**Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board**

Date: 03.02.2022 | Time: 1.00-4.00pm | Location: Microsoft Teams

**Chair:**

Krish Kandiah

**Members Attending:**

Lucy Peake – Kinship

Shelagh Mitchell – RAA Rep

Al Coates – Representing the ARG

Julie Selwyn – Expert Advisor

John Simmonds – CoramBAAF

Justice Frances Judd – Judicial Observer

Cathy Ashley – Family Rights Group

Sue Armstrong-Brown – Adoption UK

Cllr Mark Sutton – LGA Rep

Maggie Jones – CVAA

Sarah Johal – RAA

Satwinder Sandhu – VAA

Matthew Brazier – Ofsted

**Also Attending:**

Louise Smith – LGA

Kevin Woods – Department for Education

Helen Walker – Department for Education

Natalia Nadolska – Department for Education

Sarah Jennings – Department for Education

Sophie Langdale – Department for Education

Rob Shearer – Department for Education

Cheryl Foster – Department for Education

**Secretariat:**

Kevin Yong – Secretariat, Coram-i

Kelly Kaye – Secretariat, Coram-i

Xia Bury – Secretariat, Coram-i

Fern Whiting – Secretariat, Coram-i

Ruby Jardine – Secretariat, Coram-i

**Apologies:**

Edwina Grant – Chair of the ADCS HCAN Committee

Esther Kavanagh-Dixon – ADCS

Chris Walton – Department for Education

Alice Talbot – CVAA

Anita Hart - ARG

1. **Welcome and Housekeeping**

* Krish Kandiah opened the meeting and welcomed new board member Matthew Brazier to the meeting
* Attendees are encouraged to use the chat function throughout the meeting.
* John Simmonds gave a tribute to Sarah Caton
* Krish added his own thoughts to the tribute and invited board members to share.
  + Members reflected on their own memories of Sarah in the chat and commended John for a lovely tribute
* Kevin Woods reflected on the ‘robust discussions’ he had with Sarah over the years and expressed admiration for the great work she did with ADCS. She was a lovely person who will be greatly missed

1. **DfE Updates and Discussions**

* Kevin Woods provided the DfE Update
* The ASF will be continuing for the next three years from April.
  + Budgets to be announced on 3rd March
    - Applications can be made from Monday 7th February
* Announcements on adoption to be made on 3rd March
  + Spending review announcement
  + Will be publishing the Q2 figures
  + Publishing two research reports
    - Survey of parents
    - Final evaluation of the RAA programme
* RAA program update
  + Two more LAs will go live on 3rd March
  + Working with the final three LAs to join a RAA
* Hoping the Secretary of State will be able to give a speech in Manchester on 3rd March
* Somerset Judgement
  + The department is now an intervenor in the next hearing – giving advice to the courts on how they should handle cases
  + Talking to ADCS, Ofsted and CAFCASS – trying to get a consensus with government
* Minister Quince is keen to do more on promoting adoption in communication – already thinking about National Adoption Week and between now and then
  + Likely to be two big adoption announcements each year – April and October – plus a series of announcements throughout the year to raise the profile of adoption even more
* Minister Quince is talking to the APPG on 28th February
  + At a hearing on the strategy and their report on strengthening families.
* Open to questions and discussion
  + Members commented on the positive reaction to the announcement about the Adoption Support Fund
  + DfE are happy for people to share the news and tweet about the ASF extension – budget information won’t be available until the announcement on 3rd March
  + Sarah Johal asked for comments from the DfE on the subject of retrospective rather than advanced payments
    - The current system is no longer sustainable. Applications will be agreed in the same ways but LAs and RAAs will need to let DfE know when therapies are provided – then they will release payment rather than giving money in advance
    - This system should still allow providers to be paid in a timely manner
  + Discussion on the Somerset Judgement – medical advisors and community paediatricians are looking for acknowledgement of the position they find themselves in around these issues
    - Kevin Woods thanked John for his help and advice throughout this and agreed to take this point on board
  + Lucy Peake commented about the low uptake of SGs to the ASF – around 14%
    - Kevin Woods commented that he would be happy to talk to the SGTG, Kinship and FRG about how to inform and encourage SGs to access the ASF
  + Minister Quince is to be featured on an upcoming episode of the Adoption and Fostering Podcast - <https://adoptionandfostering.podbean.com/>
  + Cathy Ashley raised a point about the infrastructure around communications with SGs around the ASF – complexities with most RAAs not responsible for SG cases
    - Sarah Johal said she will gather a list of RAAs who provide SG support and send it round to the board

1. **Data Update**

* Kevin Yong provided the data update
* Q2 data to be published next month
* The number of children moving into and through the adoption process continues to decline, and those children with a best interest decision are waiting longer to be matched and placed with an adoptive family;  52% of children waiting with a PO not yet matched 18+ months
* The number of approved adopters waiting to be matched continues to increase each quarter, however adopter registrations and approvals have started to decline. The number of adoptive families matched with, and having a child placed with them also continues to decline and have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels
* Best Interest Decisions and the number of children and adopters being matched have not recovered to pre pandemic levels
* Overall indications are that there are currently more than sufficient approved adopters to match the number of families required, however, less children are being matched and placed with adoptive parents and a greater proportion of children are waiting longer
* **Need to focus conversation and actions around:-**

1. What can be done to match the children who have been waiting the longest with the currently approved adopters?
2. What are the barriers: payment of interagency fee, geographical location of children and adopters, adopters understanding of the children's needs and support available?

* Open for questions
  + Point raised by John Simmonds on best interest decisions – issues around agency decision makers and their confidence in signing off a care plan, nervousness about being challenged in court
    - Unfortunately it is difficult to know what is behind the wider data on children in care. There is work that could be done to understand the reasons behind the decline in children being made available for adoption
  + Julie Selwyn highlighted some work on older children in residential care which is currently underway in Bradford which might be beneficial to look at developing an adoption support dataset
  + Comments made on how much the data shows the need for focus on children who aren’t receiving placement orders
  + Discussion around the focus on adopters over children and what can be done to encourage adopters to consider children with more complex needs or those who are part of sibling groups

1. **RAA Feedback**

* Sarah Johal provided the RAA Feedback
  + RAA Leaders Plan: 2021-2024
    - Three year plan
    - Three key priorities around recruitment, the child’s journey and around adoption support.
    - Sarah meets with 32 RAA leaders each month
    - Small national team – working on ways of increasing capacity to help drive forward the key priorities over the next few years.
    - Working groups – working hard to make sure they do not duplicate work
    - RAA events – 1st March in London and 3rd March in Manchester – with a focus on the theme of relationships
      * Keynote speaker Harriet Ward talking about research from Australia
      * A number of workshops across different themes aiming to highlight good practice.
  + Quarterly newsletter will be used to update this group – plus will be sent to key stakeholders
  + Deep dive into matching – looking at the top 100 children and top 100 adopters waiting
    - Starting by looking at the adopters
    - Looking at the emerging themes to learn from and improve things – commissioned activity days across the country – trying to understand the barriers for specific children
  + Some RAAs and VAAs are working to develop their own regional activity days
  + Plans for 22/23 recruitment campaign
    - Focus on children’s voices and needs
    - Prioritise children who we know wait longer
    - Pilot in Bristol re Black Adopters
    - National Adoption Week
  + Adoption Support
    - Dataset group
    - Adoption support self-assessment and audit
  + Respecting Children’s Identity and Relationships
    - Letterbox contact
    - Prototype Letterswap
  + Early permanence placements
    - Initiatives looking at improving practice around early permanence
* Open for comments and discussions
  + Julie Selwyn raised a point about focusing on the child’s relationships at the beginning of the child’s journey rather than waiting until later in the process
  + Expanded explanation on the project to build and develop a digital platform that could potentially replace the traditional letterbox information exchange
    - Support for birth parents – acknowledging the gap and working with LAs to try and better support around this area
    - Life story work – important to incorporate this too
  + Maggie Jones raised a point around support for adopted adults – recent press around historic adoption cases

\*\*\* Comfort Break \*\*\*

1. **Task Group Feedback**

**Special Guardians Task Group**

* Lucy Peake presented the update to the group
  + Longitudinal work from Ecorys, IPSOS Mori and the Rees Centre
    - Consistency in feedback from Special Guardians about the research
  + Sub group to shape research strategies for SGs
    - Judith Harwin and Clare Walsh to co-chair
    - Aiming to lay out a set of principles to share with the leadership board, the DfE and the wider sector
  + Special Guardians Finance Roundtable Event
  + Research
    - Survey of LAs – led by Kevin Yong from Coram-i
    - Deep dive of LAs – led by Paul McGrath
      * Krish is meeting with various stakeholders to ready this for publication
  + Chris Walton from DfE spoke to the group about PPP
    - Working towards a project to increase awareness of PPP amongst SGs and schools

**Support Task Group**

* Sue Armstrong-Brown presented the update to the group
  + The group has produced a survey on proactive planning – for both adoption and special guardianship
    - Not looking at the whole support agenda
    - Looking at the way support is planned at the start of a placement
    - Asking for examples of best practice
    - Asking when the plans are reviewed
    - Looking at how agencies know that support is working
      * Members are encouraged to share the survey amongst their networks to encourage more returns
  + The task group is running a programme of discussions with internal and external speakers on issues relevant to support
    - Multidisciplinary Support
    - Core and Universal Support
    - Specialist Support
  + More discussions planned in the areas of:
    - Crisis support
    - Education support
    - Integration with wider support provision

**Adoption Matching Task Group**

* Julie Selwyn presented the update to the group
  + Thank you to everyone who has taken part in the group and thank you to Shelagh who has taken the reigns on matching from the RAA perspective
  + Sub groups working within the Matching Group
    - The task group attempted to address the poor quality data and the underutilisation of available data in this area
    - Work done by Kevin Yong and Andy Leary-May to look at connecting the Coram-i adoption data and the Linkmaker data – to gain a better understanding of the children who are waiting
    - Unconscious bias in the selection of adopters and restrictive matching practices
  + Julie Selwyn and John Simmonds have joined the Family Law Working Group
    - Due to report at the end of March
  + The Adoption Matching Task Group has now closed and the leadership has passed to the RAA Leaders Group
  + Krish Kandiah thanked Julie Selwyn for all her hard work with the Matching Task Group
* Open for questions
  + Discussion on the issues around adoption allowances – some adopters feel it is difficult to ask for it up front

**Racial Disparity Task Group**

* Krish Kandiah presented the update to the group
  + The group is working towards a report – dependent on feedback from the DfE
  + Krish spoke to the group about the three main aims of the task group
    - Recruiting Black Adopters
      * The group held a discussion this week with guest speakers from the USA
    - Rebuilding Trust
      * Working on more diverse panels
      * Workforce diversity programmes - DfE
    - Resourcing Transracial Adoption
  + Issues around racial disparity in adoption seem to mirror issues around racial disparity in special guardianship
    - Keen to pursue soon
* Open for questions
  + The group discussed unconscious bias in adoption and the barriers faced by adopters who are black, have mixed ethnicities, are single or LGBTQ+
    - Some adopters are seen as more risky
    - Confidence around adopting within one’s own race
    - People higher up in the management structure are unaware of the unconscious bias taking place in people’s home.
    - Recruiting black adopters, deeming them suitable and then not seeing them as ‘good enough’ – unconscious bias issue

1. **New Task Group**

* Krish gave an overview of the plan for a new task group
  + Focus of the new task group will be around maintaining family links
  + Looking at family relationships and contact
  + Coming up with best practice to meet the judiciary halfway
  + The adopter reference group and eventually the adoptee reference group will feed into and inform this group
* Open for discussion
  + Members reflected on the need for exploration in this area as this is a current issue for many adopted families, birth families and adopted people
  + Creating a therapeutically beneficial interaction for everyone involved
  + It was suggested that the task group consider the care review and their recommendations as they form and find their specific areas of focus
  + Sue Armstrong-Brown spoke about the experience of contact for adoptive families
    - Vast majority of adoptive parents are open to contact – more than those who have it set up
    - Unsupported contact initiated either by the birth family or the child as the child grows older – this can be beneficial but for some this can be deeply damaging
    - Better planning and support around contact is needed – starting it earlier and doing more life story work
  + Language is important – not just about contact, it’s about relationships
  + Preparation of adopters – preparing them to understand the importance of contact and supporting adopters with direct contact
  + Support for birth families
  + VAAs are getting an increasing number of calls for support around this – it is a valid issue that is worth exploring
  + Possible point to link with the residential and foster care system as they need to deal with these issues too
  + The group discussed the nuances of contact in a special guardianship context – there are differences but opportunities for cross-learning. Makes sense to focus on adoption now but could open up to include special guardianship at a later point

1. **AOB**

* Discussion about the work with the judiciary on the deep dive – clarifying the 26-week rule that was in the previous minutes
  + It is on the House of Lords agenda – the board will come back to this at a later point once more information is gathered
* Krish thanked the attendees for their contributions and closed the meeting

**Action Points**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Section** | **Action** | **Responsible** |
| 2 | Sarah Johal to distribute a list of RAAs who cover SG support | Sarah Johal |
| 3 | Julie Selwyn to send Kevin Yong information on the Bradford research around older children in residential care | Julie Selwyn |