Adoption Leadership Board

11:00- 13:00, 10th July 2017   
Room 2.15, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings

**Attendees**

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| **Board members** |  |
| Andrew Christie | Chair |
| Sue Armstrong-Brown | Adoption UK |
| Tabitha Brufal | DfE |
| Annie Crombie | CVAA |
| Anthony Douglas | Cafcass |
| Carol Homden | First 4 Adoption |
| Alison Michalska | ADCS |
| Mark Owers | Professional Adviser to the Board |
| Charlotte Ramsden | ADCS |
| Peter Sandiford | CASA |
| John Simmonds | CoramBAAF |
| Katy Willison | DfE |
| **RAB chair representative**  Sheila Smith | South West RAB |
| **Others attending** |  |
| Tilly Ajala-Osinuga | DfE |
| Scott Casson-Rennie | Adoption UK |
| Ben Connah | DfE |
| Ian Dean | LGA |
| Emily Cattell | DfE |
| Kathryn Lewis | DfE |
| Annie Mason | ALB management service |
| John Meyers | DfE |
| Kevin woods | DfE |
| Alex Wylde | ALB management service |
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| **Apologies** |  |
| Kim Bromley-Derry | SOLACE |
| Cllr Chris Coleman | LGA |
| Justice MacDonald | Judicial Observer |
| Julie Selwyn | Hadley Centre, University of Bristol |
| Isabelle Trowler | Chief Social Worker |

1. **Introduction and welcome**

* The Chair welcomed Sue Armstrong-Brown as a new member of the Board, and Sheila Smith who attended as Chair of the South West regional adoption board.
* It was agreed that because of Justice MacDonald’s commitments in court, the Board will hold alternate meetings at a later time of day so that he is able to attend, starting with the January meeting.
* Minutes and actions from the previous meeting were agreed. The ALB management service gave an update on an outstanding action (2-11.10.16) for ADCS, CVAA and LGA to discuss funding reform. CVAA held an event to discuss funding issues in June, the next steps from which are ongoing. The Chair reported on his recent meeting with the President of the Family Law Division. They discussed the President’s concern about the continued increases in demand for care proceedings and the importance of judges having access to better information about outcomes for children made the subject of orders. It was pointed out that recent research by the University of Lancaster on outcomes of adoption placements could be drawn on to help address the latter.

**ACTION 1: CVAA and ADCS to keep in touch about next steps on funding reform.**

**2. DfE policy update**

Ben Connah gave an update on recent organisational changes at the Department for Education and how responsibilities will be split. He then touched on the political context following the recent election, the main points of which were:

* An expectation of significant continuity in children’s social care policy.
* The Minister has already met Andrew Christie, and at the ADCS conference last week confirmed his commitment to continuing to implement existing policy initiatives, including the RAA programme.
* Katy Willison added that she, and her colleagues, have seen the Secretary of State since the election. She remains committed to the ‘putting children first’ approach, and has expressed a desire to keep closely in touch with children’s social care issues.

**ACTION 2: DfE to invite the Minister to the next ALB meeting.**

**3. System performance update**

Alex Wylde presented the Q4 2016-17 ALB data pack. The following comments were made:

* The Board expressed an interest in monitoring the characteristics of children waiting and asked for this to be included in the next data pack.
* Data from Cafcass demonstrates that the rise in care order applications is primarily concerned with children over five years of age.
* Some colleagues asked for a breakdown of the category of children from a BME background, and for a future data pack to show where children from BME backgrounds (and other ‘harder to place’ children) are successfully placed.
* The ALB is still interested to see how many children wait with a placement order for some time without moving through the system, however it is important to note that the system is serving those children better than it was.
* Since the timeliness measure is based on children adopted in the year, this is a lagged indicator of performance. This suggests that the improvements in timeliness have occurred within the last two years.
* The Board concluded that it is crucial that ALB data is used to drive improvement in the sector, however made sure to note that this data pack outlines some pieces of good news.

**4. Adopter recruitment**

4a) Adopter sufficiency

Alex Wylde presented a paper looking at placement demand and adopter recruitment. This suggests that the ‘pool’ of available prospective adopters will continue to shrink each quarter, meaning that by the end of this year there likely be close to a ‘one to one’ ratio of children to prospective adopters nationally. In order to stabilise prospective adopter numbers, the analysis estimates that adopter approvals need to be increased by approximately 20% on current levels, although this is a conservative estimate. The Board made the following points in discussion:

* The Board agreed that the issue is not simply about overall numbers, but also about recruiting the right adopters for the children in care.
* Part of the issue is not that there are not enough adopters coming forward, but that they are not continuing to assessment, or are later withdrawing from the process.
* The system may correct itself, however there will be a delay. Sector leaders must be careful in how they turn recruitment on and off to address this.
* The NRMF is exploring how to address the withdrawal rate.
* It was underlined that there has always been a withdrawal rate which cannot be avoided, and that some adopters will have to wait to be matched because this is a service for children.
* Good customer service for adopters is important to get right if we are to recruit a sufficient number of families. There are models that can be implemented to improve this, such as peer to peer support.
* Some colleagues who do not have access to national level data may have an out-of-date view of the balance of adopters and children.
* The ALB must be careful to ensure that a consistent message about this is sent to RABs and the wider sector.
* It was highlighted that when looking at the future of recruitment, the ALB should consider how RAAs will play into this. However, at present it is difficult to engage RAAs as they go through the transition to live agencies.

**ACTION 3: Design and disseminate a set of messages from the Board to encourage a proportionate increase in recruitment by LAs, RAAs and VAAs.**

**ACTION 4: Adopter sufficiency to be monitored as part of future ALB data packs.**

4b) National Adoption Week

* The theme for 2017 National Adoption Week will be sibling groups, and will involve media case studies of real cases.
* First 4 Adoption recommends that agencies focus on customer service, so that the system is ready to receive the adopters it need.

**5. Regionalisation Update**

Mark Owers provided an update on the regionalisation program. The key points were:

* There are now three live regional adoption agencies; One Adoption West Yorkshire, Aspire Adoption, and Adoption Counts.
* A cohort support model has been introduced and RAAs have been put in three groups based on when they will be going live. Mark is leading cohort 1, and Deloitte leading cohorts 2 and 3.
* The suggestion is for cohort 1 to focus on performance and monitoring of the system, the interplay between the LA and RAA, the transition of matching from LAs to RAAs, and the future adoption support market.

The Board noted the necessity to build the confidence of local politicians as well as staff.

**6. Addressing inconsistency in adoption decision making**

Kevin Woods introduced the work done to follow up on the DfE’s permanency visits that were discussed at the last meeting. The visits identified some examples of strong practice that, it was proposed, could be shared in a series of practice-sharing events. The ALB management service will organise these events, with input from ADCS. The Board made the following points:

* This is the right approach; adoption colleagues need to be confident in the robustness of their processes and that they can handle scrutiny in court.
* These events could examine variations between family courts, which may involve some joint work with Cafcass. This should help ensure that adoption is considered as an option of permanency for children who would benefit.
* RABs chairs approved of this idea when discussed at the RAB chairs’ teleconference and were keen for each event to be tailored to regional issues.
* Many judges would welcome a more consistent approach.
* Anomalous difficult local/regional patterns must not be allowed to define perception of national messages.
* While these issues are discussed at some local family justice boards, there is a varied picture across the country.

**ACTION 5: ALB management service to plan and begin implementation of the agreed programme of events for ADMs**

**7. Adoption Leadership Board communications**

7a) Communications strategy and key messages

Carol Homden presented a proposed communications strategy and key messages for the ALB. This will mean being more consistent in disseminating and publishing information on behalf of the Board.

The ALB agreed to the proposed strategy, and to the following communications objectives:

* To ensure that leaders at every level in the adoption system have the information they need to make effective decisions;
* To gather views and information from the sector;
* To ensure that the key message that children’s welfare is paramount is conveyed and that the professional and media debate is balanced and informed by evidence.

7b) Adoption Voice

At the previous ALB meeting the ALB management service was commissioned to provide a proposal with specific measures to ensure that adoption voices are included in ALB discussions. The paper provides two proposals; the first suggests that the ALB uses existing channels to engage the voices of adopted young people when it is necessary to the agenda. The second, which is specifically about adopter voice, is that the remit of the Adoption Support User Group (ASUG) is broadened. At present, ASUG is chaired by colleagues at DfE and feeds into the Expert Advisory Group. The ALB’s proposal would allow ASUG to comment on the ALB agenda in advance of the meetings and that the group’s adopters attend the ALB on a rotation.

The Board agreed with the proposal, and decided that the question of how the ALB engages with birth parents and adopted adults should be discussed at a later meeting.

Next meeting: 10th October 2017