

Corporate Parenting Board – 17 May 2021

Adoption East Midlands: activity 2020-21

This is a report outlining activity of the Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption East Midlands, hosted by Nottinghamshire County Council, covering activity during the second year of operation, April 2020 to March 2021.

Adoption East Midlands (AEM) provides adoption services as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) on behalf of Derby City, Derbyshire, Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire County Councils.

Nottinghamshire is the host authority, with all staff being employees of Nottinghamshire, whilst keeping office bases in all four local authorities. The service delivers all adopter recruitment and approval activity, all adoption panel functions, home-finding services and adoption support.

Prospective adopters are recruited, and prepared for adoption, following the Adoption regulations and Statutory Guidance. Adoption panels recommend approval and recommend matches of children and families; these recommendations are considered by the Local Authority decision maker, and AEM supports families as required after adoption order.

The aims of the Regional Adoption Agency, as recorded in the business case, are regional adoption services which:

- provide all children with an adoptive family that meets their needs;
- ensure that those affected by adoption receive the information, support and advice that they need to understand their adoption journey;
- ensure that RAA families are well prepared, enabled and supported to care for the children with plans for adoption;
- deliver improved outcomes for children for whom adoption is the preferred plan for permanence;
- deliver the new service at no additional cost to the partner local authorities.

AEM has been home-finding (identifying adoptive families for children) for 187 children at its busiest and has matched 134 children in the first year of operation, and 153 in the second year of operation. A further 146 children became subject to Placement Orders (court order, which gives permission to place a child with an adoptive family) in the first year, to the end February 2021, 117 Placement orders were granted, 23 of those to Nottingham children. There are some delays in the granting of placement orders, due to the impact of Covid, on Court timescales.

The number of adopters approved in the first year was 82, and to end February 2021 is 86. These figures denote sufficiency to place the children who have been waiting and children newly subject to a Placement Order.

Due to not always having enough placements of the right match available, interagency placements are used. The business plan target was 20% of all placements, and placement activity to date has shown a net of approximately 23% when offset with those AEM placed into AEM families, from other local authorities outside the partnership.

AEM has a dedicated area of website which all adopters can access for current information and support. The aim of the preparation of adopters is to make strong links, such that adopters will always re-visit AEM as the first point of contact for ongoing support. There is a developing comprehensive support offer, and a growing cohesion in service delivery, such that all social workers are able to deliver support and are knowledgeable regarding potential future need. In addition, services are available for all adopters in the geography, and for those living in the geography affected by adoption.

The preparation of adopters is thorough and is always evolving. There is much information online, and preparation includes the opportunity to discuss with experienced adopters, and to make links with others who will be mutually supportive. The preparation falls in stage one of the process, with the aim of enabling prospective adopters to make informed decisions about next steps; AEM is refining the support offer in early placement, to embed thinking that support is seamless and expected. At any one-time AEM has approximately 400 households at any stage of the journey pre order.

AEM operates five adoption panels per month considering adoptive families, and matches with children, as well as plans for children who are not subject to the Court process.

AEM has close working relationships with placing authorities, and thereby works closely to deliver the placements needed, refining the recruitment strategy accordingly. Additional thought is given to preparing adopters to take siblings, and to offer early permanence placements. These placements can be made before there is a Placement Order, and mean the child is placed with the family who may adopt them at a much earlier time in their life. It may also avoid placement moves for children. In the first year there were 22 matches of siblings, and 22 early permanence placements; to end February there were a further 14 early permanence placements and another 22 sibling groups matched. Children are now having life story books for use in their preparation for adoption, and adopters are accessing additional tools such as virtual reality experiences, to truly understand children's lived experience.

Virtual support groups have been offered to those in the early stages of adoption, to offer the opportunity to develop peer networks.

Since AEM went live some children have been matched rapidly - the shortest wait was 13 days from Placement Order - others have waited longer but are being placed, the outcome of permanency is achieved. Those that wait longer are older children, siblings, and mixed heritage children. Families are more likely to express a preference for girls than boys, and the national recruitment campaign will focus on boys and siblings as part of the forward plan for recruitment activity.

There have been a high number of foster carer adoptions, which means continuity for these children. For those children moving family's introductions have been creative, building virtual contact, and using technology during introductions. In our experience, foster carers have been committed to moving children on, and teams have overcome any obstacles, due to vulnerability. Technology has been welcomed and used for keeping in touch. We are beginning to see some challenges, around the impact of Covid lockdowns on small children, who have lacked the usual socialising opportunities, and introductions need more time.

At the end of the first year of operation AEM had an underspend which was transferred to the AEM ring-fenced reserve in accordance with the Inter-Authority agreement. During 2020-21 a proportion of this was returned to each partner. There is again an underspend which will be re distributed. Finance partners from each local Authority meet on a monthly basis.

In this period world events have also highlighted the need for learning and reflection about diversity. AEM fully supports the calls for greater understanding and plans to participate in learning and development to ensure continual development of its anti-racist stance. AEM has begun a working group, representative of all areas of the service, to meet to improve services for adoptive families, from first contact throughout the adoption journey. AEM has an action plan of priority areas to focus on, including recruiting and supporting a diverse range of adopters to meet the needs of children who statistically wait the longest for adoptive families, and services to support transracial placements.

Nottingham

Of the 287 children matched to date 61 were Nottingham children with the number in home-finding ranging from 19 to 39, and 48 children becoming subject to a Placement Order over the time period.

Nottingham has placed children who have been waiting substantial periods of time, the shortest time, from placement order to match was 13 days, the longest 892 days.

Seven sibling groups have been matched.

Around five Nottingham children a year are placed in early permanence placements-foster to adopt.

In this second year there has been a reduction in Best Interest decisions (that a plan of adoption should be pursued) for children from 37 to 22, to the end of February, however Placement orders have remained steady. The number of children matched has risen slightly from 29 to 32 to end February. Adoption orders have remained at approx. 25 each year.

This means the total number of children needing adoption placements has fallen. Children placed have been from less than one-year-old, up to thirteen years old.

The number of families supported by the service after adoption order for Nottingham is approximately 100.

Adoption Support

AEM has supported approximately 600 families after adoption order across the region. This includes a mixture of facilitating adoption support fund applications and therapies, direct work with families, attendance at support groups, children's events, link workers for children, and attachment groups, plus services for adults requesting birth information.

The Adoption Support Fund and COVID-19

On 10th April 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) issued a press release advising that there would be emergency COVID funds (up to £8 million) made available from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to meet the needs of adoptive and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) families arising from the Coronavirus outbreak. On 16th April, local authorities and RAAs were allocated a share of the fund to be used to pay for activities not ordinarily accessible by the fund, such as virtual peer to peer support, memberships and subscriptions, on-line therapy, given the social distancing measures that had been introduced and acknowledging the impact on already vulnerable families.

On 16th April, AEM received notification of allocated funds of £324,232 and by 21st April had made the first successful applications ensuring that support could be provided as soon as possible to vulnerable families across the region.

Packages of support were commissioned with the intention of reaching as many families as possible to meet the identified needs of families during these challenging times:

- Annual membership for all Special Guardians (across four regional local authorities) to Grandparents Plus peer support package. In addition, a number (20) of bespoke 1:1 packages for the most vulnerable were also commissioned;
- Annual membership for adopters (pre and post order) to the National Association of Therapeutic Parents. Package includes corporate membership for AEM and professional memberships. 500 memberships purchased;
- Adoption UK – specialist support groups for prospective adopters and post order adopters;
- Adoption UK – Peer to peer mentoring scheme packages (pre and post order) – 50 packages including six sessions per package;
- Adoption Plus – a package of support enabling the delivery of on-line Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) and sensory therapy to referred families. 90 consultation hours were utilised for 15 families;
- Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI) – immediate access for referred families to a number of consultations with specialist practitioners which could be accessed out of hours. In addition, a number of packages of TCI support for families in crisis were also commissioned (these have been used successfully to reduce the risk of family breakdown);
- A number of E-Courses from Adoption Academy for referred families aimed at building resilience in adoptive parents and reducing stress;

- 50 x PCAP (Parent & Child Attachment through Play) interventions which are being used with families who have had children placed either just before lockdown or since (up until the end of December) given the challenges recognised for families of not having an available support network around them (personal and professional) and who will feel overwhelmed and alone during this time.

All packages of support have received excellent feedback to date from families with many saying that without the immediately accessible support, they fear that resilience would have been extremely low and there would be the increased risk of adoptions breaking down.

Positive feedback has been received from many families about support being offered virtually. Common themes are that it is more accessible and that it has encouraged both parents to attend (particularly male carers who traditionally are not as ready to engage in therapy and support).

It has allowed AEM to review their support offer and make progress in working towards their goal of making adoption support more explicit from the start of an adopter's journey (rather than the focus being post order), and available to all not just a few.

Adoption Support requests remain very busy; it is noticeable that for families already accessing a support service from the team, the level of need that they are facing has increased in the current climate with many feelings as though they are experiencing a level of 'crisis'. This has resulted in a significant amount of increased pressure on the social workers in the team who are largely providing a virtual support service focused on containing families during this difficult time.

Whilst some of the group and family services / events traditionally offered by the service have been temporarily suspended due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the further development of our universal offer and pathway to provision has continued and is now being rolled out.

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