	11% (Average scorecard data)
Percentage of children leaving LAC through SG0 2013-2014	5.6%

Care Management Team distribution;

Dudley North and Team 4	12
Halesowen	6
Brierley Hill	6
Children's disability team	0

Ethnicity of children adopted:

Asian/British	0
White/ Asian British	3
White/Black British	2
White/British	17
Any other Mixed Heritage	2

Ages of children at adoption order for the review period: 24

Under 12 months	0
Before 2 nd birthday	5 (2 previous year)
2 – 5yrs	14
Child 5 +	5

This included 5 sibling pairs

Adoptive placements disrupted during the review pre Adoption Order:

2013-2014	1
2012-2013	1

2011-2012	0
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Number of children withdrawn from the Adoption List from 1.4.2013 to 31.3.2014

Permanent fostering	13
Rehabilitation programme to birth family	1
Special Guardianship	1

Number of children for who an allowance is provided to their adoptive parents 2013- 2014	76
2012-2013	75
2011-2012	68

Special Guardianship Activity

Total Number of children's placements where SGO allowances are provided

2013-2014	49
2012-2013	39
2011-2012	22
2010-2011	19

3.2 ASSESSING ADOPTIVE PARENT/S

Adults enquiries to adopt

2013-2014	58
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2013-2014 Redirected to Adoption in the Black Country as DMBC address	11
2012-2013	78
2012-2013 Redirected to Adoption in the Black Country as DMBC address	23
2011-2012	85
2011-2012 Redirected to Adoption in the Black Country as DMBC address	39

Outcome of enquiries

Initial assessments completed	33 (Previous year 28)
Accepted application	11 (previous year 14)
Withdrew during home study assessment	1 previous year 3)
Intercountry adoption enquiry	0

Applications approved as suitable to adopt

2013- 2014	15
31.3.2014 current Stage 1 and Stage 2 assessments	9
2012-13	14
2011-12	13
Time taken to complete suitability	8 months or < 5 8- 12 months 4 12 months + 6
Time taken to match with child once approved 2013-14	0 -3 months 4 3 -6 months 7 6 – 9 months 1

Diversity of individual approved adopter;

White British individual	27
Asian British individual	2
White Black British individual	1
Mixed heritage individual	1

Adopter/s relationship status

Single adopter (female)	1
Same gender partnerships (female)	1
Heterosexual partnerships	13
Including former foster carer families	2

Approved Adopter/s waiting for match as of 1st April 2014

1.4.2014	7
1.4.2013	5
1.4.2012	3

Dudley Adoptive families matched with LAC child originating outside of Dudley area

2013-2014	0
2012-13	0

2011-12	2
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Approved adopters who withdrew from their adoption assessment in agreement with the agency during the review period

2013-2014	2
2012-13	0
2011-12	4

3.3 Adoption Support Enquiries/Requests from adoptive parents with dependent children

Service request	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Contact issues needing SW allocation	8	15	11
Life story / Telling	6	*2	1*
Emotional and educational difficulties	21	14	17
Request for financial assistance	3	2	2
Request for review of records	25	15	14
Enquiries from birth parents/adoptive parents about letterbox including change of address, follow ups etc	125	93	55*

* single lead person has provided continuity for this service

3.4 Adoption support work for adults affected by adoption

Service request	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Self referral-pregnant mothers	1	0	1
Adopted adults; records access, link to adopted relatives	50	43	21*
Birth records Schedule 2 (pre 1976) done in house	11	5	7
Non agency notice of intent received	0	5	5
Non agency adoption orders granted	1	3	1

* Duty Social Worker sign posting to After Adoption by Duty Social Worker

3.5 Development in Life Story work

Statistics from 1st January 2013 to 31st March 2014. The areas of work are still being developed.

Life story consultations to date	45
Attended by social workers	18
Attended by young person's advisors	6
Work with adoptive parents	6
Work with foster carers	6
Life story books completed on historic cases	3
Life story books completed so far	9
Life story books currently being completed	7

4. Current issues for the Dudley Adoption Agency

4.1 Timeliness of children moving onto adoption

Adoption remains high on the government's reform agenda, with the priority to reduce the time each child will spend "in care" before settling into an adoptive family. There is growing scientific evidence that the emotional experiences of each child in the first 3 years of life form the foundations for the all future social and emotional development. Greater understanding of how the young child's brain develops and the critical impact of the attentive and responsive parent/s in launching maximum neurological pathways that enable engagement social relationships and learning opportunities, so the need to resolve the uncertainty for children who experience adversity in their family of origin has become more widely understood and prioritised. This has been particularly significant in understanding the pervasive impact of neglect on children's long term outcomes.

The government is introducing legislative change to develop new options for permanence, and earlier placement with the family that will adopt. At the same legal reforms are driving a 26 week case schedule for care cases decision making. The impact of this is younger children being referred to the adoption service, with the chance for placement at a much younger age. This year **5** children completed their legal adoption before their **2nd** birthday and a greater proportion of the matches were for children under the age of 2 years. Whilst there are younger children ready to place with

approved adopters, the particular family circumstances of adversity have the potential to include many aspects of developmental risk; including the long term impact of exposure to drug and alcohol during pre-birth. Often there is absence of paternity information. Nationally there is an overrepresentation of birth parents that have a learning disability or deeply entrenched psychological difficulties that will require intensive long term therapy. There is growing concern about the experience of birth parents who can experience repeat adoption care planning of their children. A new initiative called **“Breaking the cycle”** is being piloted across the Black Country, led by After Adoption to assist to some birth parents to change to avoid recurrence.

During the review period the service placed **37** children in **30** adoptive families, a significant increase on the previous year. A further **3** children were matched but with legal challenges pending in court. These children subsequently joined Dudley approved adoptive families later in April. Time taken to match once legal orders were made has decreased with **15** of the **37** children joining their new adoptive family's in less than **8** months (the A2 scorecard target for 2010-2013). Of the **24** children whose adoption was legally completed during this review period **10** of **24** were matched in less than **8** months. The **Adoption Scorecard A1 indicator** measures **every day** the child is “in care” before joining an adoptive family and evaluates performance of all care planning processes to move through to permanence through adoption. The government was disappointed at release of the second scorecard for the period 2010 – 2013 to see that their plans for reform were not materialising as rapidly as anticipated, with a greater majority of local authorities including Dudley taking a longer time on both A1 and A2 targets. One concern was the delay in time between the scorecard publication and current performance with many adoption agencies reporting an increasing placement activity. Dudley participated in the voluntary national data collection on a quarterly basis to provide current details. The Associate of Director's for Children's Services executive summary report provided comprehensive information on geographical national variation of numbers of children in who had legal orders, waiting for an adoptive family. It also confirmed the experiences of staff that competition for good placements was extremely intense across the West Midlands region. This demonstrated that the West Midlands had the second highest density of children waiting for adoption in the England and Wales. The publication of the Adoption Maps enabled us to see who had an excess of approved adopters waiting, which informed interagency working with 4 new local authority adoption teams. We have maintained strong working relationships with 2 Voluntary Adoption Agencies in the West Midlands Region and are now seeking to develop one of these relationships into a more formalised partnership to increase our sufficiency of placements for Dudley LAC.

Whilst we have made significant improvements in placing a greater number of children with approved adopter/s and the time taken to do this is decreasing. Whilst we aim for

greater improvement against this A2 target it is clear that for single younger children particularly where a sibling already has a care plan of adoption that they will experience a much reduced overall time from day 1 of care to adoption. **6** children entered care and were placed with their adoptive family in less than **9** months from the start of care. Research into adoption outcomes support the very low risk of adoption for children who join their adoptive family in the first 18 months of life. We are acutely aware through case tracking of children who wait for extensive periods of time including those adopted by their former foster carer/s. Often this will follow repeated national family finding. The impact for the child of continuity of parent figure can bring many positives but we are looking for life long commitment and there is a need for risk assessment of the birth parents potential to disrupt the permanent family. The identity of the foster carer is often known to the birth family and these dynamics are extremely difficult to manage safely with social media. On occasions the adoption service and child's social work will be strongly opposed to these plans. We provide adoption preparation training, and specific assessment that informs the support plan for all foster carers who seek to adopt. Work is ongoing to revise procedures to ensure consistency and understanding of the long term risks that must be balanced against the gains from continuous parenting figure. We are also preparing for the new demands of Fostering for Adoption (where an approved adopter/s will be approved temporarily to foster pending the outcome of court legal processes).

A number of children whose data is included in this review had extensive family finding over a number of years. Referred to as legacy cases, these will have a significant impact on scorecard, but we remained strongly committed to securing adoption for the child or children. The time taken before acceptance for adoption has been considerable for a number of children adopted this year. Sadly other care options have broken down e.g. connected other placements or placement with parent breakdown at late stages. There may also be added time where the adoption plan cannot be progressed due to court directed sibling reassessment or foster home placement changes. There has been increasing legal challenge of Placement Order and Adoption Order applications and this is reflected in the reduced total of Adoption Orders this year and delay in placing some children with their matched family whilst legal contest is resolved.

Waiting approved adopter/s have become more aware of the ability to choose and to take younger children are more aware of the impact of delay and neglect on long term outcomes. The result has been that it has become even more competitive to secure a match leaving increasing numbers of children in the **3 – 7 age** range with few opportunities to join an adoptive family. This situation has been particularly exasperated for sibling pairs. It is therefore pleasing to note the placement of **6** sibling groups with Dudley approved adopters. Of these sibling groups **5** had at least one child of school age and all were able to benefit from support of our clinical psychologist to consider the

impact of their early life experiences and prepare parenting strategies. **3** sibling pairs were placed with families approved through a Voluntary Adoption Agency, with other local authorities providing placements only for single children. There continues to be a gender bias in adoption placement with male single children over **3** yrs of age often not be identified a placement and their care plans subsequently being changed after extensive searches. During the review period **17** male children were matched including **3** sibling placements with **2** male children all with Dudley approved adoptive parents. It is hoped that with increasing adopter approvals this pattern may shift and research into same sex partnerships seeking to adopt has shown very successful outcomes for male children.

In January 2014 we were able to bring added social work capacity through the use of Adoption Reform Grant appointing **2** experienced full time social workers; **1** to family finding and **1** for adoption and SGO support. The service has made some improvements in timeliness of placement for children whilst maintaining its low rate of disruption. We continue to aim to place within **2** hours travel time of Dudley to ensure comprehensive support. The progress made will be reflected in improvement against the scorecard indicators.

4.2 Assessing adoptive families

During the review period **15** adopter families were approved. The target had been for **17** and **3** narrowly missed completion for unavoidable circumstances. All **3** assessments subsequently gained suitability decisions. Capacity of the adoption service staff to meet the combined needs of family finding and preparing adoptive parents has been a constraining factor on our performance. This is a pattern reflected in regional adoption service teams with the increasing use of independent assessing staff to complete the work and this year the Adoption Reform Grant (**ARG**) enabled a new initiative to be progressed. .

At the same time government reform implemented **Stage 1** and **Stage 2** process with target times for assessment set at **6 months**. All agencies were also expected to improve performance by at least **20%** in this area. From 1st August 2013 to 31st March 2014 the 4 Black Country Adoption Services through **Adoption in the Black Country (ABC)** created a **5th Virtual Team** lead by a manager working with a number of social work agencies and independent assessors to increase approval capacity. This new opportunity provided Dudley with **3** approved adopter/s. Timescales have improved for adopter assessments with an average time now being **10 months**. **5** assessments were completed in **8** or less months. Of the **6** families taking longer than **12 months**, delays can be accounted for by complex medical assessment and requests from the applicants to take a slower pace through assessments.

The Dudley Adoption Service social workers have strongly indicated their wish to have mixed caseloads of family finding and adoption assessment. It is our shared belief that the continuity of social worker who assessed the adoptive parent/s contributes to making effective matches for Dudley LAC children, using the knowledge from assessment and through a known person staying alongside the family as they start to parent through adoption. Where we have used an independent assessor a linkworker is appointed to support from point of approval and through into adoptive family life.

Progress has been made in the timeliness of completing adopter assessments with the new processes for **Stage 1 and 2** becoming more securely established over the year, with strong administrative tracking in place to avoid agency led drift. We have been fortunate to benefit from the councils online Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) system which has significantly reduced time during this review period. As with many adoption agencies concern was expressed about capacity to complete the adoption medical assessments in the new timescales. Where complex medical assessment is needed, we will delay preparation training until outcomes are resolved. Candidates will be informed of the reasons for any delays. At times candidates have expressed concerns about the rapid pace of assessments and target setting. We seek to be responsive to the need of each applicant recognising the enormity of the life change that adoptive parenting will bring.

During the review period **33** initial assessments were completed. These reports are provided to the individuals to ensure they are factually accurate and show the assessment of their potential for the adoptive parenting tasks. Where a decision to not accept an application is made, clear reasons for this and suggestions to strengthen a future approach to us or another adoption agency are provided. We have seen a number of prospective adopter/s taking the suggested course of action before successfully returning and completing their adoption journey with the agency.

This year in conjunction with **ABC** we launched an on line training programme, a first in the UK. This has been well received and is overseen by the administrative support worker at **ABC**. All applicants attend the **ABC 3 day** preparation training held monthly and in practice many Dudley applicants are completing this programme before starting stage 2. During the review period social work staff attended up to **2** Information Events per month. A number of new venues and formats were trialled.

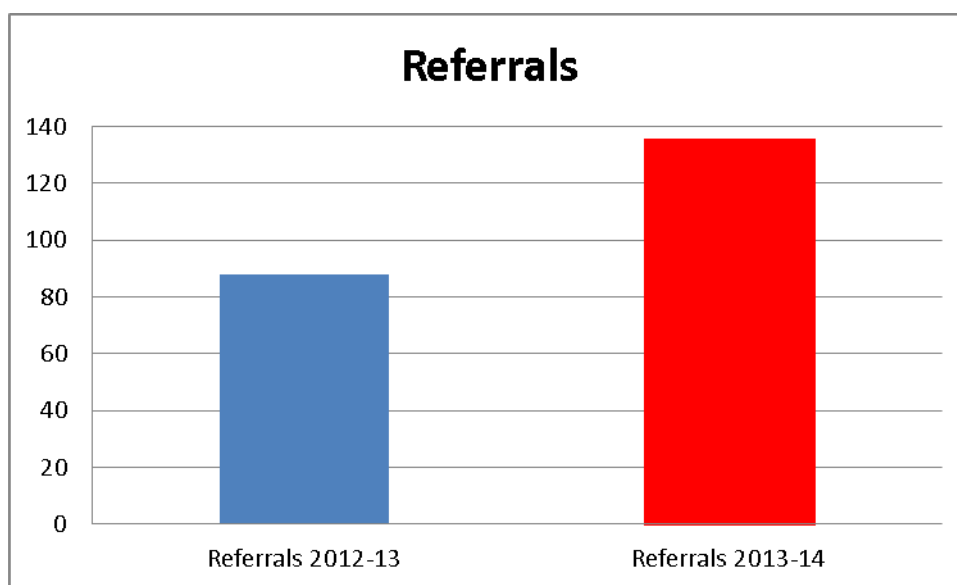
4.3 Adoption in the Black Country Recruitment Activity

www.adoptionblackcountry.org

We have continued to witness the expansion of internet based resources in the adoption field and in particular this year the increased engagement through social media channels. The **ABC** social media marketing activity has facilitated easier

synergies with the national adoption gateway and also significant organisations such as BAAF, Adoption UK, etc’s marketing activity. The national gateway has had little effect (neither positive nor negative) on **ABC** recruitment delivering just **6** clicks through from their info site. The **ABC** website has been refreshed to make it more user friendly and easier to access from phone and tablets and continues to be the most effective point of contact with over **90%** on enquiries coming through this route. **ABC** web address score very highly on all Google searches and is enhanced by specific geotargeted Google Adword/adverts.

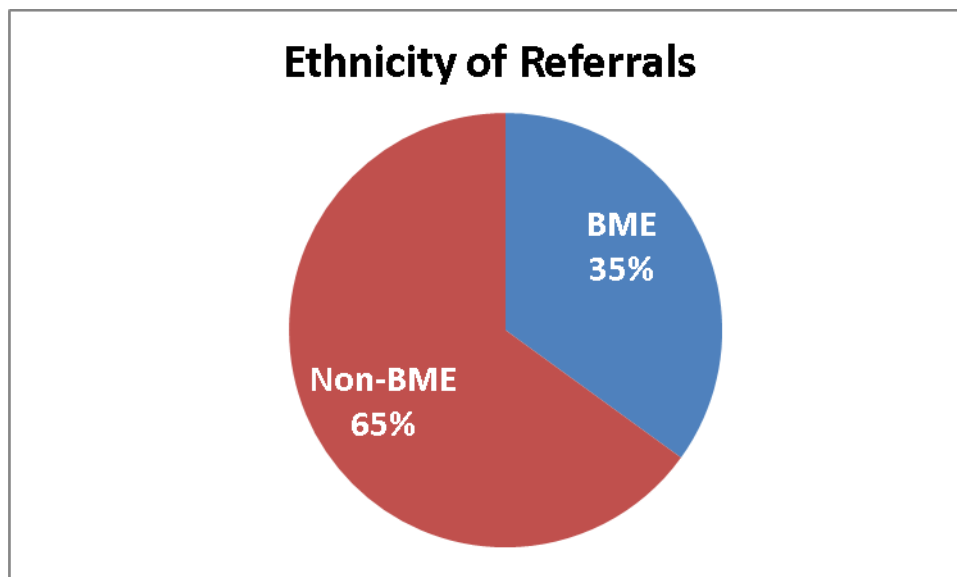
Marketing activity has significantly increased in this period and we have seen growth in referrals by **54.5%** compared to the previous year.



The marketing approach of directing enquiries to an information event is again a reason for this growth. We have seen information events increase from **13** in 2012/13 to **19** in 2013/14. We all have customer retention processes in place to initiate follow up to strong candidates at a later date.

Dudley Adoption Duty receives a high level of interest from Dudley Borough residents and **ABC** arrangements ensure this potential resource is used to best advantage for the regions young children waiting for adoption. **ABC** enables Black Country residents to be allocated to the agency best placed to match with waiting LAC children. We are also recruiting from neighbouring areas to the Black Country which equated to **26%** of enquiries in 2012 - 2013 and decreased slightly to **18%** this year. We aim to ensure the privacy of new family life and offer effective support by placing all Dudley children outside of the borough, but within the West Midlands. The Dudley Borough has traditionally been the area of greatest recruitment for adopters into ABC this has increased from **25%** of all referrals in 2012 – 2013 to **32%** in this year.

Engagement with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups was still significantly higher than the Black Country demographic with **35%** of adoption referrals from minority groups. We continue to seek to reach out to applicants who can parent a child of White Black British Ethnicity and are performing very strongly in attracting adopters for children of White and Asian heritage.



Adoption in the Black Country now has in place an on-line training tool which **74** adopters have successfully used. This tool which support the governmental position of an adopter led process empowers the prospective adopters to undertake the training at a time and place that is convenient to them. The on-line training is broken down into 'bite-size' modules that can be accessed at anytime and from various platforms (be it a mobile phone, tablet, laptop or PC). Prospective adopters have provided positive feedback about the on line training and some initial issues have now been ironed out with a new enhanced version anticipated later in 2014.

Adoption in the Black Country hosted its first Adoption Activity Day in July 2013, again using Adoption Reform Grant (ARG) investment. 3 Dudley children were secured matches through this adopter led initiative. Learning from the event will inform the next event scheduled for April 2015 in partnership with Staffordshire and Adopt West Midlands.

4.4 Support opportunities for adoptive parents

During the review period adopter/s were kept informed of opportunities to attend a range of training and support events at times that suited their families unique needs. This was through the tri annual newsletter, fliers and through contact with service staff. New adoptive families were also signposted to adoptive parenting courses available

through the service and these included in adoption support plans at matching panels. During the review period **8** families attended the **Safebase** course provided through a service level agreement with ABC consortium, which includes a specific assessment of each family using MIMIS, a Theraplay technique. In addition 1 adoptive family was identified a Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) based parenting programme, in their home location. Where families are facing extreme challenges an adoption support assessment will be completed to inform on a multi- agency approach to supporting the family.

ADOPT parenting programme ran a 16 week programme across the Black Country Dudley Adoption Service staff have become very “attachment and trauma focussed “ in their approach to work with adopted families. This reflects the specialist education and responses from adoptive parents that this approach seems to offer most progress to adoptive families. There are ongoing arrangements for staff consultation with our Clinical Psychologist, and this can include pre matching discussions with the identified family to ensure their understanding of how a child’s early life coping strategies may re surface during transition to adoptive family life.

There are strong connections with colleagues in health in supporting schools to develop their skills in making school days be manageable for children with additional emotional needs. Theraplay introductions sessions have been provided to adoptive parents in addition a number of interventions. There have been some super conferences with key note speakers including Dan Hughes and Joy Rees and a number of adopter/s have been supported to attend.

Service levels agreements provide adoption support services from **Adoption UK** an adopter led charity. This includes Adoption UK membership, providing access to the online community support; adoption support magazine and invites to participate in local adopter led groups at 3 venues across the Black Country region. The Adoption UK annual fun day is always oversubscribed and it is seen as a way of supporting children to know they are not the only child who is adopted. We use Adoption UK’s advertising magazine and online site to reach approved adopters waiting for a match.

Through the **ABC** consortium, Dudley also makes use of the many adoption support service provide by After Adoption Birmingham. This includes support to family members whose children are adopted through their Birth Ties Service. Acutely aware that some parents will experience adoption planning for more a succession of children Dudley provided anonymous data that informed the successful bid to deliver the innovative “Breaking the Cycle” programme commencing Autumn 2014.

After Adoption has been developing increasing opportunities for adopted children to meet others and the take up from Dudley young people has been very strong. This has

included participation in the Steering Group, and photographic courses, African Drumming workshops and its teens group programme. **After Adoption** also runs residential camps that bring adoptive children together and we have sponsored 6 children during the last year to attend.

The publicity of adoptive family life and the governments drive to ensure speedier adoption of the right children has resulted finally in investment into adoption support service and an exciting new range of services have emerged through the Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) arena that can benefit the children who experience adoption. It also ensures we hear the voice of the child with a recent event attending by 2 team members show casing Adoption Support young people services over the last year.

4.5 New arrangements for psychological support service to adoptive families

In August 2013 the Dudley Looked After and Adopted Children's Psychology Services (LAAC) was transferred from Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to sit within Dudley Children's Services. Adoptive parents who had received support through the specialist clinical psychologist formerly attached to Dudley Adoption Service were deeply distressed on hearing that commissioning arrangements were under review and an active campaign was influential in bringing the new service to fruition. Whilst there are some operational issues to resolve for the new service, for the adoption social work staff this has provided even closer working links and use of specialist consultation has increased further and has proved highly effective. The service continues to evolve and recognises it can effectively reach out to more people through educating the child care services through specialist training and consultation to underpin their work, as it has effectively achieved with the Adoption Service Staff. During a **9** month period the LAAC Psychology Service provided consultation to inform care planning and intervention for **37** children with up to **3** sessions from the Adoption Service. Clinical Psychology staff has also provided training events for Adoption UK ABC Network and for the Adoption Service on attachment and trauma topics. There is an exciting opportunity during the next 12 months to finalise the service level pathways with mainstream CAMHS and then deliver intensive therapeutic services locally. This will provide a specialist clinical service to meet the specific needs of adoptive children, their families and the professionals involved in their care. Proposed activities include Nurturing Attachment Groups (targeting families with a school age child) and sibling assessment training for social workers, in addition to the Theraplay Practise Share.

The government is currently considering how best to provide adoption support that involves intensive therapeutic support through personal budgets and Dudley Adoption Service in partnership with colleagues in Dudley LAAC Psychology Service is participating in informative activities to seek to influence future service delivery.

4.6 Contact after adoption- Letterbox

Dudley adoption service promotes the exchange of information between adoptive parents and birth family members for all new adoptive placements and maintains those for historic adoptions. This totals over **450** arrangements, with approximately **30%** involving a responding letter from a birth family member to the adoptive family. During the review period we have had the consistency of management of many of these exchanges by a consistent dedicated social worker for at least one morning each week. This has resulted in a decrease in the need for allocation of letterbox matters freeing up time for more complex adoption support assessment work.

With the high volume of exchanges taking place we guarantee annual exchange with prompts to adopter/s to ensure this occurs. In teenage years adoptees will become aware of the exchange of news and their views may influence the need for review. A complex issue that is frequently being managed is maintaining letterbox between siblings that are in foster carer or are adults in the community connected to birth family networks. Where requested by any party we will review the arrangements to ensure they continue to meet the primary needs of the adoptive child or young person. This is an important area of work for our adoption support social workers and can evolve into much greater need for support service work.

The issue of social networking use has resulted in the decision to not exchange photographs in the majority of letterbox exchanges to prioritise the child's needs for privacy in adoption. The service would like to develop more capacity to consistently manage this aspect of our work. Letterbox is not a static need and information provided can have significant implications for 3 parties of the adoption triangle. We need to develop procedures to give options to adopted young adults about managing contacts from birth family members arising from post commencement legislation. We will be updating literature and agreements to ensure this reflect the current challenges and benefits of secure news exchange.

4.6 Lifework for adopted children

Since January 2013 the adoption service has benefited from a dedicated Adoption Life Worker Post. It is a national minimum standard that every child has a Life Story book and later life letter at the point of their adoption celebration ceremony. Statistics are provided for the work completed during the year and there has been an impact with decrease in referrals from adopters to duty to seek amendments or notify that these essential items have not been provided. The Adoption Service staff all attended training on Life Work lead by a specialist trainer and consultant in this area, whose model for this work is now strongly established within our work. There has been stronger emphasis on writing the reasons for adoption for the child at the matching stage of

placement planning with family finders supporting child's social workers to complete this. These materials are more likely to be missing where the child has experienced changes of social worker. Very occasionally the adoption service social worker will be allocated to address this deficit by writing later life letters or enhancing a Lifebook, but our capacity is over committed. Sessions held for care management staff have been well received with greater insight into what will benefit the adoptive family in the future. Explanations are most effectively written by the social worker who prepares the Childs Permanence Report, having directly known the birth family and advocated adoption in the court arena. We have found that often our contact supervisors are best placed to capture early photos and memories and we include them at Life Appreciation Meetings wherever possible to give a balanced insight into each parent's relationship with the child.

This development has also assisted in focusing on the need for child centred narratives for children age 3+ as they progress into an adoptive family. Preparation for the first Activity Day also made us all reconsider the needs of the child for preparation to ensure their emotional needs are responded to as we seek to establish them in an adoptive family. There is emphasis on being open about adoption status from the onset of an adoptive family placement. This is easier if there are child friendly materials ready for use by the adopter. We work hard to ensure there are photos of birth family members, especially parents in Lifebooks. Take up from adopters to attend the Telling About Adoption courses remains consistently high.

We are aware that we are still not fully compliant and with an increasing number of children being placed for adoption at younger ages there is a need to secure this post as a permanent provision as it is scheduled to end in December 2014. This will ensure this essential aspect of identity work is actively promoted for the benefit of the children who need to know the answers to "why was I adopted".

4.8 Adoption panel

The adoption panel continues to meet at least once each month to consider matches of children and the approval of new adoptive families. We welcome the participation of prospective adopters at discussions about their suitability and matching, and this is sensitively managed, but not compulsory. Panel training has been through a number of short workshops sessions this year. One session was on alternative permanence options so panel understood what might happen if adoption plan is removed e.g. SGO. We also reflected on panel decision making and the subsequent impact of court activity for a number of specific cases. There is acknowledgement that panel does identify risk issues. In addition we have been working towards a paper free panel. Whilst many obstacles exist we are committed to competing this during the next year. The panel moved into a new venue in April 2014 as part of the councils estate management

programme and now meets in a Children's Centre. On occasions additional panel time is needed the panel members respond quickly to the need to convene to avoid delay.

The Panel is chaired by an Independent Adoption Specialist, who brings extensive adoption and fostering expertise to the role of panel chair. Panel seeks to achieve the need to be welcoming to participating whilst at the same time being vigorous in ensuring it is fulfilling its duties. The panel chair person has attended a number of regional events including one on the new report formats for children and is a member of the Regional Independent Chairs Group.

During the year there was a change to the Adoption Agency Medical Advisor with the Consultant Community Paediatrician returning to fulfil this crucial role. We are appreciative of the flexibility to meet with prospective adopters to inform on specific medical issues at short notice.

We also saw the resignation of our independent social worker in December 2013 and were delighted to appoint a DMBC care management team manager into panel in April 2014 to meet the panel requirements for specialist child care and adoption skills and add capacity to the central list.

The educational psychology input to panel activities has been very constructive especially as we match increasing numbers of children in reception year with known complex needs. Panels role is an independent vetting of decision making, so knowledge from this specialism is particularly beneficial with all the changes to provision of additional support criteria and adoptive placements requiring school transfer unto a new local authority area.

4.9 Developments in Special Guardianship

Special Guardianship surgeries, held by the Assistant Team Manager continue to be well attended and interest remains high in this permanence route. **9** children became the subject of SGO orders in the review period; of which **8** were formerly Looked After child by connected other (family and friends) placements. The remaining child became the subject of an SGO granted to his former foster carers. Processes are in place to prepare the support plans and financial arrangements for these permanence placements. There are many challenges in progressing the initial interest into completion of the legal orders and increased tracking activities will seek to address to add pressure to complete the necessary case and legal work to make this a reality, .

In each case a support plan is agreed and will include a financial support package; the addition of social work time through the ARG has been targeted to assist with support plans to seek to increase use of this option. The co-location of the adoption and fostering team ensures that the best adoption support strategies can be considered for

SGO support, including consultation and parenting courses. There is a need to further develop services for managing complex issues of post order contact and parenting the child with trauma and attachment issues to support more orders being secured.

5. Summary

- 2013-2014 was a very active and successful year for Dudley Adoption Service with very strong performance in placing children into well prepared adoptive families carefully and more quickly
- We performed especially well in making sibling placements with Dudley approved families. All included at least one school age child.
- We slightly increased the numbers of approved families available and all matches were to a Dudley LAC child.
- Every child placed for adoption will have a letterbox exchange between their adoptive parent/s and birth family members. A consistent worker has reduced the need for allocation to the adoption support staff over the last 12 months freeing up time for families in crisis. This needs to be sustained as we add this years new 37 families into the long term service provision
- We maintained an increasingly high number of complex letterbox exchanges and provided intensive support to a number of adoptive families experiencing acute difficulties.
- The close working arrangements of Adoption in the Black Country ensured an effective consistent high quality reception for future adoptive parents delivering a substantial increase in enquiries to seek to adopt.
- Through **ABC** we are able to provide a unique online training programme and intensive training without delay, making sure adoption suitability is achieved more quickly.
- Dudley adoption service continues to work at and beyond capacity with a highly motivated staff group with a range of expertise in adoption work. The appointment of 2 additional social workers has contributed to improvement in performance and lifted the teams' moral.
- Media coverage of adoption is beneficial and the message is that we need to recruit, educate and support adoptive parents to meet the real needs of the children waiting for adoption. We have children waiting for this resource and want to support new families on their life journey with their adopted child.

- Adoption Scorecards have had the impact of ensuring that every stage of care planning is under scrutiny and strong tracking mechanisms put in place to identify patterns and make improvements for each child who can benefit from early adoption placement.
- Adoption is most effective with pre school children where there is time to form an emotional safe haven that is the base of all future relationships and it is positive that legal orders were made for an increasing number of under 2 year olds.
- Adoption can provide a highly effective early intervention service for a small number of young children originating in families where deeply entrenched difficulties remain highly resistant to change. The right children are being sought adoption in this locality and we are making improvements in placing them at the earliest opportunity to ensure maximum benefit for all parties.
- The Dudley Adoption Service is fortunate to be able to draw upon the expertise of the in house clinical psychology consultants to actively prepare and support new adoptive families, intervening early to redress potential issues. These unique arrangements also support families in acute crisis at any stage of their adoption journey.
- The Dudley Adoption Service continues to offer new initiatives to develop to meet the ever complex needs of today's adoptive families. These are well publicised and take up from adoptive parents and young people is high.
- The Dudley Adoption Service moved to Mary Steven's Park in April 2014 and staff are adjusting to the new demands of this venue and opportunities to work in more agile ways. Arrangements are in place to ensure that birth parents letters to their children in their adoptive families continue to be exchanged effectively.

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