Adoption Leadership Board

10th October 2017  
Room 2.14, Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings

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| Attendees |  |
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| **Board members** |  |
| Andrew Christie | Chair |
| Sue Armstrong-Brown | Adoption UK |
| Annie Crombie | CVAA |
| Anthony Douglas | Cafcass |
| Cllr Lucy Nethsingha | LGA |
| Mark Owers | Professional Adviser to the Board |
| Charlotte Ramsden | ADCS |
| Peter Sandiford | CASA |
| Julie Selwyn | Hadley Centre, University of Bristol |
| Katy Willison | DfE |
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| **RAB chair representative**  Carolyn Fair | London RAB |
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| **ARG representative**  Al Coates |  |
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| **Others attending** |  |
| Robert Goodwill MP | Minister of State for Children and Families (attended 11:05-11:30) |
| Ben Connah | DfE |
| Ian Dean | LGA |
| Nicola Doyle | DfE |
| Kathryn Lewis | DfE |
| John Myers | DfE |
| Kyri Papasavva | DfE |
| Kevin Woods | DfE |
| Alex Wylde | ALB management service |
| Grace Toller | ALB management service |
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| **Apologies** |  |
| Kim Bromley-Derry | SOLACE |
| Carol Homden | First4Adoption |
| Justice MacDonald | Judicial observer |
| Alison Michalska | ADCS, President |
| John Simmonds | CoramBAAF |
| Isabelle Trowler | Chief Social Worker |

## Introductions and welcome

Andrew Christie welcomed the Minister and introduced the Board. The Minister made some introductory remarks, expressing that finding the best outcomes for children in care is a priority for him, and that he sees adoption as continuing to be an important option for achieving permanence for children in care. The Minister confirmed his commitment to the regional adoption agencies programme, and his intention that regional adoption agencies should be delivered across the whole country. The Minister also made clear that he wants to maintain an open, two-way dialogue with the Board, and expressed his willingness to listen openly to the advice of the Board on issues relating to adoption.

Andrew then opened the conversation to the rest of the Board, referring particularly to the issue of adopter recruitment and the Board’s recent work to understand placement supply and demand. Members of the Board discussed a number of issues relating to adopter recruitment with the Minister, highlighting in particular the importance of the right support being available, including from health and education services, and adopters being given more clarity about the needs of the children they are adopting. The need to think more creatively about who can adopt – for instance, considering older individuals or families who already have children – was also raised.

[Robert Goodwill left the room at 11:30]

Following the departure of the Minister, Andrew moved on to the first items on the agenda, noting apologies and agreeing minutes and actions from the Board’s previous meeting.

All actions from the previous Board meeting had been completed, with the exception of one action for CVAA and ADCS to continue discussions on the interagency fee.

Turning to the forward look, Andrew invited Board members to suggest any items for discussion for future Board meetings.

**Action 1: Board members to suggest items for future agendas (to be sent to Andrew or the ALB management service).**

## System performance update

Alex Wylde introduced the headline measures from the Q1 2017-18 ALB data pack. The most recent data showed a continued improvement in timeliness for children adopted, along with an increase in the number of children waiting with a placement order but not yet placed.

Discussion of the data focused on further analysis of adopter recruitment and demand for placements. The best available information suggested that there is a 1:1 ratio of children needing to be placed to available adopters. Following the circulation of the Board’s most recent note on adopter recruitment to RAB chairs, regions had been asked to provide estimates of expected placement order numbers and adopter approvals. Responses were incomplete, with just over half of RABs responding in full. Notably, RAA heads of service and VAAs were much clearer about recruitment plans than most local authorities. However, these estimates differed substantially from current projections based on the number of adopters currently in the process of being approved.

The Board had a detailed discussion of the issue of adopter recruitment. Possible explanations for the shortage of adopters being approved included: anecdotal evidence of some local authorities stopping or slowing down recruitment, prior to RAAs going live in their area; a lack of families coming forward, because of a perception that few children are available; and a wider slowing down within the overall children’s social care system, due to factors such as increased number of care applications, hearings and use of expert witnesses.

Andrew rounded up the discussion by concluding that the Board needed to provide visible leadership on this issue and ensure that the right messages go out to the system about adopter recruitment. It was agreed that DfE and the ALB management service would arrange discussions with RAB chairs and RAA heads of service.

**Action 2: DfE and the ALB management service to arrange discussions with RAB chairs and RAA heads of service.**

## Board strategy

Alex Wylde introduced a paper summarising outputs from the Board’s strategy away-day in July and the proposed new strategy for the Board, produced on the basis of that discussion. The paper proposed several recommendations for the Board’s approval, in particular, an expansion of Board’s remit to encompass permanency more broadly: limited here to children in public care system who cannot return home to their birth parents.

The Board agreed to the recommendations set out in the paper. During the course of the discussion, however, a number of issues were raised that members were keen to see reflected in the final document. Much of this centred around the question of scope: all members agreed that it should be broadened as set out, but there was also a desire to potentially include long-term fostering. It was agreed that this would be out of scope initially, but would be maintained as a future possibility.

There was also some discussion about possible implications for the name of the Board: ‘Permanence Leadership Board’ was suggested as an option that did not isolate adoption. However, other members felt that the concept of ‘permanence’ had resonance only within the sector – and would not be understood by those from outside it. ‘Adoption’, on the other hand, is more widely understood.

Finally, there was some discussion about the role of the Board in relation to the Department. The Board agreed that a key objective should be to provide constructive challenge to DfE on policy issues relating to permanence, as well as advice. It was recognised that for this to work required the Board to shape policy early on in development, which in turn requires the Department to consult the Board early on in the policy-making process.

**Action 3: Andrew to write formally to the Minister proposing the changes to the Board’s role and remit as outlined in the strategy paper.**

## RAA update

Mark Owers provided an update on the regionalisation programme and his work with the RAA Leaders Group. The number of heads of service is growing and an early indicator data set for performance is being developed. Many RAAs are still clarifying how they will engage with adoption support – what they will provide in house, and what they will commission. One difficulty is that many local authorities do not use the same terminology to describe the services they want to commission. This inhibits decision-making in commissioning services. Mark suggested that in order to tackle this we need to develop a common language for describing adoption support services. This is particularly important in providing the foundation for any collection of adoption support data.

DfE officials provided further information on recent developments. Most notably they reported that the Minister had written to the 23 local authorities that have not yet joined an RAA, inviting them to an event about joining the programme, which was held last week. Those not already involved are in very different places; some are preparing to engage, some are considering partnerships, some are still not keen to engage at all. Discussions with those local authorities continue.

## Adoption Support Fund

Kevin Woods gave an update on the process of consulting on decisions about the ASF fair access limit for the coming financial year (2018-19). DfE officials are currently discussing the ASF budget for the coming two years with ministers. In the last two years, the number of applications has increased from 2,000 to 10,000. This increase in demand means that it is unlikely that the DfE will be able to raise the fair access limit. DfE has therefore asked the LGA, Expert Advisory Group, Adopter Reference Group, and VAAs for comments on various options.

Kevin asked the ALB for comments on two options: to keep the status quo or to modify the current model slightly by combining the fair access limit for assessments (£2.5k) with that for therapeutic support (£5K), giving a total fair access limit for both types of service of £7.5k.

In the discussion that followed some members expressed interest in a tiered fair access limit, with different levels of access depending on assessed need.

Concerns were raised about how well the current arrangements meet the needs of complex children, where the fair access limit is inadequate – particularly since the majority of local authorities have not yet provided match-funding.

Another set of issues raised centred on the spot purchase model that the ASF seems to incentivise. It was argued that this prevents long-term planning and market development, since providers do not have the level of forward certainty they need to develop services at a more efficient and effective scale.

Finally, the barriers to access faced by VAA-approved adopters – evidenced by the long waiting times faced by many families – was raised as an issue. As a solution, it was suggested that the ASF should allow VAAs to carry out assessments for support for their families, in the same way that local authorities do, and that they should be able to apply directly to the ASF, avoiding the administrative delay involved in making applications via the local authority.

Summing up, Andrew concluded that in the short term, the Board recommended a continuation of the current fair access limit, but that more thinking needed to be done about the longer-term operation of the Fund, including the future beyond 2020 and how RAAs can make best use of the ASF.

**Action 4: A discussion of the ASF and RAAs to be added to the April Board agenda.**

## Family justice system

The Board finished with a very brief discussion on the papers provided by the DfE on the family justice system. These provided contextual information, which the Board agreed was very useful, and should be shared further with RAB chairs. Andrew also reminded the Board that at February’s meeting the Board will discuss with Justice MacDonald how the adoption system can work more effectively with the family justice system.

**Action 5: DfE to provide briefing a paper on the family justice system for RAB chairs.**

Next meeting: 12th February 2018, Royal Courts of Justice