# Adoption & Special Guardianship Leadership Board - Minutes

Date: 6th May 2021

Time: 1.00pm – 4.00pm

Location: Microsoft Teams

**Agenda:**

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|  | **Time** | **Duration** | **Topic** | **Lead** |
|  | 1.00pm | 25 mins | Meet and Greet   * Optional time for the Board members to meet for virtual coffee |  |
| 1. | 1.25pm | 5 mins | Welcome and housekeeping | Krish Kandiah |
| 2. | 1.30pm | 30 mins | DfE Updates   * National Adoption Strategy * Spending Review Outcomes | Kevin Woods |
| 3. | 2.00pm | 30 mins | Care Review   * Hear about the review taking place | Josh MacAlister |
| 4. | 2.30pm | 20 mins | Data   * Update on Data collection * Update on analysis being undertaken | Louise Jelks |
|  |  | 10 mins | Comfort break |  |
| 5. | 3.00pm | 60 mins   * 15 mins per task group | Task group feedback   * Chairs of the groups share how meetings have been progressing | Task group Chairs / All |
| 6. | 4.00pm | 5 mins | AOB | Krish Kandiah |

**Members Attending:**

* Krish Kandiah - Chair
* Edwina Grant - Chair of the ADCS HCAN committee
* Lucy Peake – Kinship (formerly Grandparent Plus)
* Maggie Jones – CVAA
* Shelagh Mitchell – RAA rep
* Al Coates – Representing the ARG
* Maxine Campbell – Representing the SGRG
* Julie Selwyn – Expert Advisor
* John Simmonds - CoramBAAF
* Cllr Susie Charles - LGA
* Cathy Ashley – Family Rights Group
* Sue Armstrong-Brown – Adoption UK
* Satwinder Sandhu - VAA

**Other Attendees:**

* Sam Mercadante - CVAA
* Flora Wilkie, standing in for Louise Smith – LGA
* Sophie Langdale – DfE
* John Myers – DfE
* Kevin Woods - DfE
* Helen Walker - DfE
* Cheryl Duke - DfE
* John Myers - DfE
* Rob Shearer - DfE
* Kevin Yong - Coram-i
* Louise Jelks - Coram-i
* Kelly Kaye - Coram-i
* Chinyere Ogbue – Coram-i

For the Care Review update:

* Josh MacAlister
* Simon Sowerby

Apologies**:**

* Teresa Williams – CAFCASS
* Esther Kavanagh Dixon - ADCS

1. **Welcome and housekeeping**

Krish welcomed attendees, reminding them of the use of chat functions for engagement.

* Krish introduced Maxine Campbell – a representative for the Special Guardianship Reference Group (SGRG). Maxine Campbell gave a brief introduction to her background.
* There were 500 response to the survey on priorities for the Board. The survey is closed and the results will be analysed and shared widely.

1. **DfE Updates**

Kevin Woods provided an update from the DfE.

* The Minister for Children met the SGRG recently. Minutes from this meeting was sent out. The meeting sparked further discussions on supporting special guardians.
* There’s a continued conversation with Judiciary and CAFCASS regarding court delays, to make sure that Placement Orders (POs) and Adoption Orders (AOs) are prioritised in the recovery programme.

Comment(s):

* As there have been discussions on SGO allowances and the significant variation across Local Authorities, Family Rights Group are able to produce a note to circulate to the Board around Special Guardianship allowance and what the law says (**Action Point [AP]**).
* Caution needs to be given when using the word ‘permanence’ to prevent seeing kinship through an adoption lens as opposed to looking at the right trajectory. Additionally, reunification also needs to be taken into consideration in discussions regarding permanence.
* Reunification is seen as a positive option wherever possible and kinship care acts as a suitable backup that is there if and when necessary. The remit of the ASGLB is the ability to influence adoption and special guardianship – this opens room to make positive changes towards other factors like family reunification.
* There have been improvements in transition support from Local Authorities and voluntary services in recent years e.g., Staying Put.
* The Board hasn’t fully taken into account **all** forms of special guardianship as it focuses on those where the child was previously looked after. CoramBAAF, Kinship and Lancaster University held a webinar with Special Guardianships and an issue that was at the forefront was the inequality towards children and SGs.
* The system is setting individuals against each other. Additionally, housing is a major issue for SGs and though the Government guidance states that SGs should have priority, there are families in overcrowded situations with many older SGs having to sacrifice their rooms.
* There is a general consensus across the Board regarding its remit and limitations.
* A number of adoptive parents go on to be special guardians to their grandchildren and an immense amount of individuals in this group are unable to access support. There is scope for a recommendation to be made, by the Board, for the DfE to review the status of kinship care families and the test on if the child has gone in and out of the care system.

1. **Care review**

Josh MacAlister discussed the Independent Children’s Care Review taking place.

* Week 10 of the review: It is currently working at a considerable pace with hopes of it being concluded and reported with final recommendations by Spring 2022.
* The review has been shaped by prioritising the views of individuals with lived experience of children’s social care. This started with an expert by experience board who are at the centre of the review process; this includes children and young people who are care experience, care experienced adults, kinship carers, adopters and foster carers. The process by which a wider group of people are engaged with is shaped by those who’ve had these experiences themselves. There has been support from different organisations including Family Rights Group, Kinship and CoramBAAF.
* Workshops are currently being run online to bring in more thoughts. There’s a recognition of diversity in experience and opinions which helps to build upon evidence from previous reviews like the [*Care Crisis*](https://frg.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/the-care-crisis-review/).
* There’s a focus on producing a document that sets out the challenges shared in the conversations had. This will be shared after the first 3 months of the review – will be published in June, with an intention on asking for feedback on what may have been missed out or misunderstood. This will help shape the subsequent stages of the review.

Three themes arising:

1. Crisis of family help and engagement

* The vast majority of families who end up being in the children social care system are there due to adverse experiences with parenting in challenging circumstances. The system’s response tends to focus on children’s safeguarding rather than with practical help. There is a mismatch between what families are saying they want and what the system is responding to them with.

1. Child protection hinge point of the system – Variation in decision making

* This looks at the quality of decision making and interagency decision making. There’s a huge variation in initiation of care proceedings to the point where it is indefensibly unequal.
* The responses from police and children social care fail to be adequate in keeping teenagers safe.

1. The care system lags in building strong adult relationships.

* Children leave care without a strong group of adult loving relationships that will carry them through for the rest of their lives. Not having a strong family web can be a stumbling block and this is a fundamental issue in need of filling.

Question:

* Will the 3 themes be the sole focus or is there room for add-ons post the publication of these findings?

Response from JM:

* There is a fourth theme that looks at system issues surrounding data and workforce. After feedback is received from the first publication of the report, recommendations made shall be reviewed at the final stage making it as accurate as possible.

Question:

* Can feedback from the RAA leaders be taken into consideration for the Care Review? There’s a gap in social workers not feeding in to the review. Their experiences can add as a positive aspect for the review. The RAA have set up a new group of leaders that talk to each other across the country.

Response from JM:

* In the next few months, it is entirely possible for their thoughts to be included as it will provide useful insights to hear from their experience. A document will be shared on the plans for workforce engagement which will include a number of events to speak with the workforce. There’s been a deliberate prioritisation of engaging those with a lived experiences, however the workforce will be met with especially as it pertains with recommendations.

Question:

* Where does the child centred approach sit within the care review? How will this go forward as the review progresses?

Response from JM:

* There’s a reluctance to use the ‘child centred approach’ phrase due to the mass usage of it. There’s a focus on using phrases that are more precise on what the intent of the review is.

Comment:

* The approach, by any other name, and the value it brings helps to inform things that take place. The system needs to see the child and produce the things that the child will need in order to thrive – this is a crucial aspect.

Response from JM:

* The review will hopefully open up the space for people to debate further on this aspect and discuss how this is done and avoiding the repeated actions that has failed to address underlying issues.

Question:

* What is the degree to which the review will look into first principles i.e., the role of the state in intervening in families and children’s lives?

Response from JM:

* The way the system is operated does not live up to the values behind the 1989 Children’s Act legislation. There is an imbalance in the system towards investigation of parents. Going back to first principles involves going back to the 1989 Act – the Act forces each generation to think about how they apply the values to contemporary issues.

Comment:

* The 1989 Act is clear that the state operates on the basis of the paramount principle of the child and what is the long term best interest for the child; the courts also have to be convinced that making an order/intervention is better than not making an order at all. Child centred is a fundamental principle that the law requires us to follow, however the nature of individuals is developed through an intimate and thoughtful relationship with others. Child centred is one aspect of a more holistic approach.

Question:

* How much thought has been given to the wider family – both on reunification and the support given to families?

Response from JM:

* Both of these issues are on the register. The work that’s done with the wider family is a big feature.

Comment:

* There are complexities that surround our children. It would be prudent to think about how the review will unpick the spaghetti junction of the life stories of the children. The same things are still being repeated.

Response from JM:

* This is an important point and what will be tricky will be looking into the solutions and the boundaries of responsibility – this will require the assistance and advice from Board members when the time comes.

Josh MacAlister and Simon Sowerby gave their thanks and left the meeting.

Board discussed the content of the Care Review update provided by Josh MacAlister.

* There’s support for the emphasis on families and reunification and relationships.
* Some members shared concerns about the gap in identifying children who cannot be returned – as a result of abuse and other factors – and what alternatives are in place for them.
* ADCS previously met with Josh MacAlister and shared the content that was discussed.
  + The fact that there’s little on the growth in numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children has been challenged. This has cost authorities significantly and the impact has been unequal.
  + The need for early intervention has been brought up particularly with regards to the level of understanding of trauma and being trauma informed.
  + Resilience of teenagers was discussed and this will likely inform the third theme aforementioned by Josh MacAlister.
  + Innovation is funded on a temporary basis and it doesn’t necessarily lead to a substantial funding improvements in the overall care system.
  + The link between care and poverty was outlined.
* There are more children in the care system now than in 1985. It doesn’t indicate that the threshold for entering has gotten higher, and there’s huge variation across the country. A lot of calls are being received by FRG from family members that are getting variations in assessments – there’s an issue in the systems’ ability to assess if a wider family member is a suitable carer. Additionally, management on domestic abuse towards children have yet to be properly managed.
* A [report](https://frg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CCR-3.pdf) by Caroline Thomas’ on rates of looked after children since 1994 was shared.

1. **Data updates**

Louise Jelks provided an update on data.

* 100% return rate for the Q3 return. The agency level file and Headline Measure report should be published on Monday 10th of May.
* Number of children moving into and through the adoption process continues to decline and children with a best interest decision are waiting longer for permanence.
* There’s more SGOs granted than AOs with more children finding permanence with a special guardian than an adoptive family.
* In 2020/2021, 51% (1040n) of the total number of SGOs granted were for children under 5. So they’re not necessarily being used for older children.
* Permanence, overall, is likely to be lower in 2021 compared to 2019/20.
* There’s an increase in potential and available adoptive families. There’s more registrations and approvals compared to last year. There are more adopters not yet approved and approved adopters waiting to be matched.
* Approximately, there’s 200 less registrations in Q3 than Q1.
* There are more approved adopted families waiting than children waiting to be matched – this is the first time in four years (Q3 2016/17). There are 2020 children waiting but when looked as single children and sibling groups, there will need to be 1539 adoptive families to place these children.
* 50% of children have been waiting 18 months or longer to be matched. Children waiting who have a family finding flag status as ‘active family finding’ have been waiting an average of 20 months for a successful match with an adoptive family.
* The data is showing that there’s good sufficiency of adopters but children aren’t being matched with adopters.
* Characteristics like race, age, and being differently abled, are being looked at presently to get a better understanding of the profiles of the children.

Board discussed the data update provided.

Krish asked: Why are children waiting longer if there’s a sufficiency of adopters?

* The pandemic has impacted the matching of children and families which may have influenced the figures shared.
* There may be a mismatch between the type of adopters and the type of children that are waiting. Some adopters may be looking for very young white single children, whereas the children that are in the system do not fit those requirements.
* Stresses in the systems are also an influence. Children social workers are going through a process where they’re considering more families to make the best match which takes a lot more time. There are a multitude of reasons why children are waiting longer.
* Delays are not equal across the 150 councils so talking generally is difficult. Court time, presently, have been scarce thus difficult to obtain as a result of the impact by the pandemic. And the Judiciary have been reluctant to make decisions on an online platform.
* Recovery time is necessary for things to even out.
* Children waiting have multiple complexities and the adults waiting, though they may consider siblings, may not want the siblings that have complexities. Drawing out a theme to answer the question, generally, is difficult. A homogenous practice across the RAAs cannot be assumed either.
* Referrals are about 30 percent down, but the number of children on a protection plan has stayed reasonably stable. The delay in the courts that is worrisome is the delays relating to placement orders – this doesn’t negate the fact that adoption orders are also negatively impacted. However, there are problems with scheduling times for the placement orders and there’s an ongoing discussion on what can be done to deal with the backlog.
* There needs to be a more family friendly approach to this matter by the courts.

Krish asked: Figures related to adoption are reported back, however are there figures available on special guardianship?

* With the care planning process, figures on adoption are set out clearly. However, when it comes to special guardianship, this evolves and issues raised regarding viability assessments and more, complicates the overall process. It should be explored, however navigating it will be difficult.
* The data does exist on breakdown, and the Board can take a closer look on this to assess the information and what can be done. It is vital to look at breakdown in relation to special guardianship. Special guardianship breakdowns were going up pre-pandemic. SGs are increasingly worried about teenagers as the age of children in special guardianships increases.
* The pathway of adoption has a higher level of scrutiny in comparison to other routes to permanence.
* The Coram-i secretariat are exploring how child-level data on SGs can be collected. The team is also looking at what data is available that can be used alongside.
* **AP:**  Look into what data can be reported on – the SG task group can assist on this alongside the Secretariat.

1. **Task group feedback**

Lucy Peake provided feedback from the Special Guardianship Task Group.

* The task groups will have some admin support from a project officer that will guide all task groups.
* The SG task group’s focus is on supporting the ASGLB to influence positive change for special guardians and the children they care for. There are plans underway for the group to start meeting from summer 2021.
* Below are some issues raised at the Away Day:
* Advice and information which could mean include: better information packs and benefits advice that are accessible at the start.
* Legal aid – the government has made a commitment to make legal aid available to SGs.
* Adoption Support Fund – renaming and refocusing it so that it supports Special Guardians and their children need.
* Pupil Premium +; the take up for children in SGOs is much lower. Is there something we can do? For example, awareness raising in schools
* Adoption leave parity
* Allowances on par with fostering
* Improved Assessment
* Better training and support for SGs including prep training and peer support
* Recognising SG families have different needs to foster care and adoptive families e.g., policy practice services.
* Supporting and recognising all SG families and removing the entitlement based on previously looked after children.
* After meeting with the SGRG, post-18 support and looking at family relationships in contact has been added.
* It is important to think about the strengths of the leadership board and applying pressure where relevant. For example, legal aid, and pupil premium plus intake for SGs.
* Is there any possibility to rename the ASF but also make it better attuned to the needs of different family groups?
* Special guardians are struggling to manage the cost of caring for their children as allowances aren’t sufficient.
* All the structures and levers available are being used to gather interest in membership.

Julie Selwyn provided feedback from the Matching Task Group.

* Members presently include 2 RAA leaders, 2 VAAs, Andy Leary-May from Link Maker and Kevin Yong from Coram-i.
* The aim of the group is to identify ways to match more children efficiently.
* 84% of in-house matches happen with little delay (within 4 months) and there is a low disruption rate. However, there’s evidence that some children and adopters are waiting too long and children aren’t being placed.

Key issues identified:

1. Poor quality data and the available data not being used accordingly.

* *Link Maker data* - Staff can see practice that prevents matching or causes delay, but data are not scrutinised at RAA leader’s level. How many links are not pursued and why? Why are some matches found so late when the details have been in the system for some time?
* *ASGLB data* – it has not been possible to link children with their adopters until very recently due to concerns with the quality of data submitted, so questions such as, ‘How many ethnic minority children are matched with adopters of the same ethnicity?’ are only now being answered.
* *ASGLB data -* 16% of in-house matches in the RAAs involved children and adopters who both waited more than four months but unsure as to why.
* VAA data could be used better.

1. Unconscious bias in selection of adopters and restrictive matching practices.

* *Not making best use of available pool of adopters*. Single parents and those who are already parenting wait longer. Some VAAs report their adopters are waiting longer to be matched (average wait 6 months). Some adopters approved for sibling groups have young children placed and it is unsure whether this is a resource is being wasted or whether they were well matched.
* *Children’s profiles poor and inaccurate*. It is not known how widely and how quickly profiles are made available or how best practice in preparing profiles is supported.
* *The inter-agency fee remains contentious* with mixed views on whether it prevents or enables matching. The percentage of children placed with VAA adopters’ remains at 20% nationally despite the fee increase but there may be regional variations.
* *Commissioning of placements -* VAA contracts with RAAs to provide a certain number of adopters gives better financial security to the VAA and a basis for planning, but may reduce the pool of adopters available nationally

1. Lack of confidence in adoption practice in children’s social work teams

* *Children’s social workers* lack of expertise, some have a dislike of adoption, they may not know the child and there is a nervousness about a care plan of adoption. There are some poor CPRs, lack of life story work (children unprepared), and profiles with misleading information restricting links.
* *Long delays* before children get to an activity day although 1:4 of those attending are placed. Some children’s profiles circulated on Link Maker for 3 years. How much is still sequential planning rather than parallel? How is early permanence built into the planning processes?

1. The courts

* *Lack of knowledge on outcomes and practice*. Some courts making unreasonable demands e.g. find a placement for a sibling group in four months. Risk of impermanence not being weighed up in decision-making and in the balance-sheet. Concerns expressed in family justice on lack of contact planning in adoption and issues of identity for the child.

1. Adopter’s concerns about matching

* The PAR that is used for approval may not be the best tool for linking and matching.
* Some RAAs have a practice of sharing only one profile at a time with their adopters. Suits some adopters, but others want to see lots.
* Adopter’s access to Link Maker prevented or delayed by child’s social worker.
* Adopters expressing an interest in a child on Link Maker and receiving no or a very delayed response. They aren’t sure why they’re being rejected.
* White adopters prevented from linking with a minority ethnic child
* Minority ethnic adopters not being supported to find a match outside their geographical area.

Lucy asked Board members to contact her and share any other issues that may have been missed out. The issues listed have come from a variety of sources.

Comments:

* The issues identified matches with what has been discussed within adopters’ networks.
* There has been growing scepticism surrounding matching – is it needed?
* Matching in special guardianship isn’t discussed (enough).
* The paradox point between regional and national matching is a point for further discussions. There’s a sense of maintaining cultural identity regionally but then younger children are placed locally and older children tend to be placed further away.
* The use of the PAR is haphazard in relation to matching. The same methodology is not applied to all forms of permanence. In London, RAAs and VAAs are holding an event for social workers to look at matching to understand why prospective adopters aren’t being matched appropriately.

Sue Armstrong-Brown provided feedback from the Support Task Group.

* The group is awaiting the additional capacity from the Secretariat before commencing with meetings.
* The intention of the group is to identify opportunities and recommend improvements to the support offered to SG and adoptive families post-placement, to improve outcomes for care-experienced children and their parents or carers.
* From the Away Day, there was a general consensus on all support starting with an informed support plan on placement. A third of families start their journey with a support plan in place. This will be the first focus for the group in order to work out how support can be planned for the children.
* There are specific support needs for kinship families.
* Peer support groups for children will also be looked into.
* A project on Trauma Awareness in schools, using Church of England (CfE) schools, is underway to develop a year-long trauma awareness programme with 5000+ schools. A launch event will possibly take place in July followed by an opt-in programme to support schools with inclusion and support of care-experienced children.

Comment:

* The task groups have been established to tackle problems and challenges, however it is vital to share good practices. This will be a key motivator for individuals.
* Adoption Now, in response to the pandemic and delays, have started doing pre-placement support plans which has reportedly had a positive impact.
* [PAC](https://www.pac-uk.org/) are a useful organisation for the Trauma Awareness programme.
* There are growing [resources](https://uktraumacouncil.org/resources/traumatic-bereavement) available on bereavement and helping children.

Krish Kandiah provided feedback from the Racial Disparity Task Group

* Two meetings have taken place thus far.
* A large racial disparity survey is underway, gathering insights from adopters and adoptees.
* The transatlantic learning exchange summit will be taking place in June. This is an exchange between the United States of America and the United Kingdom.
* **AP:** Krish made a request for members to suggest possible attendees for the Transatlantic Learning Exchange summit taking place in June.
* There shall be a report that will include the data and qualitative analysis fed from the exchange, with the view of recommendations being passed forward to the UK government in October during Black History Month.
* In the US, it is suggested that if a child has had numerous adverse childhood experiences and they do not have a regular caregiver, their life expectancy falls by an average of 20-years. What could be, if any, the potential connection between this and racial inequities found?

1. **AOB**

* Board discussed the work of Board sponsors within the RASGLB. Krish is happy for it to be optional rather than mandatory, leaving room for those who may no longer want to attend.
* The Public Law Working Group is undertaking a review on adoption. It has been agreed on a number of topics and issues for review.
* Counsellor Susie Charles gave her thanks to the Board, announcing her step down from her role.

Krish thanked members for their time and concluded the meeting.

Nest meeting date: Thursday 22nd July

**Action Points:**

* Look into what data on Special Guardianships can be reported on – the SG Task Group can possibly assist with this.
* Board members to suggest attendees for the Transatlantic Learning Exchange summit.
* Family Rights Group to produce a note for circulation to the Board on Special Guardianship allowance and the law.