



Leicestershire Adoption Service Annual Report 2020-2021



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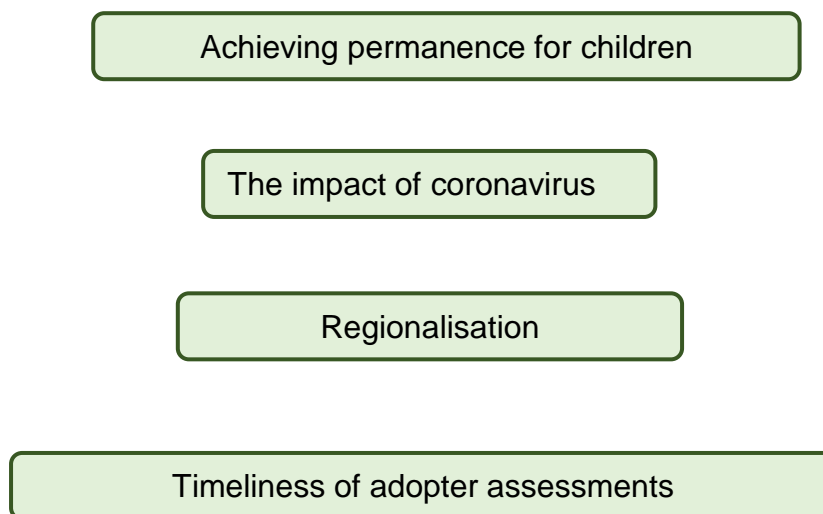
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Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Adoption Service sets out the performance for the service in 2020/21 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year 2021/22.

Key messages within this report are:



The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3 year trend and 1 year trend. The three main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

The 3-year trend data remains more positive with A20 highlighting a slight decrease in the length of time. However A10 and A2 are both indicating an increase in time. We do not yet have figures from our statistical neighbours for comparison.

The 1-year trend data for 2020/21 is highlighting an increase in the number of days in comparison to the previous year and therefore a decrease in the timeliness to achieve permanence. Detailed consideration of information regarding individual children was completed by managers. This analysis reflects outliers in the data set – a small number of children who have waited longer to achieve permanence due to the complexity of their needs and matching requirements, as well as delays related to court proceedings. The situation of seven children comprising of two sibling groups of

three and one single male child have had a significant impact on timeliness in achieving permanency. The first sibling group of three male children mother has applied twice to have the Placement Order revoked, the second sibling group of three female children consisted of an older child of 8 years whose emerging needs during placement meant that an original care plan of placing the children together had be altered to looking for separate placements for the oldest child alone and the youngest two together. The single male child has recently had his Placement Order revoked despite the fact that he was well into introductions with his adopters. Despite the delays within the court process the Permanence Team continued to strive to find adoptive homes for all of the children including commissioning nationwide Facebook campaigns and paying for specialist therapeutic training for identified adopters. The sibling group of males have an adoptive family identified and ready to start introductions as soon as the court proceedings are complete. The oldest child in the female sibling group is now in placement with her adoptive family and the youngest two have a match identified. We will continue to have robust monitoring and oversight of the progression of children whose permanence plan is adoption and recognise that matching for children with additional complex needs may require more time, consideration and intervention.

| Adoption Score Card | 2019 | 2020 | Statistical Neighbours |
|---|----------|----------|------------------------|
| A10 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family | 425 days | 489 days | TBC from scorecard |
| A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family | 167 days | 311 days | |
| A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child | 316 days | 352 days | |

Regional Arrangements

Leicestershire County Council is part of the Family Adoption Links (FAL), a regional partnership of Adoption Services. The government's agenda for adoption was set out in a paper, "Regionalising Adoption", published by the Department of Education (DfE) in June 2015 setting out arrangements for the formation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) by 2020.

This partnership comprises of Lincolnshire County Council (who provide adoption services for Rutland Council), Leicestershire County Council, Leicester City Council and North Lincolnshire Council. It has been agreed that Lincolnshire County Council will act as host for the arrangement.

The interagency agreement creating the partnership commenced on 14th October 2020 and describes how FAL manages the provision of all core adoption functions on behalf of the local authority. Agency decision making for adults and children are maintained within the local authority in line with corporate parenting responsibilities.

Through working in partnership, we will benefit from the regional sharing of best practice, pooling of resources and developing a strategic approach to the development of a range of services from the marketing of adoption across the region through to the commissioning of post adoption support services.

The vision of the RAA is that:

- Children have the widest range of adopters trained to meet the needs of children placed with them
- Matching delivers the best quality outcomes for all children
- Adopters receive a consistent, high quality and professional service at all stages of the process
- The same high standard of adoption support for all adoptive families across the region
- Family Adoption Links, local authorities and VAAs work together to promote and maximize choice for children and adopters

Governance and Management

The RAA will be accountable to the Family Adoption Links (FAL) Management Board which is aligned to the agreed vision and will enable partners to have a continuing demonstrable focus on achieving permanence through adoption for Looked After Children. The FAL Management Board is accountable for delivery of services within scope and will continue to provide strategic leadership as the service develops. The Board includes representatives of each partner and takes decision by consensus. The Board is chaired by a Director of Children's Services (on behalf of the respective Local Authorities) and includes Assistant Directors responsible for permanency. The FAL Management Board will ensure there are clear strategic plans in place to manage future demand, develop quality services, deliver value for money and achieve appropriate efficiencies and cost savings. The board has appointed a

Head of Service for the Regional Adoption Agency who oversees the work of the adoption service in each local authority. The Head of Service reports to the board and is responsible for the delivery of adoption services within each LA. Each partner LA retains its own adoption service manager who is the Registered Manager.

The FAL Management Board will keep members fully informed regarding the progress and performance of the RAA.

1. Introduction

OUR VISION Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people and their families

This means that we will describe the outcomes we want to achieve for children, young people and their families and identify measures that can tell us how well we are achieving against them. We will aim to be the best performing local authority in the country against these measures, and where we are not yet there we will set stretching targets for annual improvement.

OUR MISSION

Children and young people in Leicestershire are safe and living in families where they can achieve their potential and have their health, wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities.

Under the 2011 National Minimum Standards 25.6, all Adoption Agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive regarding the activity and work of the Adoption Agency and Adoption Panel. To meet this standard the Adoption Service submits a monthly report to the Lead Member and Director and an annual report to the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

1.1 Our Service

Leicestershire County Council had operated a joint Fostering, Adoption and Placements Service since April 2015. In July 2019 we separated the two functions to have our own dedicated Fostering and Adoption Services. Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Adoption Agency. It undertakes statutory and regulated responsibilities relating to adoption. The main roles of the Adoption and Permanence Service is to provide high quality adoptive placements, a range of adoption and special guardianship support and other permanency options, including profiling for long term placements for children who are looked after by Leicestershire County Council and are unable to live with their birth families.

Adoption and Permanence Services are provided to:

- Children who are to be adopted
- Birth parents
- Prospective and approved adopters
- Children and adoptive parents who require adoption support services

- Children and Special Guardians who require therapeutic support and advice, where the child lives permanently in Leicestershire
- Adopted adults

The Adoption Service is led by the Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care and the Virtual School and managed through a Service Manager who has responsibility for the three teams that make up the adoption service, Assessment and Support, Permanence and Post-Order Support.

| Name | Designation |
|--|---|
| Jane Moore | Director Children and Families Service |
| Sharon Cooke | Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Childrens Social Care |
| Nicci Collins | Deputy Assistant Director, Transformation |
| Kelda Claire | Interim Head of Service |
| Michelle Robinson | Service Manager |
| Helen Gronhaug | Agency Decision Maker |
| Gemma Barber | Manager, Post-Order Support Team |
| Emma Bulgin/Ellie Taylor | Managers, Permanence Team |
| Caramjit Supra | Manager, Assessment and Support Team |
| Katie Bancroft | Senior Practitioner, Post Adoption and SGO Support |
| Lauren Nichols | Senior Practitioner, Permanence |
| Claire Pepper, Sophie Cotterill, Emma Kamgue, Julie Bilton-Dowell, Judith Collins, Wendy Marsh, Angela Saduera | Permanence Team Social Workers |
| Bethany Fox | Long-term Fostering Family Finding Social Worker |
| Michelle Smith | Life Story Worker |
| Natasha Aaron, Harriet Pearson-Cole, Rachel Knox-Barrett, Debbie Bevan | Adoption Assessment and Support Social workers |
| Sameerah Makda, Charlotte Fanshawe, Zeena Shepherd | Post Adoption Support Social Workers |
| Sarah Greaves, Anne Barton | Birth Records Counsellors |

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Sheryl Peberdy | Special Guardianship Support Worker |
| Lianne Graham-Halford | Post Adoption Support Worker |
| Leesha Irwin | Art Therapist |
| Philippa Read | Permanence coordinator |
| Lorraine Daniels | Panel Advisor |

In September 2019 Leicestershire`s Children and Family Service was inspected by Ofsted. Whilst the Adoption Service was not subject to its own inspection the feedback for the service was exceptional. The overall judgement for services for children in care, was **Good**.

This report should be read alongside the Care Placement Strategy and Permanence and Adoption Strategy 2017-2021. These are dynamic strategies, geared towards supporting the recruitment of a diverse and confident mix of adoptive families, ensure enduring relationships and high-quality adoption support services. They are integrally linked with other key strategic plans and strategies for the Council:

- Children and Family Departmental Plan 2017 – 2021
- Children & Families Partnership Plan
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to excellence 2017 - 2020
- Adoption Service, Statement of Purpose

1.2 National/local Political Implications

Adoption has been a key part of the Government Agenda since 2012 and has seen significant change, including the publication of various key documents such as the 2013 *Statutory Guidance on Adoption*, the 2013 Amendments to the *Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005* and *Regionalising Adoption* in 2015.

In 2018 the Adoption Leadership Board became the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), with a remit to cover previously looked after children subject to adoption or special guardianship orders. This reflects a recognition of the increasing numbers of children leaving care on Special Guardianship Orders, and the need for these children to be able to access support akin to that of their peers who are adopted. Leicestershire County Council Post-Order Support Team already contains provision for the support of families with children on SGOs, with a dedicated support worker located in the team. There is further work being progressed to develop the support offer available to these families as part of the *Defining Children and Family Services for the Future* programme.

The Department for Education (DfE) has been clear that all local authorities should form Regional Adoption Agencies by 2020. Leicestershire County Council has worked with Leicester City, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and Rutland to form Family Adoption Links (FAL). The Regional Adoption Agency went 'live' in October 2020, with the Local Authorities agreeing to a partnership arrangement.

The work of Leicestershire County Council adoption service during the last year has inevitably been affected by the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. The regulatory framework for adoption has been amended by the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (Regulations) 2020 and Leicestershire has been able to make some use of the relaxed regulations, in relation to conducting assessments and panels remotely. However, we have been able in many ways to limit our use of the amendments, instead adapting our practice in line with restrictions and continuing to conduct robust assessments.

Like all other services, the adoption service has had to make considerable concessions in the way the day-to-day business is carried out. All staff have worked primarily from home, enabled by flexible working arrangements and equipment grants. Home visits have been severely limited during some parts of the year, with workers creatively utilising technology to complete virtual 'visits', meetings and direct work. Adopter assessment and preparation has been conducted almost exclusively online, and in-person visits to children limited to those where it is necessary. Post-order support has been delivered flexibly, again utilising online tools and virtual platforms but completing in-person visits where this has been necessary. Despite the huge challenges present during the year, staff have continued to work safely and effectively to support children and families across Leicestershire and move children to their adoptive families where this has been possible and appropriate.

1.3 Progress against last year

| Recommendation from previous annual report | Progress |
|---|---|
| 2020 will see the launch of the RAA and there will be a period of time that is needed to ensure that services are aligned with Leicester City, Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire. This is an exciting time where each authority can learn from the other and strive to provide an excellent | The launch of the Regional Adoption Agency was achieved in October 2020. 'Family Adoption Links' is a partnership agreement between Leicestershire, Leicester City, Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and |

| | |
|---|---|
| and consistent service to adopters and children. | Rutland. |
| Although Leicestershire continues to perform well against Department of Education score cards for the 3 year trend data. The decreasing timeliness identified for 1 year trend data 2019 requires an in-depth analysis to be completed to understand the increase in the time that children are waiting before being placed in their adoptive homes. This will be presented to SMT by the end of February 2021. | <p>Work continues to take place in monitoring timeliness for children on a local and national level in conjunction with the RAA.</p> <p>Given the challenges of the last year, workload priorities were readjusted in line with coronavirus and resource issues, so this work will need further development in the year to come.</p> |
| The service will explore the possibility of mirroring our Post Adoption support offer to those family members and children subject to a Special Guardianship Order | <p>This is being progressed through the department's transformation programme, <i>Defining Children and Family Services for the Future</i>.</p> <p>Decisions about future models will be made by August 2021.</p> |
| We will also focus on ensuring that adopters' journey is timely and efficient to ensure that we have the right adopters for our children. This work will be completed by March 2021 | <p>This is an area which continues to be challenging. There is ongoing work to undertake to improve our resource offer, ensuring that adopter recruitment, assessment and preparation are timely, and that the adopters we recruit are well matched to the needs of our children.</p> <p>A business case has been submitted to bring adopter assessment 'in-house'.</p> <p>The year ahead will also see further collaboration with our partners in the RAA.</p> |
| Further consideration needs to be given to whether Leicestershire dually approves adopters as part of the Family Adoption Links arrangement to keep in line with our partners. | Leicestershire County Council does not currently have any plans to dually approve adopters i.e. to approve them as both prospective adopters and foster carers at the same time. |

2. Our service – roles and responsibilities

2.2 Permanence Team

The role of the Permanence Team is to work alongside colleagues in locality teams to progress plans for children where adoption may be required. Permanence team social workers also undertake all family finding activity for children who need permanence via adoption.

Permanence social workers are co-allocated to work with children where a decision has been made to twin or triple-track their care plan, meaning that multiple options are being considered for the child, usually remaining with their birth parent(s), moving to live with a wider family member, or adoption if neither of the other options is possible. Permanence social workers complete Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) which draw together all the assessments that have been completed and provide a comprehensive assessment of the child's needs. These reports are presented to the Agency Decision Maker where the recommendation is that adoption is in the best interests of the child.

When children have a plan of adoption which is agreed in court by way of a Care Order and Placement Order, permanence team social workers become the allocated worker for the child. They are responsible for statutory social work visits and reviews as well as all family finding and matching activity for the child or children.

Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker, a secure online platform, to create and upload bespoke profiles for children. Permanence team workers collaborate with colleagues using Linkmaker to search for potential adoptive matches, communicate with adopters locally and nationally and share information securely to progress placements for children. Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker for all our children, whether they are matched 'in-house', with adopters approved by LCC, 'regionally' with our partners in Family Adoption Links, or in 'interagency' matches with other Regional or Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

Permanence team social workers present identified matches to the Adoption Panel, prepare transition plans and support agreements to help the child move to their adoptive family, and support the placement until the point of Adoption Order.

The team's workforce additionally includes a dedicated Life Story Support Worker and a Family Finding social worker for long-term fostering placements. Our Life Story Support Worker provides

extensive specialist work for children in their transition to adoption; this includes completing direct work with children, drafting Life Story books and offering 'telling and explaining' sessions to adopters to prepare them for the ongoing life story work they will do with their children. The Family Finding social worker for long-term fostering works closely with other members of the team to track children who may need a permanent fostering placement and identify placements when this becomes required. The objective is to ensure that children with a plan of long-term fostering are able to access the same levels of life story work, transition planning and careful matching that is available to children moving to adoption.

In addition to day-to-day operations, the team continues to be committed to ongoing developmental projects such as the introduction of Life Appreciation Days, processes for the permanence planning of children in long-term foster care and, further embedding of the Signs of Safety methodology in our practice. Team members have participated in workshops to develop trauma-informed practice, offered training in Virtual Practice Forums and offered training to foster carers.

This team have continued to see children through the coronavirus pandemic, where it has been necessary and in accordance with risk assessments. Where possible, visits have been virtual. When children have been placed with adopters, face-to-face meetings have been essential and each transition is risk-assessed to consider all affected parties.

2.3 Recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopters

The Adoption Service works closely with professional colleagues to provide a full recruitment, assessment and preparation service to adopter applicants in Leicestershire.

People who are interested in adoption can find information on the Leicestershire County Council website and are also directed to the Family Adoption Links website. Any enquiries about becoming an adopter are handled by the Recruitment and Marketing team initially, which is a shared resource with the Fostering Service. Potential adopters are then able to access adoption information events run by the Assessment and Support Team (AST) and, following this, request a social work visit before completing a formal Registration of Interest (ROI).

The AST complete all Initial Visits to help potential adopters begin their two-stage journey to becoming prospective adopters. Stage One of the process is managed by the AST, with support workers completing statutory checks. At this point social workers begin delivering preparation work directly to applicants, and this work continues throughout stage 2. During the year 2020/21, all preparation work

has been delivered virtually, with adopters accessing online training and virtual discussions with social workers. When adopters progress to Stage Two, a social worker from our partner agency Carter Brown is allocated to complete the home study and present their recommendations to the adoption panel in a Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). Social workers in the Assessment and Support Team maintain contact with adopters as 'Engagement Workers' during this assessment.

In 2020/21, 36 Initial Visits were completed, 28 of which resulted in an ROI. During this period 23 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, 6 of which were deferred for further work. Some, but not all, of the deferred cases were returned to panel within the period, meaning a total of 19 adopter households were approved. Two 'brief reports' were presented to panel, meaning that the agency presented panel with a negative recommendation, one of which resulted in a negative recommendation and one which required the agency to prepare a full report. One de-registration was presented to panel during the year.

After adopters are recommended for approval at panel and formally approved by the Agency Decision Maker, all case responsibility is allocated to a social worker in the Assessment and Support Team. This is usually the Engagement Worker who will have been in contact with the adopter throughout their assessment. AST social workers go on to support prospective adopters through matching and placement, continuing to work alongside the family until the point of Adoption Order.

As with our children, Leicestershire County Council uses Linkmaker to support our adopters to identify potential matches. All of our adopters are encouraged to create a profile on Linkmaker. The team is developing work around matching agreements to ensure that all adopters have clearly defined expectations about matching processes and the support available to them.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a considerable impact on the in-person activity for this team, as it has not been possible to complete the same level of home visits or run preparation groups in which adopter applicants can develop informal support networks. However, the AST has been able to adapt many of its functions around the restrictions and have been successful in ensuring adopters have continued to be assessed and approved during the year.

2.4 Adoption Panels

Adoption panels are chaired by an Independent Chair in line with regulatory requirements, supported by a vice-chair, independent members, social work representatives and an agency adviser.

Leicestershire has a stand-alone Agency Decision Maker who is responsible for ensuring that they have considered all the information presented to them before making a final decision.

Adoption panels make recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker regarding the suitability of prospective adopter applicants, adoption matching and adoption plans for children who are relinquished for adoption. All matches for Leicestershire children are considered at this panel.

Leicestershire County Council hold adoption panels once or twice per month in response to service requirements. In 2020/21, eighteen adoption panels were held, which is less than the preceding year when 21 adoption panels were held.

Adoption panels have responded to the pandemic by moving all activity online. Panel members share and discuss papers electronically and panels are coordinated virtually on Microsoft Teams to enable adopters and social workers to participate in the meetings. In this way, panels have been able to continue providing independent scrutiny to the adoption service and enabling the continued placement of children with adoptive families despite the considerable challenges of the last year.

Across the eighteen panels held, 23 adopter households were considered for approval, of which 6 were deferred for further work. Three approvals were made where adopters wished to adopt a specific child. One brief report was considered.

23 matches for children were considered and all received a positive recommendation followed by a positive Agency Decision.

Two adoption plans for relinquished children were considered.

2.5 Post Order support

Support Offer

Pre and post adoption support is provided in a number of ways within Leicestershire. An adoption social worker offers support up to three years post adoption order, especially in cases where adoption breakdown or disruption is a threat. This is set out in legislation (Adoption and Children Act 2002/Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005) as all placing authorities are required to provide support to a child they have placed for adoption for the first three years. We also have a dedicated support worker who makes first contact with any adopter approved by Leicestershire at the point of 6 weeks post placement. This is the point when research suggests that post placement depression can

become evident. During this visit the support worker will spend a significant amount of time discussing any concerns or issues, they will inform the adopters about our post adoption support offer and email a pack of useful contacts and information.

The support worker is Theraplay (level 1) trained, if necessary, she can remain involved to support managing behaviour and completing direct work with children. She can also escalate any worries to the allocated social worker, who can then utilise the expertise of the post adoption service to inform their support package. There are four Post Adoption Support social workers within the team with a variety of expertise, from DDP (level 2) to Person centred therapy. All are trauma and attachment trained and specialist training is provided as part of their continuous development. Once a case is allocated for Post Adoption Support the social worker completes a Post Adoption Assessment of Need, which enables a thorough assessment of support needs and recommendations for therapeutic and non-therapeutic interventions. Therapeutic provisions and specialist assessments are commissioned through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF), providing that eligibility criteria is met.

The Post Order Support Team, which incorporates Post Adoption and Post SGO support have access to an in house Art Psychotherapist and Play Therapist. Both work individually with adopted children, plus facilitate an Art Therapy group for teenagers needing to therapeutically deal with issues around identity. They also create a support call model named 'Parent Support 6' as a result of the covid crisis. This was funded through the ASF and was used to support parents in acute stress over the phone. It's success has meant that we are continuing this offer despite covid developments.

A quarterly newsletter is distributed and receives a high level of positive feedback from adopters and professionals. Pre covid there were also two events per year, in the summer and at Christmas, which we are hoping will run again from this summer.

Despite only being required by legislation to provide support for the first three years post granting of an Adoption Order, Leicestershire now offers lifelong support so after the three-year period, adopters can contact the team directly if they require specific adoption support. For those cases where there is a chance of a child being placed back into care or there are child protection concerns it remains that support is provided via First Response Children's Duty and fieldwork locality teams. The post support team will continue to work as part of a team around the family, offering support to the child and parents relating to the therapeutic needs of the adopted child.

Birth Parents are routinely offered support prior to the adoption of their children. This support is offered through a leaflet provided at the point of ADM ratifying a care plan of adoption. The Permanence Team has a protocol of any such request for support to birth parents who are facing the knowledge that the Local Authority is not supporting a return of their child to their care. being presented to Permanence Panel where an application for an independent person to undertake this service will be

considered. The Authority are currently reviewing how to facilitate this service so that the offer to Birth Parents is meaningful.

The Post Adoption Support Team liaises with the Virtual School and training is offered to schools particularly around attachment issues for adopted children and how to successfully manage these in the school setting. The training is highly valued by schools who report a change in staff behaviour and interaction with children which in turn impacts on the children's ability to engage in education. Collaborations with the Peer Adoption Support group LAFS is also valuable and enables a connection with the wider adopter network. A monthly CAMHS consultation is held for any adopted child where a clinical nurse can offer advice and services provided by CAMHS.

The demand for Post Adoption Support continues to grow in all areas. Leicestershire has a Therapeutic Support Budget that can be accessed to support children emotionally prior to adoption. Each child can have an initial payment of up to £450 with a further £450 being available if required. The Service Manager for Children in Care has a role in monitoring applications and the progress of any therapy commissioned.

Adoption Support Fund

To 31st March 2021, Leicestershire has drawn down £1,494,524.94 from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is a significant increase in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£499,478,28) and represents support to 251 families, up from 164 in 2019-20. It should be noted that the art therapist post has been funded through this ASF funding at no cost to the Local Authority and Leicestershire has successfully trained workers therapeutically to ensure a better provision of services. Any money accumulated from the ASF also ensures that workers receive clinical supervision alongside regular supervision to ensure that their therapeutic practice is ethical and appropriate. Some of the most complex cases may be co-worked by the Locality Team with support from the Post Adoption Support Worker. In such cases an assessment will be conducted and an application may be made for appropriate therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund.

Birth Records Counselling

Birth Records Counselling is a service provided to adults who have been adopted and wish to access their records and understand their life story prior to being adopted. A social worker reads the records and provides a detailed account to the adoptee alongside therapeutic emotional support that enables the adult to process their journey. This service continues to be highly successful and adoptees regularly provide positive feedback. Intermediary services where adult adoptees are supported to find and meet their birth parents is not carried out by Leicestershire. Some initial advice may be given but

as with other Local Authorities we signpost adoptees who request this service to third sector agencies.

3. Performance

3.1 Adoption Score Card – Key Performance Indicators

The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a 3-year trend and 1-year trend. The 3 main key performance indicators are:

- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family
- A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family
- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child

| • 3 year trend | 2016-19 | 2018-21 |
|----------------|----------|----------|
| A10 | 334 days | 426 days |
| A2 | 143 days | 235 days |
| A20 | 255 days | 242 days |

| 1 year trend | 2019 | 2020 |
|--------------|----------|----------|
| A10 | 425 days | 489 days |
| A2 | 167 days | 311 days |
| A20 | 316 days | 352 days |

As shown in the tables above, Leicestershire Adoption Agency's average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family increased, the 3-year trend performance data with 2018-21 (426) being 92 days longer than in 2016-19 (334 days). The 1-year trend increased by 64 days, from 425 days in 2019 to 489 in 2020.

The average time between the local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family has increased across the 3-year trend and the 1-year trend.

The average time between a child entering care and the local authority being granted a Placement Order for a child, has slightly decreased in the last year whilst increasing over the 3-year period.

The 1-year trend data highlights an increase across the three key performance indicators, meaning children are waiting longer, on average, to achieve permanence. It must be noted that the cohort of children who need adoption is small and the average easily distorted by outlying data; a few children who wait significantly longer mean that the average is increased even while most children are achieving permanency in a timely way. Cases where the children have waited longer for permanency

have been explored individually and we are satisfied that the delays for these children have been unavoidable. It can take longer to identify the right adoptive matches for children who have complex needs and who are in larger sibling groups; Leicestershire County Council nevertheless continues to pursue adoption for these children whilst it remains in their best interests.

The adoption service is keen to reduce the time taken to achieve permanence for children and a detailed action plan as well as a regional service delivery plan aim to address some of the key areas for development: increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption placements, identifying adopters earlier from across the region to meet our children's needs and building on our achievements regarding quality assurance to enable efficient, thorough decision-making.

3.2 Adoption Plans

Where the Local Authority proposes a plan of adoption for a child, this plan must be presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for a decision that adoption is in their best interests. In this period 40 children were subject to Best Interest Decisions. 20 of those children are waiting for final court hearings where Placement Orders (PO) may be made to allow their placement with adoptive families. Two children with a Best Interest Decision (BID) from a previous year continue to wait for a PO, making a total of 22 children with a BID and no PO. Four children with a BID made in the year were also placed with their adoptive families within the reporting period.

There has been an increase in the average days from BID to PO which partly reflects the difficulty in progressing proceedings to final hearings during the pandemic. Children who have a BID but no placement order are tracked by managers to understand delays. Such delays are most commonly attributable to court processes and to additional assessments being completed where family members come forward to be considered to care for the child/ren at a late stage in proceedings.

National minimum standards require Local Authorities to track the time between children coming into care and receiving a Best Interest Decision. National minimum standards also require tracking from the time the Local Authority proposes a plan of adoption to the point of a BID. Children wait longer than average in Leicestershire County Council from the point of coming into care to the point of BID and further work is needed to understand the reasons for this. However, BIDs are made in a timely way once the Local Authority has confirmed a plan of adoption.

Children are referred to the permanence team, as above, where a twin- or triple-tracking decision is made as part of childcare proceedings. Permanence Team managers meet regularly with colleagues

in locality teams to track the progress of children who are in proceedings or who may shortly enter proceedings. The Children's Decision-Making panel continues to be chaired by the Head of Service for Fieldwork and is the forum where decisions for pre-proceedings and issuing of care proceedings is made. This provides senior management oversight of cases that may progress to a permanence decision of adoption. These processes help the adoption service plan for children's expected needs and assist decision-making regarding the recruitment of adopters.

When children are relinquished for adoption by their birth parents, these plans must be presented to the Adoption Panel. In this period, two plans of adoption for relinquished children were presented, one of which was approved.

3.3 Children Waiting for Adoption

At the 31st March 2021 there were 43 children with a best interest decision of adoption, of which 21 had Placement Orders granted by the court. Three children have an ethnicity other than White British. 14 children are female and 29 are male. 16 are part of sibling groups who require adoption; this does not include children who have siblings with different care plans.

Prior to the making of a Placement Order, Permanence Team social workers ensure they are familiar with the needs of the child or children and complete early scoping to identify any potential adoptive links for the child. Formal family finding work is then initiated at the point of Placement Order but can be paused if there are additional court proceedings required.

Early identification of potential links and matches is carried out in internal family finding meetings. Children may also have anonymous profiles created to facilitate early linking with Leicestershire adopters as well as adopters across the Regional Adoption Agency. Leicestershire County Council seek to place children with our own approved adopters initially, then consider adopters within our region before looking to other interagency placements including Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). Children's profiles are uploaded to Linkmaker and shared securely with professionals and prospective adopters to allow potential links to be explored. Regional family finding activity is in process, with regular matching meetings taking place. This is a developing area of practice but has already been successful in identifying matches for three Leicestershire children; the family finding work will continue to grow in the year ahead.

Family finding activity has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic as adoption activity days and exchange events have not been possible to conduct in person. Leicestershire County Council has not

used virtual exchange events during the course of the year but has used other creative online marketing campaigns to support recruitment of specific adopters for some 'harder to place' children, categorised by the DfE as children in sibling groups, with disabilities or aged 5 and over.

No children were placed under Fostering for Adoption protocols during this period. This continues to be tracked through attendance at CDM and is considered upon the referral being received.

3.4 Children Placed and Adopted

25 children have been placed with their adoptive families during the year, the same number as the previous year, evidencing a continued drive to progress children's plans. Leicestershire children, on average, wait longer than the national average between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

We have been successful in matching children with our own adopters – of the 25 children placed during the year, 18 were placed with adopters approved by Leicestershire County Council. A further three children were placed within the region. 2 children with an ethnicity other than White British were placed with adopters during 2020/21. 31 children are now in placement with their adoptive families but awaiting an Adoption Order.

15 Adoption Orders were finalised in the year 2020/21, a decrease from the previous year when 31 orders were made. This reflects the challenges in court timetabling as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that urgent and emergency hearings were prioritised. Nevertheless, the average number of days from placement to Adoption Order has decreased from the year before (387 days from 413 days). This remains above the national average.

3.4 Adoption Approvals

19 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 21 the previous year. This includes 4 households who attended panel prior to this reporting period but received their agency decision of approval in the year 2020/21. There were a further 16 households in assessment at 31st March 2021.

23 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. 15 applications had resulted in approval by the end of this reporting period. Eight applications presented to panel had different outcomes – deferrals, requests for additional information from ADM and unsuccessful/withdrawn applications. Of the 15 adopter households who attended panel and were approved, this was made up

of 14 couples and 1 single female adopter. 13 of the couples were heterosexual. 11 out of the 15 households were white British. No adopters are recorded as having a registered disability.

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (Regulations) 2020 temporarily amended some of the regulatory requirements regarding adopter approvals, meaning that visits and panels could be undertaken remotely. Adopters have continued to access training, preparation and assessment in line with National Minimum Standards throughout the year despite the challenges presented by the pandemic.

The timeliness of adopters' assessment and preparation is a key area for development during the coming year, whilst also ensuring that work is of a high standard.

Timeliness in completing adopter assessments has been a challenge for the service during the last year, with adopters approved in this period waiting an average of 441 days between entering stage 1 and completing stage 2 – a process which is intended to take 6 months (~180 days) in total. Key performance measures and monthly performance meetings are planned for the forthcoming year to ensure that these challenges are robustly addressed.

Clear matching expectations and planning for adoptive families from the point of their approval to the point of their match will also improve the service we offer to families and, ultimately, to the children they can offer a home to. We plan to collate further data to better understand the adopter journey from approval to match, with particular consideration of any adaptations we may need to make for adopters who have protected characteristics. We are in the process of aligning our practice in this area with our regional partners.

3.5 Adoption Disruptions

There have been no disruptions for Leicestershire children in this period. One disruption has occurred of Leicestershire adopters with children from another Local Authority.

4. Statement by the Agency Decision Maker, Helen Gronhaug

The substantive arrangements to fulfil the function of Agency Decision Maker in Leicestershire are for a dedicated standalone post. This provides a level of independent oversight of final decisions for both fostering and adoption. The Agency Decision Maker role can also be undertaken by the Assistant Director for Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care as well as Head of Service for Safeguarding, Improvement and Quality Assurance.

Children's Adoption plans

40 children have had adoption plans agreed by ADM this year. Of those children, there were 8 sets of siblings coming forward, all were sibling groups of 2 with an adoption plan except a 1 sibling group of 4. The children in 1 sibling group had separate court proceedings and a plan of separate adoptive placements. Another child was to be matched together with their older sibling whose adoption plan had been agreed before this reporting period. There was an additional child considered for an adoption plan. Further information was requested before making a decision. In light of further assessment, the child's care plan changed.

Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) are now routinely prepared by the Adoption Service. The locality social work teams complete assessment and care planning processes and the permanence social worker is therefore responsible for providing a narrative of this work within the CPR. sibling assessment. This year has seen regular inclusion in the CPR of a 'words and pictures' explanation of the child's story to adoption. This is a really positive development as it provides the basis for the child's understanding of their plans and is a basis from which adopters can ultimately start their support of the children's story.

Permanence social workers continue to seek to engage birth families in the preparation of CPRs. Their degree of independence from court care planning processes appears to enable this participation and gives the opportunity to gain important family-based knowledge for the child. Workers draw on their experience of family finding and post placement support to provide analyses of children's likely future needs based on their lived experiences so far, and family background factors. This working model of CPRs and sibling assessments being written by the permanence teams has enabled practitioners to develop practice wisdom around placement planning. A feedback meeting was held with Permanence Team Managers and ADM to promote consistency and concision amongst the teams, minimise unnecessary duplication and importantly further develop the writing style of 'writing to the child.'

ADM is required to apply the welfare checklist of Adoption and Children Act 2002 in considering how a plan of adoption would affect the child's welfare on a lifelong basis. There have been occasions when ADM has been presented with different proposals which fall under the overarching decision whether

adoption is in the child's best interests. The locality team devise the care plan and yet proposals for contact arising from sibling assessment or the analysis of child's needs from within the CPR are provided by the Permanence social worker. There have been different proposed plans for post adoption contact; sibling placement plans and the nature of contingency planning should an adoption match for siblings not be found in children's timescales. E.g. keeping siblings together on a fostering basis or searching for separate adoptive families. These important considerations need to be explored collaboratively at the earliest stage before plans are submitted for ADM consideration.

Similarly, regular communication is needed between the teams to ensure all assessments and processes are completed before ADM considers the proposed adoption plan. In order for an adoption plan to be considered, all assessments must have been completed and available; a Key Decision Discussion held evidencing service manager oversight; receipt of Adoption Medical Advisor's report and endorsement of the plan through the Review of Arrangements process.

There have been occasions when a proposed adoption plan has been submitted to ADM without all these requirements. Timescales are tight to fit with court deadlines. Paperwork can be received late which presents a challenge. Strengthening administrative support for this workstream is an area for development. The completion of ADM recording has been revised in conjunction with a permanence team manager to improve timeliness of decision records which can often be required by court.

Adoption planning for siblings continues to be a complex and challenging area of work. Requests by ADM for further information and clarification are more likely to be seen when making such decisions. Further development work is planned to consider whether revised CoramBAAF guidance on assessing sibling relations should be introduced.

There are a small number of children whose original permanence plan at the conclusion of court proceedings has not materialised or sustained. Robust tracking by IROs and oversight of managers for Permanence needs to ensure that if appropriate, adoption planning is progressed in timescales that serve the children's best interests. Work is planned for Head of Service for Fostering and Adoption, Children in Care and Virtual School, Service manager for Safeguarding and Improvement and ADM to ensure early identification and tracking systems are sufficiently robust.

There have been a growing number of occasions when ADM has been approached to review the decision of an adoption plan on the basis of further assessments agreed through court. The reduced number of Placement Orders granted this year is noted. It would be useful to understand the reasons relating to those circumstances where a plan of adoption has been agreed and yet Placement Orders do not follow.

Overall the transfer of adoption planning work from locality to permanence teams has been successful with improved performance. The information provided to ADM has more consistently enabled a decision to be reached rather than further information requests being made.

Fostering for Adoption

The local authority has a statutory duty to consider a placement with dually approved carers whenever it is considering adoption or where the decision has been made that the child ought to be placed for adoption, but where the agency does not yet have authority to place the child for adoption through either a placement order or parental consent. (Children and Families Act 2014)

No fostering for adoption arrangements have been passed to ADM to consider this year. There remains a lack of adopters coming forward who are wanting to be considered for such arrangements. Likewise, there is work needed to understand the frequency fostering for adoption is raised as an option as a child's care plan evolves. The reduced number of Placement Orders may be reducing confidence in pursuing this plan for early permanence. Profile raising regarding this statutory as well as in recruitment and assessment processes is required. This year saw a sibling group of 2 placed under Reg 24 of fostering regulations with adoptive parents of their older birth siblings.

Adopter approvals.

23 applications have been presented to Adoption Panel for approval. 15 applications had resulted in approval by the end of this reporting period. Stage 2 of the assessment of prospective adopters has continued to be entirely commissioned externally. There were 5 deferrals on adoption approval applications by Panel. out of the 5 deferrals, by the end of this reporting year, 1 couple had withdrawn from the process and 3 other deferred applications had not returned to Panel for consideration. The 5th deferred application had returned to Panel and resulted in a determination that the couple were not suitable to adopt.

ADM has remained concerned about the robustness of the assessments even after Panel's scrutiny and has therefore required further work before making a determination on 9 applications. Of those 9 cases, 1 decision remained outstanding at the end of this year, pending a second opinion visit. In addition, 2 further determinations were made which came to Panel outside of this reporting period and where further work was required, one approval and the other that the couple were not suitable to adopt.

There have been gaps in the assessment around expectations and adoptive parenting capacity, understanding of Foster to Adopt and the needs of adopted siblings as well as providing a clear evidence base. There is a need to strengthen the connection between Stage 1 checks and Stage 2

lines of enquiry. These issues are not new in this commissioning arrangement. Although a meeting was held and on assurances were given in May 2020, improvements have not been forthcoming. It has been proposed that Stage 2 of assessments return for in-house completion.

The delay to applicants is acknowledged. There has been a push to tighten up the timescales for the completion of the additional work whilst recognising these requests are often due to the presence of complicating factors. There is also a need to ensure diversity issues are considered at the outset as applicants from black and ethnic minority communities and people with mental ill health and /or learning needs make up a number of the applications where assessments have not led to an immediate recommendation by Panel and decision by ADM. It is important any potential complexities to an assessment are captured at the point managers decision meeting when progressing through to assessment. It has been identified that practice standards will assist for child specific assessments (subsequent siblings of children who have already been adopted by adopters or foster carers already caring for a child).

ADM continues to provide challenge to strengthen quality assurance at each and every stage of the assessment and planning process. The quarterly reflective meetings with Panel Advisor, Panel Chair, Vice Chairs, ADM and Service Manager need to be fully embedded as they offer an opportunity to understand any differences between Panel and ADM deliberations to drive practice development and appropriate scrutiny.

Adoption Matches

19 adopter households were presented for matching with a total of 22 children which include 3 sibling sets of 2. Minutes of matching meetings are submitted to Panel and ADM as part of the material to be considered. They generally provide good evidence of how strengths and potential vulnerabilities of a match have been weighed up. A welcome addition to panel papers is the report of the dedicated Life Story Worker who completes 'telling and explaining sessions' with adopters specifically around their child's circumstances. This evidences adopters' understanding of the support their adopted child is likely need in terms of their life story and identity. It also rehearses the narrative for them to use with their child. Use of family network meetings for adopters prior to matching panel help to evidence the preparation as well as seeking to harness adopters' informal supporting from the outset.

Panel made no deferrals on matches. There were 7 occasions when ADM requested further information before making a decision, 2 of these were substantial pieces of work and 1 of which was outstanding at the end of this reporting period. These issues related to process issues around an adopter review and clarity around continued suitability of adopters to adopt, questions around the actual match of adopter capacity and child's needs; preparation of the child to be placed as well as adopters' birth child and managing expectations. Other requests related to clarification regarding child

and adopters' health; preparation of children being placed at an older age; how proposed adoption leave meets the children's needs & adopters' vulnerabilities not covered clearly in support plan. It is acknowledged that it is a national standard for an ADM decision to be completed within 7 working days from receipt of panel minutes and that the required further work takes timescales beyond this on occasion. Feedback has been shared with the agency and Panel about pre panel quality assurance and panel rigour in terms of applying adoption regulations and guidance so that timescales can be more consistently met. Tracking systems are needed to give clear oversight of any potential delays at the different stages of cases coming to panel and ADM and measure any time impact for children.

Support plans are individualised to the child's circumstances, however, the support plan format asks for consideration of both child and adopters' needs (this should include the needs of children who are already part of the adoptive family, by birth or through adoption). Given the wealth of detailed information that has gone into the preparation for children's placement with adoptive families in acknowledging the child and adopters' circumstances, it is really important that the support planning that has been presented as part of matching processes feeds through the child's journey to the point of Adoption Order and beyond. Where ADM has made requirements for additions to the Adoption Support Plan, this is shared with the child's Independent Reviewing Officer for their oversight and monitoring. Further work for the adoption service and the Safeguarding and Improvement Unit to develop practice regarding children's Adoption Reviews in line with regulations.

It has been recognised that Adoption Panel has not had access to a legal advisor for some time. However, to date no regular service is available but Panel Advisor has made use of the duty solicitor.

Disruptions

Following a disruption with a child placed by another authority, 1 set of adopters were issued with a determination they were no suitable. Learning from disruptions is vital to inform Panel and ADM practice and future decision making. While the process for learning has been established, there remains a need to extend this learning to Panel and ADM.

5. Statement by the Adoption Panel Chair

It has been a challenging year for panel adapting to virtual sessions during the pandemic. Whilst members are now use to running panels online it still comes with technical issues which can add to delays. The main concerns for applicants is sometime limited technical know-how but also finding the process somewhat distant and unsupportive.

The number of cases coming to panel remain stable. We have a minimum of two panels a month. The challenge has been ensuring each panel is not overloaded with cases so that we can do justice to all cases presented. The quality of paperwork is an ongoing issue. This has been raised at the Quarterly Business Meeting and also the direct feedback at panel. The main issues have been the amount of paperwork being presented for a case, missing paperwork, late submission of paperwork and lack of analysis to support a recommendation.

We recruited an additional 16 new panel members to add to the pool of panel members. They bring a wide range of experience from education, law and social work. To ensure the new members can play an effective role we have introduced a mentoring system where panel members can be paired up with experienced members.

The resignation of both the Chair & Panel Adviser in May added additional pressures to the running of panel. We have now recruited two chairs to share the workload, Fran Thompson, who has many years' experience as a Chair and myself. Hopefully between the two of us we can continue to ensure panel remain effective but also help the service address the quality issues.

Mohamed Patel

Chair of Adoption Panel

6. Developments

6.1 Regional service delivery

The Regional Adoption Agency, Family Adoption Links, was newly formed as a partnership agreement during the year 2020/21. Operational managers across the region have developed and revised a Service Delivery Plan with clearly defined workstreams in order to promote regional collaboration and create workable cross-authority protocols.

Staff who work for Family Adoption Links are beginning to build relationships with their counterparts across the region and a whole staff event is planned for July to support and enhance a regional identity.

6.2 First family support

The Local Authority has a duty to provide support for birth parents whose children are adopted. Previously Leicestershire adoption service ran a peer-support group as well as offering individual counselling sessions.

During the last year, group work has not been possible but parents continue to be offered individual sessions which have been commissioned through an independent counsellor. This counsellor offers a

series of six counselling sessions to birth parents. In the year 2020/21, she received four such referrals for parents wishing to access this service; two of these parents have completed all six sessions so far. The majority of these sessions have been provided remotely via Zoom.

Further work is now required reinvigorate this area of work and ensure we provide an excellent service to children's first families. Consideration will be given to whether this is a commissioned service or is directly provided by LCC staff.

Birth family members and wider family members are currently offered an information sharing meeting with our life story support worker, which allows them to share positive and significant information about themselves for their children in later life. This service has been significantly limited by Covid-19 but three families were able to take up this service virtually. Informal feedback from this is extremely positive, with birth families members explaining that they were grateful to have the opportunity to share memories and keepsakes and thanking the worker for kindness at a difficult point in their lives.

6.3 Feedback

The adoption service gathers feedback from various people, including adult adoptees, adopters, foster carers, birth family members and other professionals. Development work is needed to ensure that:

- Children's voices are included in the feedback
- Feedback is sought routinely and sensitively at appropriate points in the process
- Feedback is used to develop and co-produce service improvement.

"J's emotional resilience is the best it has been . He will start to talk about his feelings and his worries."

"Thank you so much Sheryl for all your advice and support. We are extremely grateful."

"She is beginning to stand up to her friends. And to tell an adult if she is hurt or been wronged - as it were. This is huge!!!"

'have more faith in our ability to manage situations'

The above are just a few of the positive comments that the team have received in respect of the therapeutic support that adopters have received.

7. Complaints

Two complaints have been received during the year, both relating to the assessment process and decisions made about applicants' suitability to adopt. Complaints are initially directed to the relevant team manager for a response and can be escalated where the individual remains unsatisfied.

Adopters who receive negative decision about their suitability to adopt (a 'qualifying determination') are also able to appeal this decision by referral to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). In this year, no adopters have accessed the IRM to appeal a negative decision.

It is understandable that adopters are more likely to complain in situations where the Local Authority must make negative recommendations or requires time to complete additional assessments. When adopter applicants and prospective adopters raise issues with the service, both through formal complaints and informal discussion, these issues are always overseen by managers.

We are committed to being a learning organisation and ensure that we respond to queries as fully as possible. A key area of learning from the comments made by adopters during this year is that we must continue to strive for ever-greater transparency – families are better able to understand and accept difficult recommendations and challenges when we have a clear rationale and share this with them in a timely way.

8. Achievements

Leicestershire Adoption Agency continues to strive to deliver excellent services to our children. The permanence team now complete all Child Permanence Reports for Leicestershire children following the roll-out of this service due to the success of the pilot programme. Reports are of a consistently high quality and social workers collaborate well with colleagues across the children's service to progress plans for children.

The recruitment and assessment of adopters who are able to meet the needs of our children continues to be an area for development, but this reflects a national picture of the challenges in identifying adopters for children with complex needs. Nevertheless, the service is committed to improving the adopter journey and has developed a detailed action plan which will be enhanced by partnership working across the region.

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, the adoption service has continued to support children and adopters, in the early stages of matching and moving in as well as later, when the families are able to access support from the Post-Order team.

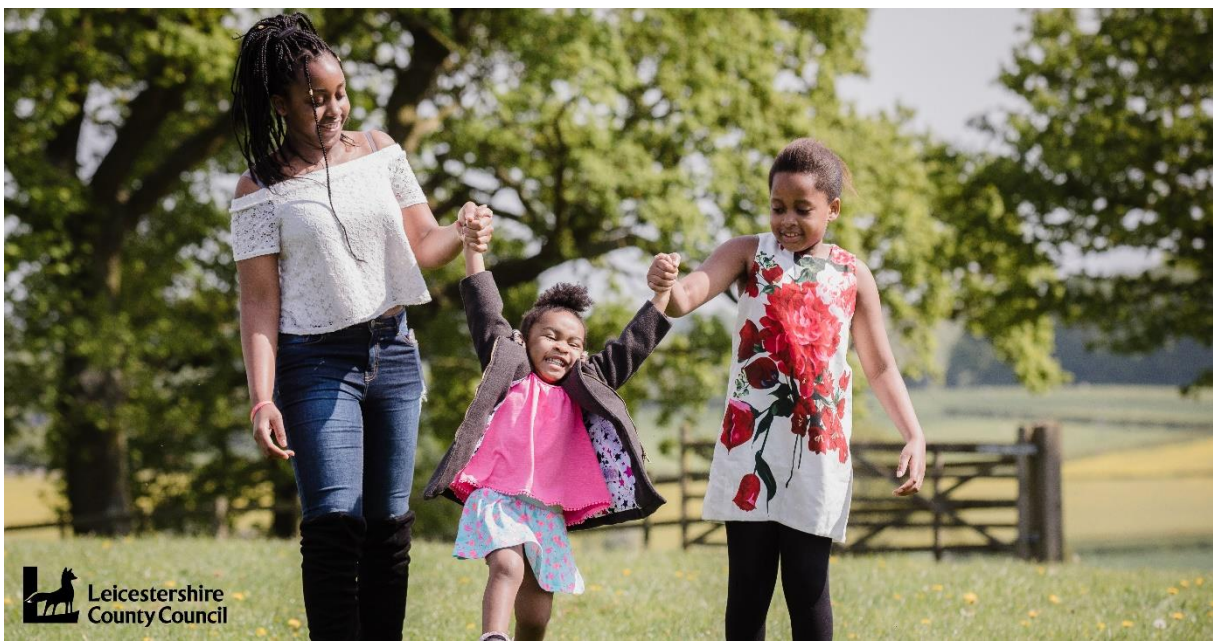
The Post-Order team has developed its specialist work with a view to ensuring as many families as possible are able to access the help and resources they need. The team provide direct help and advice as well as facilitating access to therapeutic services via the Adoption Support Fund.

Social workers in the adoption service have access to specialist training and are supported to develop their skills. We are ambitious for our service, for our children and for our staff.

The adoption panel is adapting and developing, having recently recruited 16 new panel members and two panel chairs. The panel service is building on existing positive relationships and building stronger links with service leads.

9. Recommendations for 2020/2021

- Continue working and developing alongside our colleagues in the Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board.
- Focus on the key performance indicators related to the assessment and recruitment of adopters, identify barriers to improvement and learn from areas of good practice.
- Focus on timeliness for children by developing our understanding of children's journey through care to point of Best Interest Decision; developing early linking and matching processes; increasing our use of Fostering for Adoption where appropriate to meet children's needs.
- Develop our panel, ensuring that the central list meets the needs of the service and panels continue to provide robust scrutiny of the agency.
- Develop a service-wide action plan to ensure that operational managers invest in mutually beneficial activity to improve outcomes for children and adopters.
- Develop processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development
- Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members.



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