

Dudley Adoption Service

Annual Report



1st April 2009 – 31st March 2010

1.0 Purpose of the Report;

The report outlines the role and function of Dudley's Adoption Service and highlights activity levels and performance against outcomes, as well as service related success and challenges for the future.

2.0 Profile of the Adoption Service Personnel

Management Team:

Service Manager 32 hrs

Assistant Team Manager 37hrs

Family finding for children, recruitment and assessment of future adoptive parent/s and duty work

Senior Practitioner - 37 hrs

Social Worker – 37 hrs

Social Worker - 30 hrs

Social Worker - 18.5 hrs

Social Worker - 18.5 hrs

Social Worker - 18.5 hrs

Adoption support and contact including letterbox

Social Worker - 37hrs

Social Worker - 22.5 hrs

Clinical Psychologist – 22.5 hrs

Current Vacancy – 37hr social work post

Administrative support

Senior Admin Assistant / Panel administrator – 37 hrs

Senior Admin Assistant / Panel administrator – 37 hrs

Admin Assistant /Letterbox Assistant - 37 hrs

Adoption in the Black Country Consortium (ABC)- Recruitment and Marketing Service

Marketing Officer – 37 hrs (Part funded by Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall) - Managed and administrative support from DMBC Adoption Service

3.0 Current Services Provided.

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 work staff assist Care Management colleagues in managing skilled transitions of children into carefully matched adoptive placements. They also

provide counselling to all individuals wishing to adopt, and for birth parents who are considering relinquishing a child to adoption. They provide initial assessment of individuals expressing a wish or interest in adoptive parenting. Once an application has been accepted a comprehensive assessment is undertaken using the BAAF Prospective Adopters Report format to enable the Adoption Panel to assess their suitability to adopt. In addition the service provides support, advice and prepares court reports in relation to non -agency (step parent) adoptions, which can include Intercountry adoption.

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 yrs 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 yr 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 created by neighbouring boroughs or through 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 face-to-face contact and information exchange between growing numbers of birth families and adoptive parents, and their children.

The Adoption in the Black Country(ABC) Recruitment and Marketing provision leads our recruitment activity through a co-ordinated multi-media campaign, regional Information Evenings and consortium wide preparation groups. There has been a diversification of potential adoptive parent pool post the Adoption and Children Act 2002 with more applications from single and same-sex partnerships.

Legislation recognised that best practice from adoption support experience would have many potential benefits for the sustaining of Special Guardianship families. The promotion of 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, and will make additional demands in the services financial provisions and staffing capacity.

Through the ABC consortium service 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. They deliver two bimonthly adopter support groups at venues in the Black Country. Other services include Family Support Services that maximise peer support; the Buddy Scheme and Parental Consultation Service, which offer independent guidance for individuals in conflict with their assessing adoption agency. ***Adoption Uk's*** "It's A Piece of Cake" post approval and placement course focuses on lifelong adoption issues and strategies and is provided annually.

Adoption Support Birmingham provides a dedicated independent service to represent and support birth parents of children where adoption is proposed or has taken place. In addition it also undertakes increasing amounts of work on behalf of Dudley residents wanting to trace adopted relatives or access their adoption records. It also provides an Intermediary Service, ensuring that adopted adults and their kin can be supported to reconnect in a well-managed safe way.

Initial Section 2 counselling interviews for those individuals adopted pre 1976 is provided by the Dudley Adoption Service, when staffing capacity permits but was spot purchased during this financial year to ensure timely service delivery.

4.0 Service Activity Levels.

Between the 1st April 2009 and 31st March 2010 the adoption service was involved in the following activities in respect of the Directorates responsibilities as an adoption agency.

Looked after children's work

| | |
|--|--|
| Number of children adopted from the 'Looked After Population' (C23) | 19 (previous year 12) |
| Ethnicity of the children adopted | 19 were white /European |
| Age of children when Adoption Order was granted | 10 children before their 3 rd birthday 4 before their 4 th birthday 1 child of 11yrs 3 were placed with a sibling |
| Number of Children Placed | 22 (the same as last year) |
| Number of children placed within 12 months of acceptance at panel (NI 61) | 15 of the 19 children (approx 70%) |

| | |
|---|--|
| Number of Children Placed with Other Agencies | <p>13 children including: 3 sibling pairs; a reduction of 4 children from previous year</p> <p>3 children joined Dudley approved prospective adopter/s, including 1 sibling pair</p> <p>3 remained with their Dudley former foster carers, including 1 sibling pair.</p> |
| Current Applications lodged before the County Court for Adoption Orders | 10 applications (of whom 3 are sibling pairs) |
| Adoptive placement disruption pre-order | <p>2 1 child age 5yrs 11mths at adoptive families request. 1 child removed at week 7 of placement by the agency.</p> |
| Number of children Accepted for Adoption | 32 (previous year 16) |
| Ethnicity of children accepted for adoption | <p>1 Asian /British 2 White/Asian/British 1 White/Iraqi/Kurdish/British 1 White/British/Black/South African 27 White / British</p> |
| Number of Children Withdrawn from the Adoption List | 2 - Their care plans have been amended to permanent fostering |
| Children Receiving an Adoption Allowance as at 31.03.2010 | 66 (a decrease of 1) |
| Number of Children Special Guardianship Orders granted | 7 (1 former family and friends arrangement- child LAC, 6 private law applications) |
| Number of Children receiving a Special Guardianship Allowance as at 31/03/2010 | 14 (previously 10) |

ADULT WORK

| | |
|---|---|
| Adoption Enquiries | 73 |
| Applicants Approved | <p>7 including:</p> <p>1 specific application from a single female White/ English foster carer</p> <p>All the partnerships were from heterosexual couples including:</p> <p>1 Asian /white couple</p> <p>1 Asian/ Pakistani/British couple</p> <p>1 White/Scottish/ Irish ethnicity</p> <p>3 were of White/English ethnicity</p> |
| Approved Adopters Awaiting Placements | <p>4 as of 31st March 2010:</p> <p>2 were White/British couples</p> <p>1 White/Asian couple</p> <p>1 Asian couple</p> |
| Approved Inter Country Adopters awaiting placement | 1 White/British couple for a Bulgarian child |
| Adoptive Placements purchased by other adoption agencies | 2 Adoption Orders were granted for a sibling pair 4 and 2 years of age with a White/UK/Asian couple |
| Adopters who have withdrawn during the review period | 2 White/British couples De-registrations: 1 White/UK couple (at their request) |
| <p>Adoption support counselling:</p> <p>Self -referrals from expectant mothers</p> <p>Birth Records initial Schedule 2 counselling (pre 1976)</p> <p>Adopted Adults: access to records/or supported links to birth relatives (post 1976)</p> | <p>4 None proceeded post birth</p> <p>11</p> <p>35</p> |

| | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Adoption support referrals: | 30 (no change to previous year) |
| Of which: | |
| Contact issues | 16 |
| Lifestory /Telling | 5 |
| Emotional or educational needs | 8 |
| Therapy request | 2 |
| Non Agency/ Step Parent Adoptions: | 25 |
| Notices of Intent to Adopt by a step parent | 15 (3 with a foreign element) |
| NAA Adoption Orders granted | 3 |
| Inter-Country Adoption Enquiries | 0 |

5.0 Service developments.

5.1. C23 Outcome: Looked After Children Adopted from Care

19 Adoption Orders were granted during the review period, a more realistic outcome given the service placed 22 children each of the 2 previous years. Whilst C23 is calculated as 5% of LAC the reality is that not enough children are being sought adoptive placement to achieve this level. There is continuing variation in locality activity that results in adoption care planning. Dudley North and Team 4 are the most significant referrers of the next cohort of children for whom adoption family finding must take place.

In contrast to the 3 other adoption consortium authorities whose numbers show stable or decreasing acceptance activity; there has been a doubling of the numbers accepted for adoption. Whilst some increased performance is anticipated this year; the active promotion and support of SGO options is assessed as the most effective way forward for Dudley Children's Services to meet its C23 target.

Scrutiny of the services and care management practice post placement through to the making of Adoption Order would indicate the average conversion time period to adoption is 7 months. There is a slight decrease in this time if the child is under 3 years and placed with in-house approved adopters. There has been an increase in the numbers of birth parents seeking leave of the court to appeal the Placement Order or the final Adoption Hearing. Case law would indicate the likelihood of success once the child is well attached to new carers is negligible.

5.2. NI61 Time taken from acceptance to adoption family placement

15 children of the 21 currently placed but not yet adopted joined their new parent/s within 12 months. It was of note that a number of delays to active family finding were as a result of 1 post-panel legal challenges. Delays were more likely where one child had already commenced schooling and was part of a sibling pair. In line with national trends 2 foster carers came forward for assessment, whilst this can add today to apparent delay there are many benefits for the child of the continuity of care.

The opportunity to have more in-house choice of placement would assist in improving outcomes. Initial assessments during the first 5 months of the year failed to result in strong applications. However the last 7 months has seen 7 strong applications now undergoing preparation and assessment. The agency is well placed to attract adopter/s for single children. We remain dependent on Inter Agency for sibling placements. Increasing competition for approved adopter/s has remained a feature of the period. Continued strong relationships with a number of adoption agencies have assisted our continuing success in securing good placements and achieving low disruption rates.

5.3. Changing Demography of adopted children

Children being secured through adoption during this review period were all of White/European ethnicity. Acceptance activity included a more diverse population and the family finding for children waiting will require national activity and advertising to secure scarce adopter resources. Dudley is able to attract adopter/s of diverse ethnicity but continues to face challenges in matching them with children waiting. We encourage these approved prospective families to attend regional and national events that feature children from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. The service also refers such families to the adoption register and West Midlands Consortium to ensure their availability becomes widely broadcast. Close working links across the Black Country Consortium are also being maximised through the launch of our own database to ensure potential links are not overlooked locally for children and waiting approved adopter/s.

When considering the age at adoption the majority of children are secured before their 3rd birthday enabling quality time to make emotional connections pre formal school entry. The long term needs of young children require skilled and knowledgeable staff to inform decision making about developmental uncertainty and offer ongoing guidance to adoptive parents, with substance misuse issues continuing to feature frequently where very young children are accepted for adoption. Today's approved adopter/s are made aware of research about the long-term implications of this and this reinforces the essential collating of comprehensive documentation and full medical reports to enable them to commit to a child. The Agency Medical Advisor appraises medical assessments before panel and offers guidance to care management staff, throughout the process.

5.4 Adoption Panel

We have an independent chair of panel. The increase of panel business in accepting children for recommendation of adoption has required 3 additional panel sessions in this review period. Panel has been able to meet its quoracy requirements on all occasions. Panel members are routinely provided with summary of expert reports, whilst panel chairperson, panel advisor and Agency Decision Maker review the full documents before panel sessions.

A new medical advisor joined the Panel in June 2009. He has been committed to the work of the group, and together with other members made recommendations that improve practice. One example has been in actively ensuring that birth parents are encouraged to share their own medical information before the pre-adoption medical. This assists the Agency to obtain a fuller history of the birth family improving the quality of overall medical history for adopted child.

Panel are currently seeking the appointment of a new layperson that has personal experience and knowledge of adoption. The panel remains female dominated and efforts continue to address this but some other diversity issues are well represented.

Panel members have also expressed concern regarding the high level of contact taking place for young children prior to adoption placement.

The panel whilst mindful of the demands on staff within the service remain concerned about the quality of some of the Child's Permanence Reports and would support the need for the agency to commission specialist training.

Inclusion of prospective adopter's at match is well established and feedback from social workers and applicants is that this is a highly beneficial. It has also reduced occasions where deferral would otherwise have been necessary. Prospective adopter/s are given options about whether they wish to be told of recommendation in private or in Panel. Feedback information continues to be collected and monitored about panel experiences from all participants.

A consistent process format was agreed to assist in focussing each panel item. Quality of subsequent minutes is self-assessed as having improved. Agenda timing remains a high priority for each panel session and time for each item has been increased to ensure each child is discussed as a unique individual.

5.5. Adoption Support

The adoption service continues to prioritise the needs of adoptive families that are at high risk of breakdown. In one situation this year the effective co-ordination of a response by CAMHS Walsall and a Dudley adoption support worker has avoided a disruption for a child of 5 yrs with complex needs. The family has been enabled to reach a point where they can proceed to legally adopt the child.

The pattern of challenges at time of school transition is again reflected in the referrals. Close working links with the clinical psychology service has ensured access to adoption sensitive therapy for parents and children. Where Inter Agency placements are made and a therapeutic input is required there are enormous challenges as a result of variation of specialist provision to address attachment and trauma related issues.

There is much skilled work by the team in guiding adopters in talking about adoption to their children. The service also undertakes care file reviews to inform adoption agencies elsewhere of additional information to seek to stabilise vulnerable placements of children originating from Dudley.

A post approval training programme has been launched across the Black Country agencies to address lifelong adoption issues e.g. talking about adoption, attachment and trauma, and introduction to Theraplay.

The service continues to maximise its service level agreements with 2 independent support agencies. Analysis of duty referrals shows a continuing high number of enquiries from adult adoptees seeking to trace birth relatives, particularly siblings. These individuals are directed to Adoption Support Birmingham who have specialist skills in tracing and supporting adults with an adoption related need.

The Birth Parent Independent Support service has been revised with an “opt out” rather than “opt in” referral system to increase uptake. Liaison has taken place with the Independent Review officers to promote this service. Where birth parents do become actively engaged with this service their inclusion in adoptive transfer and ongoing successful letterbox is much enhanced.

A member of the team has completed Theraplay training and this is being made available in early days of placement to maximise attachments.

5.6. Direct and indirect contact after adoption

Letterbox and complex contact arrangements continue to expand. Letterbox exchanges continue to be rigorously screened, copied and forwarded on. It is assessed that a quarter of all correspondence will need some agency involvement reflecting the nature or style of the news, before they can be forwarded. Due the sheer volume of post from the 355 contact exchanges we restrict the frequency of letterbox exchange for new links to once per annum. Quantitative data about the exchanges where birth parents or other family members are writing in response to news is now being gathered. This will inform further the need for additional staff capacity. The services needs continue to expand as with each new child’s placement a minimum 2 letterbox links will be set up needing management to ensure safe, timely exchange.

The threat from social networking sites poses real challenges to privacy in adoption. Adoptive parent/s of primary school aged children are seeking agency advice on managing these issues to which we don't have the answers. Staff will be attending forthcoming national events addressing this issue. More requests are being made to amend first names at adoption placement and if this becomes acceptable adoption practice this would bring new challenges to telling and identity formation for today's adoptive young people.

Letterbox exchange remains a relatively new socially constructed option. We need more research about the experiences of adoptees in this method of hearing restricted news of kin to inform our future practice. Photograph exchange is now a very rare occurrence in letterbox due to the ease of reproduction and misuse.

5.7. Service Staffing Capacity

The service has continued to perform effectively despite significant changes of personnel over the period. The service has been enhanced with the appointment of an experienced adoption practitioner to the role of Assistant Team Manager in December 2009. This has brought much needed additional capacity and leadership for the adoption support aspect of the service. Where deficits have occurred effective use of skilled sessional staff has been possible. At the current time there is a FTE social work vacancy. From reviewing the strategic needs of the service noting the doubling of children needing family finding work a full time practitioner post will be sought for a family finding and adopter assessment role.

We are facing increasing challenges in meeting needs service wide and adoption support provision desperately needs additional capacity. The current sessional support to the Letterbox Service is proving highly effective and a specific post for this role would prove to be an efficient investment.

Our capacity places us in a poor comparative position to our ABC competitors. The service has 1.5 management posts with 8 social work posts and 22hrs clinical psychology post when fully staffed. Walsall in contrast has 10 full time equivalent social work posts, a part time family support post and a lifestory post. Sandwell's service consists of 9 Social work posts and 2 management posts. Dudley's LAC population is far in excess of the 2 authorities. Neither of the other services has any role in SGO financial provision or support.

Dudley Adoption Service is committed to assisting the Directorate in promoting an increase in SGO placements. These arrangements nationally are now known to be likely to destabilise and require future involvement from the Directorate to be successful. Any increase in demand for support must be accommodated within the restricted capacity of the adoption service. Without growth in staffing resources a reduction of performance in this area must be anticipated. It is envisaged that the current sessional input to the Letterbox service will continue with auditing to

champion the need for both additional specialist and admin staff time. Other options to improve performance would be a dedicated Life Story/ Play therapy post to reflect the incoming work demands

5.8 Business support review:

The many tasks of the service in complying with the authorities financial directives and the need for detailed recording of life changing information for children and their families places huge pressures on the services staff. Review of the activities that social workers and administrators perform has refocused skills, and clarified that we have outgrown our administrative support provision. One area of significance is the high volume of invoices from the Adoption in the Black Country Service. One response to reduce the pressures has been to restrict minute taking where a social work prepared report is compiled for panel. There is service wide consensus that Life Appreciation Meetings captures qualitative information about the child that is not available on electronic records elsewhere. This information can make the difference later in assisting children with their adoption identity issues.

The service continues to pull together in the face of increasing demands, and the expertise of the staff group contributes greatly to the continuing positive progress of the service. A review of the duty service has been undertaken and new protocols will be put in place to ensure staff time is most effectively utilised.

5.9. Adoption in the Black Country

The ABC Internet site is the source of the majority of enquiries about adoption, and has been complimented for its strong brand image. These initial interests are directed to the Information Evenings, where specially prepared DVD material is shown and an opportunity for individual discussion is available. Evaluation confirms this is the most cost effective activity in converting interests into to application. Some improvements have been made through the development of protocols to ensure consistent messages are portrayed by all social workers from the 4 different local authorities. The frequency of the events has also been increased to maximise market presence.

Analysis has identified that 40% of 'hits' on the ABC site are from Dudley residents. This indicates we are located in a strong area for potential adoption recruitment but we cannot use these resources for Dudley LAC if privacy remains a key element of modern adoption. It also indicates a strong likelihood for increasing calls on Dudley's adoption support provision from local adoptive families.

One "Meet the Children Event" was held during this review period using video and artwork to feature children waiting for adoption. The ABC management team has recognised the need to widen the pool of adoption agency invites to include more Voluntary Adoption Agency approved families to improve the likelihood of placing the children featured. Whilst the ABC provision is effective in attracting diverse Asian families, its leads into Black British/ White populations remain poor.

A new development has been the creation of an ABC database of waiting children and approved prospective adopter/s, offering a new tool for matching children. Its effectiveness will be evaluated over the next 12 months and there has been interest from other regional consortiums to replicate the provision.

This next period will see a revision of materials reflecting the changing needs of today's children needing an adoptive family.

Summary

The service is actively working to continually evaluate and improve practice on behalf of the children needing adoptive placement. We are fortunate to have an experienced well-motivated and committed staff team with strong consortium and regional links to assist this relatively small agency to deliver a good service.

The current increase in demand for adoptive placements for children waiting in Dudley again raises the issues of increasing opportunity to complete more assessments of our own adoptive applicants to avoid increasing Inter Agency dependency that cannot always ensure quality. Dudley continues to face unique challenges in not supporting safe placement within its boundaries for the majority of children. At the same time the presence of many adoptive households growing in age in the borough reinforces the needs for robust adoption support provision to respond in teenage years.

We remain committed to offering responsive services to all touched by adoption.

Helen Maybee
Adoption Service Manager

Indarjit Gill-Johal
Assistant Team Manager

May 2010