

1st November 2021

Agenda Item: 4

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND SOCIAL WORK

ADOPTION EAST MIDLANDS ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide an annual update on the activity of Adoption East Midlands, which is hosted by Nottinghamshire County Council, and is the Regional Adoption Agency of Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.

Information

2. This is the second year of operation for Adoption East Midlands, and an increase in adopter approvals and children matched has been achieved. The support offer has been refined to ensure accessibility, and clarity for staff and families. The staff group has remained relatively stable, with most changes being for promotion or retirement. Adoption East Midlands maintains a presence in office space in the four local authorities, however, this has been impacted by Covid. The service continue to be provided with budget underspend, which is partially redistributed, and partially saved in reserves. Adoption East Midlands is proud of its achievements in this second year of operation and expects to build on this base in the third year of operation.
3. The aims of the Regional Adoption Agency, as recorded in the business case, are as follows:
 - provides all children with an adoptive family that meets their needs
 - ensures that those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand their adoption journey
 - ensures that Regional Adoption Agency families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for the children with plans for adoption
 - delivers improved outcomes for children for whom adoption is the preferred plan for permanence
 - delivers the new service at no additional cost to the partner local authorities.
4. Covid impact: since March 2020 staff have been working from home, most services have been delivered virtually, and when restrictions allow, visits to families are undertaken. All meetings are virtual. It is felt necessary to have some level of physical visits with adopters,

and these have been built in. Events for adopters such as seminars, information events and peer support groups have all been virtual, as have adoption panels.

5. Once the technology was accessible, there have been proven benefits to virtual working, such as better attendance at meetings, higher levels of involvement of both parents and less time lost driving. There are also challenges of adapting to these different ways of working, and teams physically meeting will be of benefit when this is possible.
6. Partnership working, the operations meeting which involves service managers from fostering and children's permanence in the local authorities, is a regular meeting, well attended and an opportunity to check Adoption East Midlands is meeting need, and works collaboratively on best practice.
7. There are regular meetings with placing team managers, to ensure that everyone adopts the most efficient practice. There are sound working relationships which enable constructive challenge both ways. Adoption East Midlands is also increasing working with the six Regional Adoption Agencies across the Midlands and the three Voluntary Adoption Agencies operating in the same area. This is with the aim of placing children as locally as possible, recruiting adopters to meet children's needs, and offering a consistent adoption support service. Again, best practice is shared, plus collaborative problem solving.

Adoption support

8. The last year has been one of significant change and development for the Adoption Support Team which has raised a number of challenges but has ensured the service is now in a position to deliver a more responsive, sustainable and equitable service to families across the Region. A clear vision is now in place and embedded, where early support intervention and focused support at key points of transition and development are accessible and where adoption support needs are understood and supported by all front-line staff and managers within Adoption East Midlands.
9. Ongoing development work around the service offer has continued and gathered pace over the last 12 months which has resulted in the launch of the new Pathway to Support which is now fully operational. Significant changes to the way in which services are delivered utilising a graduated response to support, will mean that the support needs of more adoptive families can be met in a much quicker time frame, regardless of where they live in the region. Importantly, it reflects a much more pro-active post order support offer which delivers a strong universal offer to all as well as the introduction of a consultation model of support which will empower families to access support when they need it without having to have an allocated social worker.
10. A new Information Line has been set up (replacing the former Duty Line) which will be the first point of call for all families and which will be able to carry out Tier 2 assessments over the phone in order to commission a therapeutic service, book into individual and group consultation sessions, and to book families on to relevant information and training seminars. Seminars are provided by our own social work staff, but Adoption East Midlands is also working closely with therapeutic providers to co-deliver and have collaborative working arrangements in place with all four local authority Virtual Schools.

11. To support these new and exciting developments, Adoption East Midlands has worked with the Council's Mosaic Development team and have undergone a massive overhaul of the current Mosaic processes and workflow and now have a workflow and relevant forms that are fit for purpose and meet the needs of the service being delivered. The assessment framework used is relevant to adoption support needs and is trauma and attachment informed, enabling robust analysis and informed decision making around supporting needs. As a result of this extensive development work, Adoption Support will be able to report on key performance measures going forward to aid workflow management as well as providing the data for future areas of development need.
12. The 12 months operating under the impact of Covid-19 has represented a significant challenge for the Adoption Support Team; whilst adapting to new ways of working there has been felt a sense of disempowerment amongst the workers. It is positive however, that in the early days of the lockdown, Adoption East Midlands was able to access additional funds from the Adoption Support Fund, specifically to access packages of support of its own choosing to quickly meet the needs of families within the Region during the pandemic.
13. Adoption East Midlands was quick to access this support and commissioned services for prospective adopters (specialist support groups) as well as pre-order and post-order families. Bulk purchasing of packages ensured that there could be a quick response to need for families which enabled them to sustain relationships and ultimately avoid spiralling into a crisis situation. As well as direct therapeutic support for children and families Adoption East Midlands was also able to fund 500 memberships of the National Association of Therapeutic Parents, early intervention support for children and their families placed during the lockdown period and a number of Peer Support Packages from Adoption UK. The success of the packages and feedback from adoptive families has been extremely positive and has proved a good evidence base for the continued development of group and peer support as well as the effectiveness of utilising virtual methods of communication to deliver support, both of which Adoption East Midlands has and will continue to build into the Pathway to Support.
14. As well as support for adoptive families, Adoption East Midlands was also able to use part of the Covid funding to commission a package of support for eligible families with a Special Guardianship Order in place from Grandparents Plus. This package gave all eligible Special Guardianship Order families across the four local authority areas access to a free 12-month annual membership to their Kinship support community, offering specialist information and advice, peer support and virtual support groups. In addition, 20 one-to-one support packages were purchased to be used across the Region for families in acute need.
15. Adoption East Midlands has continued to work with Adopter Voice (part of Adoption UK) this year and they have consulted on our behalf to gain feedback on the Covid support packages that Adoption East Midlands provided as well as the new Pathway to Support. This is a great way to gain independent feedback, however Adoption East Midlands has also developed its own internal feedback mechanisms including those that ensure it is proactive in gaining the voice of the child and their feedback when working with families.
16. This year 95 adopter households have been approved, an increase of 16%, and there have been 82 households starting stage 2, an increase of 17%. There is now an Adoption East Midlands Facebook page which allows the promotion of national recruitment campaigns. This also gives a healthy level of enquiries and, like all adoption agencies, Adoption East

Midlands is promoting the need to place siblings together. There are insufficient adopters for siblings, boys, and mixed ethnicity children; however, Adoption East Midlands is able to partially meet need and use other agency placements to fully meet need.

17. An ongoing area of work is the development of the website, so all resources are in one place, and readily accessible to adopters and those interested in adoption.
18. Adoption East Midlands has matched 153 children this year, an increase on 134 in year one, and is sufficient for approximately 80% of all placements when the placements into agency are taken into account. This meets the business plan target; however, the aim is to exceed this target. The age range of children matched is less than one year old, to over 16, the shortest time from placement order to match was 18 days, and the longest was 1,353 days. This year has seen more children than last year matched who had waited over two years. 23 sibling groups have been matched, some of three children. 30% of children matched are not white British, some are matched with Adoption East Midlands carers, but due to sufficiency, some are placed with other agencies. There have been 27 foster carer matches, and 14 Fostering for Adoption matches this year.
19. At any one time there are approximately 100 children in home finding stage, but very few with no match; this has usually been less than 10 most of the year. The total number in the home finding stage has fallen from over 150 when Adoption East Midlands began. This indicates placing some of the children who have waited the longest and maintaining sufficiency for new placement orders.
20. There has been delay in proceedings due to Covid, so cases are taking longer, but it is not anticipated that there will be an overall reduction in placement orders, and nationally a small pool of adopters waiting for children is expected.
21. Adoption East Midlands is responsible for panels on behalf of the four partner local authorities. Panels make recommendations on all adoption applications assessed by Adoption East Midlands workers, as well as all matches for children within the four local authorities and all plans for relinquished children.
22. Adoption panels continue to be scheduled to occur five times per month, hearing a maximum of five cases on each day and thus allowing for 25 cases to be heard each month. Initially panels were extremely busy, and most slots were utilised, however, it has not always been necessary to hold five panels to meet the demand for panel time.
23. Adoption East Midlands panels have heard 221 cases over the year, a rise from last year: a total of 98 adoption applications, three adoption plans for relinquished children and 121 matches, which includes 28 interagency placements that have been used to ensure some of the harder-to-place children have found an adoptive family. There has been a total of 23 sibling groups matched.
24. Of the 98 applications heard by Adoption East Midlands panels in 2020-21 most of the adopters were heterosexual couples, there were nine same sex couples and 15 single adopters. There were 15 applications from second time adopters, two from third time adopters and 15 applications by foster carers. The number of applications by foster carers has significantly increased compared with last year. Like matches, applications were overwhelmingly successful.

25. There are currently 34 panel members on the central list, which includes five independent chairs and five vice-chairs. There are 10 medical advisers that due to the Covid-19 pandemic have been unable to be voting members on the panels over the last year, however they have continued to provide written advice and have remained supportive to panels by being available for further discussions when needed. The medical advisers are keen to return as voting members as soon as their work commitments allow.
26. Panel managers have been able to conclude the recruitment process that was initiated in March 2020 and have successfully recruited eight new panel members, and have again tried to increase the diversity of the panels.
27. Panels offer feedback to social workers after every panel, commenting on issues with paperwork, presentation in panel and regulatory compliance. Panels have seen a steady improvement in the quality of paperwork presented over the last year.
28. Feedback is invited from all panel attendees (social workers and applicants/prospective adopters) via an electronic link; the take-up rate has significantly improved over the last year and Adoption East Midlands actively responds to feedback to improve the panel experience; an example of this is the implementation of a 'welcome to panel' document that is provided to applicants before they attend panel with information about who they will be meeting on the day. This has been positively received.

Other Options Considered

29. No other options have been considered.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

30. It is a requirement of the adoption agency regulations to produce an annual report, and to forward a copy to Ofsted.

Statutory and Policy Implications

31. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

32. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION/S

That the Committee:

- 1) approves the annual update on Adoption East Midlands Regional Adoption Agency activity for 2020-21
- 2) agrees to receive an update report in the next 12 months and that this be included in the work programme.

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Constitutional Comments (LPW 06/10/21)

33. The recommendations fall within the remit of the Children and Young People's Committee by virtue of its terms of reference.

Financial Comments (LCD 07/10/21)

34. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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