

Dudley Adoption Service Annual Report



1st April 2011 to 31st March 2012

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 Director 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 agencies acceptance of an application to adopt and then undertake comprehensive assessment using the 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 face-to-face contact and all adoption staff service the information exchange between growing numbers of birth families and adoptive parents, and their children.

Adoption in the Black Country (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 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 (formerly Adoption Support Birmingham) 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 need 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 with a small complex caseload)

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

12.5	Social Worker
30hr	Social Worker (from November 2011)

Adoption support and contact including letterbox and duty work	
37hr	Adoption Support Social Worker
22.5hr	Adoption Support Social Worker
22.5 hr	Clinical Psychologist (Maternity until April 2012)
4hr	Sessional social worker- letterbox contact

Administrative support	
37 hr	Senior Admin Assistant / Panel administrator
37 hr	Senior Admin Assistant / Panel administrator
37hr	Admin Assistant /Letterbox Assistant
18hr	Young apprentice temporary appointment

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 (GSCC reg'd) 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 during the 12 months to 31st March 2012

2011-12	36
Children with Placement Order of 1.4.2012	35 (Scorecard data)
2010-11	47
2009-10	32

Ethnicity of children accepted for adoption during the 12 months to 31st March 2012

Asian/British	2
White/ Asian British	3
White/Black British	2
White/British	29

Number of children placed with approved adopter/s from 1st April to 31st March 2012

2011-12	27
2010-11	14
2009-10	22

Proportion of children placed for adoption with 21 months of becoming LAC

2011-12	64%
2008-11 Dudley Scorecard	52% *noted improving trend

* This is a new indicator to monitor performance from first admission to care to a child being placed for with an approved family.

Number of children placed through inter-agency arrangements

2011-12	9 children in 6 placements
2010-11	13 children in 10 placements

Number of children adopted from LAC during the 12 months ending 31st March 2012

2011-12	19
2010-11	21
2009-10	19
2008-09	12

Percentage of children leaving LAC through adoption: 14%

2011-12	14%
2008-11	11% (Average scorecard data)

Care Management Team distribution;

Dudley North and Team 4	5
Halesowen	7
Brierley Hill	5
Children's disability team	1

Ethnicity of children adopted:

Asian/British	1
White/ Asian British	1
White/Black British	1
White/British	16

Ages of children at adoption order:

Under 12 months	1
Before 2 nd birthday	5
Before 3 rd birthday	9
After 3 rd birthday but before 5 th birthday	2
Child 5 +	2

This included 3 sibling pairs and 1 child joining an adopted sibling

Adoptive placements disrupted pre order:

2011-2012	0
2010 -2011	0

Number of children withdrawn from the Adoption List and new care plan during the review period

Permanent fostering	2
Rehabilitation programme to birth parent	1

Number of children whose adoptive parents are receiving adoption allowance;

2011-2012	68
2010-2011	65
2009-2010	66

Special Guardianship Activity**Total Number of children where SGO allowances are provided:**

2011-2012	22
2010-2011	19

There are 20 children whose carers have been informed of the financial package that they would receive if they progress their intended plan to seek an SGO order.

Attendance at Special Guardianship surgeries from April 2011 – March 2012

Family and Friends	7
Foster carers	8
Private applications	7
Total	22

3.2 ASSESSING ADOPTIVE PARENT/S WORK**Adults seeking to adopt enquiries during the review period**

2011-2012	85
2011-2012 Redirected to Adoption in the Black Country as DMBC address	39
2010-2011	75
2009-2010	70

Outcome of enquiry

Initial assessments completed	22
Accepted application	12
Withdrew during home study assessment	2
Intercountry adoption enquiry	9
Intercountry adoption applications	0

Applications approved as suitable to adopt

2011-12	13
Current assessments to of suitability at 31.3.2012	9
2010-11	10
2009-10	7
Time taken to match with child once approved	10 of 14 matched < 7 months

Diversity of approved adopter/s; Total 13

White British heterosexual couples	10
White Black British couple	1
Single Female White British	2
Number of approvals for foster carers adopting a known child	6

Approved Adopter/s waiting as of 1st April

2011-12	3
2010-11	7
2009-10	4

Dudley Adoptive families matched and LAC child adopted originating outside of Dudley area

White/British Male Couple	White British Child aged 3yrs
Asian/British Heterosexual Couple	Asian British Child aged 2 yrs

Approved adopters who withdrew from their adoption plans by agreement with the agency during the review period

1 white British couple	Approved August 2008
1 white/Asian British Couple	Approved June 2009
1 Asian British Couple	Approved November 2007
1 white/British Couple- Intercountry	Approved June 2003

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

Service request	2010 -2011	2011-2012
Contact issues needing SW allocation	9	8
Life story / Telling	24	6
Emotional and educational difficulties	29	21
Request for financial assistance	*Data not available	3
Request for review of records	*Data not available	25
Enquiries from birth parents/adoptive parents about letterbox including change of address, follow ups etc	90	125

3.4 Adoption support work for adults affected by adoption

Service request	2010 -2011	2011-2012
Self referral- pregnant mothers	1	1
Adopted adults; records access, link to adopted relatives	50	50
Birth records Schedule 2(pre 1976)	10	11
Non agency adoption enquiry to duty service	26	15
Non agency notice of intent received	7	0
Non agency adoption orders granted	3	1

4. Current issues for the Dudley Adoption Agency

4.1 The Government Adoption Action Plan - March 2012.

Adoption has been under close government scrutiny during the past 12 months, commencing with the appointment of Martin Narey as the 'Adoption Tsar' and leading to a programme of reform launched by Michael Gove in An Action Plan for Adoption; Tackling Delay, March 2012. Two main themes are at the heart of government legislative reform:

- The timeliness of adoption for a young child, with particular attention given to the increased delay experienced by children of diverse heritage.
- The second theme has been about the variation of agency work with adults seeking to adopt.

The introduction of the Adoption Scorecard in May 2012 for each agency showed the variation across local authority regions in time taken to place a child with approved adopters. Formulated from data for the period 2008 to 2011, the national average was found to be 625 days. Dudley's performance was **669** days, calculated from the first day of being a looked after child to joining the adoptive placement. We would all agree that this is an excessive delay for any child and we share the commitment to reduce this duration for the majority of children for whom adoption planning needs to occur.

Adoption agency forums and British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) have expressed concern at scorecard data alerting that there is potential for perverse disincentives to develop.

Our local experience reflects national trends which indicate that seeking adopter/s for sibling pairs with a school age child is increasingly challenging. In addition we continue to experience additional challenges in placing children of white/Black British ethnicity. The scorecard calculation counts each day a child is in care and their parents are undergoing activities to seek to enable change for parents or kinship carers to be in a position to provide good enough care. The focus now is to scrutinise time taken at every stage of the care planning process, including timeliness of moving to an adoption placement. We are implementing new internal processes to identify matches for children at the earliest opportunity to support the work of our care management services for children requiring permanency through adoption.

We welcome the inclusion of data on the scorecard about the impact of delay arising from court processes. This has been a feature that is known to have impacted on at least 4 children during the last year. New court protocols are driving through faster planning for young children, with a commitment to reduce repetitive assessments and appointment of expert witness evidence. These processes must however remain robust, noting the enormity of the impact of adoption – the permanent separation of the child from kin for life that is irreversible. The dilemma of the rights of parents to family life versus the rights of the child exposed to the neglectful and chaotic family environments continues to be a complex balancing act. Research into resistance to change of 'dysfunctional families', as well as high profile child deaths informs the drive towards early intervention and speedier decision making where separation is indicated. We welcome the renewed government attention to the training and support needs of all professionals including the judiciary, involved in this complex arena of highly emotive decision making.

This year has also seen media attention drawn to the reality that some adopted children from care cannot remain in the adopted family home into adulthood; this is termed breakdown or disruption. Adoption disruption is defined as the child being returned to care **before** the making of an adoption order. Adoption breakdown is the adoptive family experiencing such challenges in parenting that they request the young person leaves their family home.

This area of support is the primary focus of our adoption support social workers. Research consistently informs that the younger the age of the child at point of joining an adoptive family the more successful the outcomes for the child. Dudley adoption service provides sensitive support to adoptive families where a young person is at risk of returning to care. Many of these children did not originate in the borough but are eligible

for our support services **3** years after the adoption order is granted. It is our experience that even after separation adoptive parents remain in contact with their young adults offering continuing support into adulthood. We are fortunate to have a clinical psychologist attached to the service offering consultation before matching or where therapeutic needs arise.

Dudley has been sensitively matching children with adoptive parents for many years, without rigid same race procedural constraints. The racial heritage of the child is one of a number of significant factors that informs the selection of the best available family. Adoption is a lifelong experience and we are informed from research that adopted young people value looking like their adoptive kin networks, and understanding their cultural heritage. Locally, the timeliness of placement for children of white/Asian British heritage or Asian British heritage varies little compared to white British children waiting. One area that remains a challenge nationally in adoption matching is for children of white/ black British ethnicity. Our recruitment strategy led by Adoption in the Black Country (ABC) is constantly seeking new ways to tap into well connected families who can support the needs of these children.

The Adoption Service has been required to provide extensive data to the Dept of Education and this could not have been completed without the skills and energy of the service administrative staff.

4.2 Local and national shortage of approved adopters

There is an increasing recognition that there is a shortage of approved adopters who match and can take on the needs of 'looked after children' waiting for adoption. Previously it has been highlighted that Dudley has needed to spot purchase approved families for its children waiting. This year we secured just **6** approved adoptive families approved by other adoption agencies nationally.

We set a target to approve 15 families for the year, and were pleased to achieve **13** approvals. Our revision of processes to speed up adoption applications by foster carers for a known child has proved successful and will continue. For the first time in November 2011 we reached full staffing capacity within the service, and this is reflected in the ongoing high level of activity in all areas of work.

From reviewing adoption assessment experiences we are acutely aware that our highly motivated applicants are most likely to experience delay at the point of allocation of a social worker for the home study assessment. Without the ability to service assessments quickly for more potential adopters we cannot further improve our approval performance. We are currently seeking to add capacity to the service to enable preparation of more adoptive families in shorter timescales. Comparative staffing data

for the Black Country Adoption Agencies indicates that we have the least establishment posts within our adoption service.

4.3 Future assessment developments

We have seen a growth in the number of foster carers coming forward to adopt a known child in their care. This can provide excellent opportunities for a child 'where stranger adoption' has failed to provide a viable option. We will be looking at the theme of dual approval of carers for some young children where case history would inform that rehabilitation to birth parents care is extremely unlikely. Prospective adopters will need careful selection to undertake this task that has the potential risk of a baby returning to birth parents care.

The government is encouraging adoption agencies to revise adoption assessment processes, and new statutory guidance is anticipated.

Placing children at a young an age will alter the ongoing demands on our adoption support services. However some other aspects of adoption support will remain as critical to the wellbeing of all involved e.g. letterbox work, and very time intensive therapeutic work.

4.4 Backgrounds of children needing adoption

The government adoption action plan shows the growth in understanding that modern adoption is for children coming from care backgrounds; in most scenarios their birth parents are opposing this life plan. The needs of children exposed to alcohol and drugs during pregnancy are becoming more widely recognised. These children are at high risk needing adoption if lifestyle patterns cannot quickly be changed. Research suggests that alcohol exposure during early weeks of pregnancy is particularly destructive to the long term well being of the unborn infant. For adoptive parents of children exposed to drugs and/or alcohol they need specialist support to ensure the child's additional needs are met in preschool and school provision.

Many children referred to the adoption service will have older siblings already in care placements or living in extended family arrangements endorsed by social care services. This group of children come to the service already aged 4+ and presenting a range of additional needs. With the growth in numbers of children for whom adoption is being sought nationally so approved adopters are more able to select younger children. Currently in Dudley we are looking for matches for 6 sibling pairs where one child is in the school reception year.

During the last 12 months we were able to support 2 Dudley approved adoptive families in becoming parents to sibling pairs. We remain eager to not place Dudley children at

vast distances ensuring the child's known social worker can offer continuity of support during the stressful transition from a known foster carer to an approved adoptive parent. Assessing and supporting families who parent sibling groups requires highly skilled practitioners familiar with attachment and trauma knowledge as the dynamics of the neglect are highly resistant to change.

4.5 Adoption in the Black Country Recruitment Strategy

Interest from individuals wanting to consider adoptive parenting has increased rapidly since the autumn 2011, with speculation that media focus on baby adoption is one factor. Adoption in the Black Country www.adoptionblackcountry.org continues to provide an excellent front door service to the 4 local authorities of the Black Country. The Internet site offers information and there is a current trend of growth in hits on the website of 30%. This is reflected in higher attendance at monthly Information Events across the region, with Dudley social workers present at all these sessions.

The website provides a wealth of information and is well placed to adapt to the anticipated changes arising from government redesign. As is shown in the data we do receive a high level of interest from Dudley residents and Adoption in the Black Country can ensure this is used to best advantage for the regions young children waiting for adoption. Adoption in the Black Country enables interest from the other 3 areas to be directed to Dudley and we also have been successful in recruiting from areas touching our boundaries.

Adoption in the Black Country was cited as an example of innovative practice in the Ofsted publication Avoiding Delay; February 2012.

4.6 Support opportunities for adoptive parents

Dudley adoption service seeks to inform adopters of opportunities for both universal and specialist resources that can meet some of the needs of adoptive parents and children. Regular Adoption in the Black Country specialist themed sessions are provided; topics have included Telling about Adoption, Attachment and Trauma.

In addition Adoption UK provides a range of services commissioned by the Adoption in the Black Country consortium that adoptive parent/s can access including; Piece of cake course, family support service, family fun day and evening support groups. After Adoption, formerly Adoption Support Birmingham also publicises its services via the local newsletter and as part of a national adoption organisation we look forward to new opportunities such as Safe Base in the coming year.

4.7 Contact after adoption- Letterbox

Dudley adoption service promotes the exchange of information between adoptive parents and birth family members for all new adoptive placements. There are over 450 arrangements set up and this year has seen a 30% increase in activity levels to sustain these important private news exchange systems to benefit the adopted child or young person. We have been fortunate in having a consistent dedicated social worker for at least one morning each week to maintain this increasing flow of information between families. As a result of the high volume of exchanges taking place we would usually set up a letterbox at the frequency of one exchange per annum and work hard to ensure this is realised for all parties.

The issue of social networking use has resulted in the decision to not exchange photographs in the majority of letterbox exchanges to prioritise the adopted child's needs for privacy in adoption.

4.8 Review of adoption records

This review period has captured for the first time the work that we are undertaking to support adopted parents or teenagers in reviewing the information that the agency recorded when arranging their adoption. This can provide important insight which underpin accesses to specialist support for the child e.g. records about parental alcohol use in pregnancy. This work connects to the need of the Adoption Agency to provide effective tools for adoptive parents to assist explaining at increasing levels of sophistication why they are an adopted child.

4.9 Lifework for adopted children

National minimum standards for adoption require that all children at the point of their adoption ceremony before the court have a Life book and Later Life Letter. Increasing demand of children's social care services has impacted on the quality and timeliness of the production of Life Books and Later Life Letters. We have previously provided training for non social work qualified staff to undertake this work but in order to raise standards a Life Worker Post is being established to support staff and undertake this critical work. This will be for an initial 12 month period which we hope will be extended as the benefits become apparent.

4.10 Adoption panel

In April 2011 new regulations coming into force that were intended to ease the pressures of quoracy for adoption panels which were thought to be one factor that might account for delay in children's care planning. This created a central list and we added 2 new panel members; an early year's educational professional and social worker with adoption assessment specialist experience. Our chairperson of the last 10 years resigned from the role due to ill health and the vice chair person took the chairing arrangements whilst processes were put in place to recruit to a new panel chair. Training for the adoption panel and care management staff was provided on Preparing Child Permanence Reports in October 2011, led by British Association for Adoption and Fostering trainers.

Attendance of prospective adoptive parents at suitability recommendation and matching continued to assist the panel to make recommendations in the majority of cases. Panels have usually run for a full day during the first week of the month. An additional 3 panel sessions were held to ensure cases met the legal timescales to enable children's plans to progress. The issue of sibling separation was probably the most frequently arising dilemma for the panel.

4.11 Adoption Panel Reform

A review of adoption panel acceptance processes will lead to a change in regulation in relation to decision making around adoption where the matter is already before the court. The underpinning belief is that panels contribute to delay for children requiring adoption and that it is a duplication of court processes. In our experience the most likely cause of delay is the capacity of care management social workers known to the child to prepare the Childs Permanence Report. This report is an essential document in placing children successfully for adoption and for their later understanding of the reasons this occurred. In addition the length of care proceedings is influenced by the use of expert witnesses and specialist assessments which contribute to an overall timeframe which is currently around 53 weeks from issue to completion.

From September 2012 adoption panel will scrutinise the matches of each child with their adopter/s and make recommendation about the suitability of applicants to adopt. The adoption agency decision maker will consider acceptance of children for adoption unless they are being relinquished for adoption. Last year just one child was placed for adoption with the consent of their birth parent.

4.12 Developments in Special Guardianship Activities

Special Guardianship is an area of work which has been developed by the Adoption Service in Dudley. It offers an alternative legal option for permanence for children who cannot grow up with their birth parents, where adoption is not appropriate due to the need for continuing relationships with kin. For many years long-term fostering has provided consistent positive family life for some children in care, but it hasn't always offered them the security and sense of belonging that they need. Foster carers have also felt anxious and frustrated about the lack of clarity about their role in day-to-day decision making, and have expressed their need for a legally secure relationship with these children. A Special Guardianship Order gives the special guardian legal parental responsibility for the child which is expected to last until the child is 18. This means that the child is no longer the responsibility of the local authority, and the special guardian will take the lead responsibility for all day-to day decisions about caring for the child or young person, with just one or two exclusions.

Special Guardianship surgeries, lead by the Assistant Team Manager were launched in February 2011 for social workers and carers to discuss the process; the benefits of the order; and the support available after an order is made. There are 4 main routes into Special Guardianship these being through Family and Friends carer's, local authority approved foster carers, private law applications and more recently through the court where care proceedings or viability assessments are being carried out. During the review period the greatest interest has come from family and friends carers. In each case a support plan is agreed covering the financial package; specialist services as well as universal services available to meet the needs the child and their families. Currently support is available and provided by the Adoption Service in these cases but with the increased interest demand will out grow capacity in the future, particularly in relation to contact issues within family members. Whilst it was anticipated at its introduction that this option would be taken up by foster carers for children who have become permanent members of the family in fact Dudley reflects the national picture that informs that family and friends carers are most likely to pursue this permanence option.

5. Summary

- 2011-2012 was a very active and successful year for Dudley Adoption Service with strong performance in placing children waiting for adoption with more families approved and support by the service. 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 a consistent high quality entry point for future adoptive parents that could meet the many of the needs of Dudley LAC children waiting for adoption.
- Dudley adoption service is working at and beyond capacity with a highly motivated staff group with a range of expertise in adoption work.
- 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 also have children waiting for this resource and want to support new families on their life journey with their adopted child.
- With the introduction nationally of the Adoption Scorecard, the activities of all local authority adoption provision will be more intrinsically assessed as just one aspect of the provision to children and families needing safeguarding interventions.
- 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.
- 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 need to then place at the earliest opportunity to ensure maximum benefit for all parties.

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