Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board agenda

26th January 2021, 1.00pm – 4.00pm

Microsoft Teams

**Agenda:**

1. **1.00pm** - **Networking with Krish**
* Krish will be on the call early for an informal virtual coffee and meet and greet before the meeting starts
1. **2.00pm – Welcome and introduction from Krish***(Krish Kandiah)*
* Formal introduction from Krish with a discussion about the Board going forward
1. **2.30pm –****DfE Updates***(Kevin Woods)*

1. **2.45pm – Data update***(Louise Jelks)*

* Q2 preliminary analysis

1. **2.50pm – RAA update and evaluation –**(*Shelagh Mitchell - RAA update, Ecorys – RAA evaluation)*
* RAA working groups
* Recruitment campaign
* National Adoption Week
* RAA evaluation and slides have been circulated to read prior to the meeting

1. **3.05 pm – Post 16 support and Pupil Premium Plus***(Chris Walton DfE)*

1. **3.35pm – Special Guardian Reference Group***(Krish Kandiah)*
* Update

1. **3.45pm –Racial Disparity Task and Finish Group (***Krish Kandiah)*
* A document has been sent round to read. This is a working draft, which we will discuss at the meeting
1. **3.55pm – AOB** (*Krish Kandiah*)
* National Recruitment Strategy draft document  (*Maggie Jones)*

**Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board Minutes**

26th January 2021, 1:00pm – 4:00pm

**Chair**

Krish Kandiah

**Members attending:**

* Edwina Grant - Chair of the ADCS HCAN committee
* Lucy Peake – Grandparents Plus
* Maggie Jones – CVAA
* Shelagh Mitchell – RAA rep
* Al Coates – ARG rep
* Julie Selwyn – Expert Advisor
* John Simmonds - CoramBAAF
* Cllr Susie Charles - LGA
* Justice Frances Judd – Judicial Observer
* Cathy Ashley – Family Rights group
* Sue Armstrong-Brown – Adoption UK
* Fran Oram - Department for Education

**Also attending:**

* Louise Smith – LGA
* Jan Fishwick – VAA Vice Chair
* Esther Kavanagh-Dixon - ADCS
* James Ronicle – Ecorys, available to take questions on item 5 - will be joining for that item only
* Maura Lantrua – Department for Education, item 5
* Chris Walton – Department for Education, presenting on item 6
* Rob Shearer - Department for Education
* Sam Mercadante - CVAA
* Kevin Woods - Department for Education
* Anna Wales - Department for Education
* Nicola Doyle - Department for Education
* Cheryl Duke - Department for Education
* John Myers - Department for Education
* Kevin Yong - Secretariat, Coram-i
* Louise Jelks - Secretariat, Coram-i
* Reema Sodha - Secretariat, Coram-i
* Kelly Kaye - Secretariat, Coram-i
* Xia Bury – Secretariat, Coram-i

Apologies: Teresa Williams, Cafcass

1. **Welcome and introduction from Krish Kandiah**

Krish welcomed attendees and thanked them for joining. Krish introduced himself as the new chair.

**Primary goal of the board established: How can we best serve the needs of vulnerable children?**

Krish wants to ensure that the best interests of children remains the primary focus for the Board throughout all discussions and work that the Board undertakes.

Krish set out what he thought are the Board’s values:

* 1. Visionary and practical
	2. Bold and humble
	3. Inclusive and agile

Board discussed the opening statement and the following points were made:

* There was a discussion surrounding the Children’s social care review and how the board could feed into it. Josh MacAlister (Chair of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care) has already requested a meeting with Krish. It was agreed that Board will look at the best way they can serve the care review without being slowed down by it. It is a priority of the Board to focus on the here and now and the many issues currently affecting children.
* It was agreed that there are overlaps in style and intent between ASGLB vision and the plans Josh MacAlister has for the care review, however the Board’s primary aim is to drive improvements in the system as it exists currently. Board needs to act with urgency and pace.
* Covid-19 has inspired innovative ideas in the sector
* There are a maelstrom of different priorities competing in adoption and SG and the best interest of the child isn’t always prioritised. It is felt that finding placements for children sometimes takes precedent over the importance of those placements being successful afterwards, and ensuring ongoing support measures are in place.
* Foster care is designed to end at 18 or 21 but ongoing support should be life long, and we need to see genuine permanency options for all children.

ASGLB Structure

A new structure was suggested by Krish to ensure the Board could be practical in achieving goals, with Task Groups driving the work of the Board. The following groups were suggested:

Task Groups

* Racial Disparity
* Special Guardianship
* Support
* Adopter Numbers
* Innovation

These would be informed by the views of those affected through various reference groups :

* Adopter
* Special Guardians
* Young People
* Birth Parents
* Social Workers

Board members are able to select which task groups they would like to sit on. The task groups allow more time for deeper discussions and to set practical aims.

1. **DfE Updates**

Kevin Woods provided an update from the DfE.

* Departmental spending allocation are underway and priorities are being set.
* Adoption is a key priority. DfE has a manifesto commitment and the secretary of state is interested.
* ASF will continue and DfE discussions continue as to what the budget will be for that.
* Fortnightly meetings are being held with RAA leaders and VAA leads to keep on top of what is happening on the ground during the latest Covid lockdown.
* Main challenges fed back to DfE are:
	+ Court delays
	+ Increasingly difficult to get health assessments due to GP’s focus on Covid-19 vaccine distribution
* DfE have made case to prioritise adopters, foster carers, special guardians and kinship carers for the vaccine, but recognised there were also lots of bids around key workers
* Adoption health checks could continue to be done for adopters in stage 2 rather than stage 1 and DfE were looking at continuing this flexibility post March under new Covid regulations
* Funding was given to key voluntary sector groups in Covid-19 crisis and DfE have secured additional funding from the government’s Covid-19 charity fund.
* A new adoption sub group of the public law working group has been set up. It’s a judge-led group looking at legal processes around adoption and what reforms or changes are necessary to make it more efficient and fit for purpose. DfE will keep the board updated on the sub group’s progress. Justice Judd is chair of this group.
* Minister met a number of important groups recently and had some great discussions.
* Minister met AUK to discuss their barometer report. Foetal Alcohol syndrome was discussed as an issue and will be followed up
	+ Met a group of adopted young people to directly hear concerns
	+ Met CVAA to talk about their perspective on the future of adoption and how to drive change

**Question Raised for DfE**

**Question:** Could the DfE provide further guidance on early permanence placements at this time? It’s been expressed that some social workers feel they cannot share a child’s information with adopters until it has gone to court. However, due to court delays some children in placements have been waiting a long time without having that information passed on.

DfE responded that they will raise this with the RAA group to see if this is a nationwide or regional issue and will discuss how this can be solved.

**Question:** John Simmonds commented that great work had been done surrounding the processes for adopted children to retain their NHS numbers and asked if the DfE would now tackle the issue surrounding the NHS databases retaining children’s information?

DfE responded that they will continue to work on this process and work on procedures within the health sector.

**DfE plan of potential actions to reverse fall in permanence order**

There was a discussion about potential action to reverse the fall in permanence order numbers.

**Potential actions for ASGLB**

* Chair to discuss and work with regional boards on trends of adoption and SGO numbers.
* Consider whether a programme of practice sharing workshops to local authority ADMs to learn from and spread existing good practice in permanency decision-making, would make a difference.
* Chair to hold discussions with President of the Family Division and Cafcass, about raising priority of adoption and SGO decisions.
* Continue to proactively monitor adopter sufficiency, particularly for children who wait the longest and take action to address potential shortfalls where necessary.
* Encourage LAs and courts to take a more reflective approach to permanence decision making, working with their local courts to review cases and share outcomes.

**Our asks of wider sector (RAAs, Judiciary and Cafcass, Health)**

* Working with RAA leaders to focus on barriers and improving system. Particularly on reducing timeliness for children waiting for adoption, by increasing recruitment and identifying and reducing barriers in the assessment and approval process.
* Courts to ensure that care proceedings conclude and adoption order hearings continue to be heard. Longer term courts to drive improvements through the public law working group adoption sub-group. Identify how to streamline processes so cases can be heard and concluded more quickly.
* Provide evidence of any issues to DHSC on the status of medicals for potential adopters in the health system during vaccine rollout.

Other suggestions are being actively considered by DfE and the board chair.

**The Board provided the following thoughts and comments:**

* There is potential to look at where local authorities are doing innovative work around the route to SG and family and friends foster care. West Yorkshire and Bromley in particular are looking at how they can shape a long term offer including financial support which is critical for people who could move from foster carers to special guardians. If we remove the financial barrier and implement long term support for them to rely on it could be transformational.
* We could benefit from a deep dive into the matching process and look at why we have both children and adopters waiting. It would be good to explore if there are things that could be worked on collaboratively to improve the matching process.
* It would be good to explore care planning with RAA leaders and those who work in children’s service. It relies both on what is set out in law but also individual’s confidence and expertise. Has care planning developed since the introduction of RAA’s?
* IRO’s still have responsibility to ensure care plans are being acted upon.
* Special guardianship and legal aid – We need to recognise how difficult it is for family members involved in remote court hearings. These are often by phone, families often not represented and not understanding what plan is being made leading to an inadequate support plan in the process. This needs to be recognised in order to improve the system.
1. **Data update**

Louise Jelks gave an update on data:

* Q2 data was published in January and had 100% return rate.
* Q2 is showing impact of covid-19, less children coming into and moving through adoption process.
* 52% of children waiting to be placed for adoption have been waiting 18 months or more
* More SGOs were granted than AOs.
* The biggest group of children to have a SGO granted were white, under 5 and single.
* Children with harder to place characteristics continue to wait longest and are least likely to be adopted.
* Number of people registering to adopt has increased.
* Number of approved adopters has increased but figures show less children have been placed with adopters.
* Wait has increased for both children and adopters.
* The number of approved adopters waiting has increased. Of the 1910 waiting, 300 (19%) have been waiting to be matched with a child for more than 12 months and 190 (10%) have been waiting more than 18 months – why they aren’t being matched and how likely they are to be matched in the future?
* SG data – looking at opening discussion through data reference group later this year to find out what data is easily accessible for us to collect.
* Q3 data collection has been commissioned this month – deadline 1st Feb – expecting figures to decrease due to lockdown.
* As part of Q4 data we will ask, where adopters are waiting over 12 months, for the agency to provide a reason as to why they are waiting so long

The group discussed the data and the following comments were made:

* The number of children in care is at highest level since 1985. We shouldn’t presume it’s the right or wrong number as it’s about what is right for the child. There are a significant number of children who go into kinship care in adolescence that are less likely to be in the looked after system and we need to be mindful of this when looking at the numbers being reported for kinship placements.
* Since pandemic started we’ve seen lower referral numbers particularly during lockdown periods.
* Local authorities are advising DfE that the referrals they are receiving are more complex.
* The numbers of children entering and leaving care are lower, despite seeing increases in drivers which is a cause for concern.
* ADCS members have reported an increase in the level of complex cases and also families that are becoming newly vulnerable. Families are experiencing challenges not faced before and are needing more support and help from local authorities. The needs of families already known to the system are increasing.
* We should be reporting on special guardianship data also.

**Questions raised:**

**Question:** Number of children coming into care was expected to be higher due to current situation however data shows numbers are decreasing. Can you shed any light on this situation? It’s surprising to see number of children going into care decreasing whilst drivers are going up.

Kevin Yong responded that this data relates to under 5’s coming into care and has been voluntarily provided by around half of the LAs. Data looks to see if there is a shift in the proportion of those children going on to have adoption plans. Data only covers until the end of September. There was a drop in numbers at the back half of last academic year with the expectation we would see an increase when schools reopened in September, but the post September period isn’t covered in this set of data.

**Question:** To what extent can we attribute the slowing timeliness to Covid-19? Are these delays being tackled? Are we confident in those measures?

**Question:** It’s great we have an increasing number of prospective adopters, do we anticipate that these families will help to redress the balance of children being adopted?

There is a danger that the pool of waiting adopters could look like a mismatch for the children who are waiting. The recruitment strategy will target recruitment of potential adopters who are suitable matches for those children already waiting.

Some RASGLBs are also looking at this where there is more time to examine data and how we can act upon it and address this issue.

Adoption UK can run discussions with prospective adopter groups to see if they have been offered unsuitable matches. Current perception is that they are simply waiting

1. **RAA update and evaluation**

Shelagh Mitchell provided update on RAA progress.

RAA leaders now work closely together and share best practice. As a group they need to figure out the best way to feed this information back to the board.

Recruitment strategy is a cross sector working group.

Care planning doesn’t sit with RAAs but the RAAs are closely aligned with local authorities. RAA leaders are working on improving the relationship with LAs in their regions.

RAA leaders are looking at how they can align adoption and fostering more closely so the matching criteria for adoption should be replicated in long term fostering.

**Questions raised:**

**Question:** How many RAAs are case holding for children?

We don’t know the exact figure but it is low and a lot more are not case holding than are.

**Question:** How is learning being shared between RAAs to improve outcomes?

RAAs are sharing best practice and working models. Different regions are going live at different times so they are able to learn from others who are more mature and share processes.

**James Ronicle provided an update on the evaluation of the regional adoption agencies:**

**Main findings – Early Improvements**

* **Timeliness**: Live RAAs show 14 day reductions in time to placement for all children (180 days compared to 194 days in non-live RAAs).​
	+ Also show a 35 day reduction in average time to place a 'harder to place' child (from eight months in non-live RAAs to seven months in live RAAs).​
* **Adoption support**: RAAs are taking a more strategic approach to commissioning & delivery, improved early intervention & universal offers are embedded more widely, additional specialist support is offered in-house. ​
	+ Benefits of economies of scale allowing for innovative practice to develop**.​**
	+ Approaches to addressing & managing high demand are emerging.

**Main findings – Still early days**

* **Sufficiency:** Qualitative evidence shows more children placed within area through enhanced tracking & greater consideration of early permanence (especially FfA)​
	+ No statistically significant effect on sufficiency since 2015 (no. with placement order has been decreasing (aside from 2019).
* **Understanding which models are more or less effective**: Increasing variation and more ‘partnership’ approaches in newer RAAs using core features more flexibly. ​
	+ Wave 3 is exploring the relative importance of RAA core elements, which appear to be more important than the model ‘type’ at meeting the aims of regionalisation.

**Main Findings – Positive Signs**

* **Adopter experience**: On a 0 -10 scale, 83% of prospective adopters who completed preparation group surveys felt their expectations of the training had been met or exceeded.​
* Commitment to adopting a child rose from 77% pre-training to 92% after training.​
* Social workers were praised for their humour, warmth, skills, honesty and passion for the children they care for.
* Significant change in knowledge in most adoption related areas after training, particularly on the impact of abuse/ trauma on child development. ​
* Attitudes to communicative openness did shift e.g. openness to birth family contact, talking with the child about their history and adoption and openness to staying in touch with the agency. ​
* However, not much change in matching preferences.​
* The majority of participants interviewed had positive experiences of assessment.
1. **Post 16 support and Pupil Premium Plus**

Chris Walton from DfE provided an update on post 16 support and Pupil Premium Plus.

Pupil premium plus for previously looked after children

* Currently £2345 per eligible child and paid directly to child’s school and is managed by the school. It isn’t a personal budget for the child but overall funding to support schools to help eligible children to achieve educationally.
* Funding isn’t ring fenced to allow schools the flexibility to use the funding as they see fit.
* Ofsted inspections are now referencing pupil premium plus in reports to show how the funding is being used to support looked after and previously looked after children.
* Schools maintained by local authority must publish their strategy for using pupil premium plus. Recommendations are being made that colleges, free schools and academies do the same.
* No legal requirement for schools to report directly to parents on how pupil premium plus is being used but as a matter of good practice we encourage strong engagement between schools designated teacher and parents on how it is being used.
* Guidance for pupil premium plus has recently been revised and states that a school’s designated teacher should encourage parents and guardians to be involved in deciding how pupil premium plus is used to support their child, and should be the main contact for queries about its use.

**Eligibility for pupil premium plus**

People premium plus for previously looked after children is paid to and managed by the school and is based on number of allocations recorded in the October census. If the child isn’t included in the census they won’t attract the funding.

**Children who aren’t currently eligible:**

* Children adopted from abroad don’t currently attract premium plus but DfE are actively working on this.
* Children who are home educated or in independent schools.
* Post 16 looked after and previously looked after children.

A Pilot has been funded for pupil premium plus for post 16 looked after children and care leavers and DfE will take this forward at the earliest opportunity to build an evidence support for the wider roll out of this funding.

Chris Walton shared the statistics for the take-up rate of pupil premium plus for previously looked-after children by cohort, primary and secondary school.



**Questions raised:**

**Question:** Do you have any insight as to why we are getting a low take up around eligibility? Is it awareness within schools or parents and carers?

It is dependent on parents, guardians and carers declaring the child’s status. DfE guidance states that the designated teacher should be actively promoting the entitlements that these children are entitled too but it is a two way street.

Some parents and carers choose not to disclose a child’s status at secondary school as they are worried about confidentiality. Some parents and carers aren’t aware that they have to declare again when moving schools.

**Question:** It appears that the funding stopping at 16yrs is accepted. What can we do as a leadership board to help roll put the next phase of rolling it out for all in post 16 education?

The Board should keep putting pressure on the department and government. Help to build an evidence base to support the argument.

From the DfE perspective the next steps are to build the evidence base of how funding can be used effectively across schools to support whole cohorts of children. We need to highlight the need for it and highlight how it is already being used effectively.

1. **Special Guardian Reference Group**

Lucy Peake provided an update on the special guardian reference group.

A working group have been meeting since last board meeting to take forward ideas of what we can do to establish SGRG.

* Plan is to recruit up to 15 special guardians through FRG, Coram and Grandparents Plus.
* Group will represent the diversity in SG.
* Group will meet 2 days before away day to feed into board plans and also to define plans for reference group.
* Define plans for reference group.
* Aim is to have the reference group up and running before next board meeting.

Lucy will report back from the group at leadership away day.

Krish to meet with initial SGRG before the away day.

1. **Racial Disparity Task and Finish Group**

John Simmonds provided an update on the Racial Disparity Task and Finish Group.

* Experienced delays in setting up task group due to change in chair and how the task group should be formed, particularly in terms of representation.
* Significant amount of published material about issues.
* There are significant issues for children from BAME backgrounds and children with harder to place characteristics

Now there is a commitment to the task and finish group going ahead, our next steps are to produce an action plan of how we can practically address these issues.

The action plan includes:

* increasing the diversity of the current reference groups.
* Setting out a timetable of what we can do between now and black history month.

By October produce a report on what practical changes need to be made in this sector to ensure more children from BAME backgrounds reach permanency through adoption if that is their plan.A timeline of activity has already been produced.

**Questions raised:**

**Question:** Has the membership of the task group already been determined? How are we going to build the right membership of the group?

Membership has not been determined. We should be drawing in expertise from outside of the Board and are open to suggestions for members. This is about BAME adoption, we want to see care experienced voice, BME and adopter’s voice represented.

**Question:** Would you consider having a different task group looking at experiences of BAME children in special guardian placements?

We are concerned with racial disparity across the board and a high majority of kinship carers are from BAME backgrounds. At the upcoming awayday we will decide what to prioritise with respect to the special guardianship task group.

**Krish requested comments regarding suggested timeline from board members by Monday 1st Feb.**

1. **AOB**

The final draft of the 3-year national adopter recruitment strategy has been circulated and Board members’ input and thoughts on it are requested.

ACTION: Board members to send their thoughts before the next board meeting to Maggie to collate and feedback to the steering group

The next Adoption Barometer survey is out now and requested board members to circulate the survey. Aiming to publish results in June.

Nicola Doyle is retiring from DfE and the Board thanked her on her achievements.

* Jan Fishwick is retiring too. The Board thanked her on her achievements.
* Awayday papers will be circulated shorty for input from board.