Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

28th July, 2020, 2.00-3.30 pm, Microsoft Teams

Members attending:

* Andrew Christie Chair
* Cllr Susie Charles LGA
* Edwina Grant Chair of the ADCS HCAN committee
* Jan Fishwick VAA Rep
* Lucy Peake Grandparents Plus
* Maggie Jones CVAA
* Shelagh Mitchell Group Manager Adoption East Midlands RAA/ RASGLB Rep
* Justice Frances Judd Judicial Observer
* Al Coates Representing the ARG
* Julie Selwyn Expert Advisor
* John Simmonds Coram BAAF

Also attending:

* Jancis Andrew National Association of Virtual School
* Alison Woodhead Adoption UK (in place of Sue Armstrong-Brown)
* Sam Mercadante CVAA
* Kevin Woods Department for Education
* Nicola Doyle Department for Education
* Cheryl Duke  Department for Education
* Kevin Yong Secretariat, Coram-I
* Louise Jelks Secretariat, Coram-I
* Rae Buttenwieser Secretariat, Coram-I
* Kelly Kaye Secretariat, Coram-I
* Esther Kavanaugh-Dixon ADCS
* Louise Smith LGA
* Christina Bankes DfE
* Nola Walker DfE
* Sophie Langdale DfE

1. Welcome, housekeeping, and action log

Andrew Christie thanked attendees for joining and gave an overview of the rules. The minutes from the last meeting were agreed by the group. Alison Woodhead joined as deputy for Sue Armstrong-Brown.

1. DfE Updates

Kevin Woods gave an update on the work that the DfE has been undertaking. His key points were:

* The Secretary of State is eager to implement manifesto commitment and priorities, particularly around adoption. The spending review has been announced and work on that has started. The policy team is developing ambitious bids around adoption, special guardianship, and kinship care, but these will have to be tested against other DfE priorities and it is unclear how much funding will be available following Government expenditure during the Covid -19 crisis. .
* The Secretary of State and Minister Ford are keen for RAA leaders to work more closely together to deliver quality services across the country, building on recent work around the national recruitment campaign. Minister Ford met with the RAA leaders group and was impressed with their commitment and drive. She wants us to think about how we can build on the best local practice and is also keen to continue the partnership work that has been happening with VAAs. The Secretary of State is planning to give a speech on adoption in August that will highlight his priority to adoption and the forthcoming recruitment campaign.
* The Covid ASF scheme has now closed, after spending 6.5 million pounds. There has been good work in the scheme and the department has received positive feedback, and are looking at how to take key learnings from this and apply it to the normal ASF scheme.
* There has been an agreement with Ministers on providing VAAs with additional funding to provide services over the coming months.

**Action: DfE to disseminate all video and information relating to the Secretary of State’s speech**

Andrew Christie welcomed the positive updates from the DfE, and added that while there has been positive feedback from the ARG and their networks on the ASF Covid-19 scheme, it is also clear that the response has still been patchy across the country, and asked that the DfE provide data on spending across different regions. Some other responses to the update were:

* John Simmonds queried how special guardianship will fit into the spending review, given that it sounded absent particularly from the speech the Minister will be giving. Kevin Woods informed the group that the SR discussions would include how to improve support to special guardians and the scope of the SofS speech is still being discussed. It is unclear if it will be only focused on adoption or will include Special Guardianship and foster care.
* Responding to questions about whether the Department could provide any more information about the Department’s bid for the spending review, Kevin Woods informed members that this would have to remain confidential until sR announcements were made.
* Lucy Peake enquired about whether there had been feedback from SGs on the ASF Covid scheme as feedback from adopters is influencing the spending review. There is some limited, anecdotal feedback, and the Department asked that if members had feedback from their networks that they share that with the DfE.

**Action: Lucy Peake to circulate ASF Covid scheme feedback to DfE**

1. RAA Update

Shelagh Mitchell gave an update on the recruitment campaign. The RAA leaders continue to meet regularly and have been busy in terms of applications. The medial issue is one of the main concerns currently in terms of recruitment for adopters, as that is where many people have been delayed. There is big regional variation in whether the GP will perform a virtual assessment. The RAA leaders group is pooling best practices on Covid working and response, but because of the fast changing nature it makes it hard to disseminate best practice. On the recruitment, the campaign should be launching in September with a range of tools.

Maggie Jones also updated the group on the work of VAAs. She has been working with VAA colleagues to develop work for the national recruitment steering group. The campaign is targeting BAME adopters, and they have been working to make sure that messages and information take account of the challenges that the group has faced. From the VAA perspective, recruitment has held up well, with home-working going smoothly. There has been good reception from adopters in regards to work being moved online, but it is yet to be seen whether total online preparation will have prepared adopters as well as well as face to face preparation does. Matching and placement have been much slower, and VAAs are concerned about the drop in children coming forward, but it’s unclear whether that is to do with the pandemic.

John Simmonds added that the whole sector has been engaged in the recruitment campaign which is a positive sign. He wrote a paper that set out the tests the campaign needed to pass to have confidence and agreement, and it has met the majority of the tests. He also has had contact with the courts and legal teams, and the understanding there is that care proceedings aren’t being concluded. The biggest concern is if care proceedings don’t continue, there could be a 1/3rd drop off of children going into placement orders, and there is a need to gather more statistics from the court to see if this concern is rooted in the firmest evidence. Some responses to this were:

* It is helpful to hear that there are delays in care proceedings. There is a recovery group being led by Cafcass, and this issue will be fed back to them
* Andrew Christie recalled that a few years ago a big issue for the sector was that a high number of adopters were being recruited but there weren’t children to match them with, and this could again be a problem.
* Justice Frances Judd added that courts are reopening and there are more hearings happening, and that there will hopefully be more guidance as the pandemic continues that more cases may be held remotely. There are also hopes that there will be more statistics available soon to have a clearer picture of what’s happening in the courts.

1. Black Lives Matter- Adoption and Special Guardianship

Andrew Christie informed the group that the secretariat had been working on putting together a BLM task and finish group. The draft terms of reference have been sent out to the group, and he asked them for feedback on that. Some responses were:

* Jan Fishwick commented that an important focus for the task and finish group could be the sequential matching that happens within the sector and the barriers that prevent practitioners and policy makers from seeing children as the nation’s children. The interagency fee is also a barrier. It’s important that the group discusses systemic issues.
* Lucy Peake felt that the group might be more effective if the experiences of BAME adopters and special guardians were looked at separately. If the intention is for the group to be a safe space, it’s important to acknowledge that experiences are different because they exist in different systems. Andrew Christie felt that this was a reasonable proposition and that they should be considered as separate issues. He asked that Grandparents Plus help the ASGLB to facilitate safer spaces to have these discussions.
* Susie Charles commented that the report circulated by the ASGLB highlighted that BAME children are more likely to have a child in need order than a child protection order, and the LGA wanted to know if it was known what the cause of this was. It’s important that the group look at why a higher proportion of black children are in care, and if children are more likely to be in care if they are in deprived areas.
* Christina Bankes informed the group that the DfE has done work looking at why certain ethnicities are overrepresented in the care system and they couldn’t find a justifiable explanation for it, so concluded that it was due to local decision making. The care review will explore this issue to some degree.
* Maggie Jones commented that from looking at the terms of reference, it would be helpful to think about how the ASGLB as a leadership Board want to address the challenges of BLM. She agreed it wouldn’t be helpful to combine all types of permanence, and that SGs have particular experience which needs to be drawn out, as do birth families, and VAAs. There should also be discussions with BAME staff who work across the sector.
* Shelagh Mitchell expressed concern that the concept was too aspirational, and wondered if there should be a more permanent standing group. Andrew Christie responded that it would be good to start with a task and finish group, and then examine what the proposals of that group were and build from there.
* Allison Woodhead queried how to ensure that the group can identify the right questions, and not start from their own assumptions. The membership in the draft terms of reference is drawn from majority white organizations, and it’s important to consider what the face of the group should be.
* John Simmonds added that while he was glad to have been asked to chair the group, as a white man he was concerned that he might not be the right person to represent the group. The ASGLB is also very white, and it raises the issue of who influences what, who determines what. There are fundamental and long standing issues in the sector, that are structural and institutional. The issue of matching is a primary one, but not for special guardianship.

Andrew Christie summarised the conversation saying the agreement is there to set up a task and finish group, we now need to examine how this will work. He added that while he appreciated the considerations raised by members, there would have to be compromises made. The group should build on the offer from Lucy Peake to mobilise SG groups, and ask the task and finish group to give a progress report in October, and a more substantive report at the Board meeting in January.

**Action: Secretariat to re-draft the terms of reference and circulate to board members.**

1. Return to school

Nola Walker from the DfE gave an update on the planned return to schools. They have been liaising with the school attendance team and have published reopening guidance. They have also asked schools to think about how they support vulnerable groups and about the additional emotional support they may need.

Jancis Andrew gave an update on the work that the VSH was doing on this issue. VSH members feel that now is the time that schools need to embrace an awareness of understanding the impact of Coronavirus on children who have had adverse relational experience since early childhood and are care experienced. The broader context is that there are some people who will be traumatised by Coronavirus. Schools need to recognise that if they don’t adopt different approaches, there are swathes of children who will really struggle to re-engage in learning. There are divergent narratives from the DfE as well, such as the message from the behaviour and attendance department that seems to encourage strict parameters.

Some comments from members on this were:

* The key issues for the LGA are around mental health, school transport and the safety of children and staff in school. In related to adopted and SG children, it’s key that they have access to the support they need. There may be issues for children whose normal support services were suspended in lockdown, and issues for SG children whose special guardians are older and more vulnerable.
* Lucy Peake added that there were issues with special guardians relating to age and health conditions, and that coming out of lockdown, people were still scared of the virus. The government needs to work on messaging to help people feel more confident in preparing to send their child back to school.
* Jan Fishwick stated that ASCS has been trying to engage with VSH’s but they are only on term time contracts, but there should be conversations happening before they go back to school.
* Sophie Langdale informed the group that the DfE understood that there needed to be continued conversations with school colleagues. The Secretary of State has made it clear that he wants to get all children back to school in September. They are especially conscious that adopted and special guardianship children are a cohort that will suffer even more if they are not able to back to school.
* Alison Woodhead suggested that the Secretary of State’s speech in August could be a good opportunity to speak about supporting children and families on the return to school.

Summarising the conversation, Andrew Christie stated that while everyone agrees it’s important to get children back to school, the issue is what the approach would be and the punitive messaging is unhelpful. The bigger question going forward is how we need to look at good learnings and different approaches.

1. Public Law Working Group

Mrs. Justice Judd gave an update on the work of the Public Law Working Group. Their main report was postponed due to Coronavirus, but the report on Special Guardianship was brought out in June, with a focus on ensuring that SGs have the right training and support and assessment, and to bring them more in line with what is done for adopters and foster carers. There are recommendations for immediate change within the paper and for longer term change, such as questions about whether SGs should get public funding, robust assessment and support plans.

John Simmonds added that a lot of work has been led by the judiciary. Kevin Woods confirmed that the DfE would be considering all recommendations.

1. AOB

The Board was updated on the Better Futures Report headlines, which were that school foundations are key, and what happens in primary and secondary schools are foundations of a successful college life.

Additionally, the Board was informed that the Secretariat is working on an annual report, as well as continuing work on the data model.

Christina Bankes reminded the group that this was Andrew Christie’s last meeting as Chair, and thanked him for his work, particularly his engagement with regional boards and RAA leaders, creating the ARG, spotting the recruitment problem and bringing in Special Guardianship. Kevin Yong will be chairing the October meeting while the recruitment of the new Chair takes place.

**Action: Kevin Yong to circulate note updating the Board on the modernising permanence group.**