Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

10:00-11:30, 24th June, Microsoft Teams

Attendees:

* Andrew Christie, Chair of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board
* Cllr Susie Charles - LGA
* Cathy Ashley – Family Rights Group
* Edwina Grant - Chair of the ADCS HCAN committee
* Jan Fishwick – VAA Rep
* John Simmonds – CoramBAAF
* Lucy Peake – Grandparents Plus
* Maggie Jones – CVAA
* Shelagh Mitchell - Group Manager Adoption East Midlands RAA / RAA Leaders Rep
* Anita Hart – Representing the ARG
* Teresa Williams – CAFCASS
* Julie Selwyn – Expert Advisor
* Sue Armstrong Brown – Adoption UK

Others:

* Sam Mercadante - CVAA
* Esther Kavanagh-Dixon – ADCS
* Lord Justice Baker – Judicial Representative standing in for Lady Justice Judd
* 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
* Christina Bankes - Department for Education
* Katy Weeks - Department for Education
* Fran Oram – Department for Education
* Anna Wales - Department for Education
* Isobel Howlett - Department for Education
* Fatima Ali - Department for Education

Apologies:

* Justice Frances Judd – Judicial Observer

1. Welcome and introductions

Andrew Christie thanked all the attendees for joining the call, and gave an explanation for the purpose of the meeting. This is an additional meeting arranged at the request of Board members specifically to address issues that have arisen as a result of the response to the Covid-19 crisis.

1. DfE Update

Kevin Woods gave an update on the Department for Education’s (DfE) response to the Coronavirus outbreak. The ASF Covid-19 scheme has so far spent £5.8 million to support families. The DfE is aiming to evaluate the scheme to inform future policy discussions, and asked the ASGLB members share any information they’ve been gathering on the scheme. The DfE has also been holding weekly meetings with RAA leaders.

Another important issue the DfE is working on is the return to schools, and the impact that home learning has had on children. There have been meetings set up between RAA leaders and Virtual School Heads (VSH) to monitor this.

On the issue of courts, the DfE has been discussing how to ensure that the court process continues, and there are concerns that care proceedings are being adjourned. The latest guidance from the President has been very helpful and there has been a strong ongoing dialogue between him and the DfE.

The DfE also has weekly meetings with CVAA and are currently funding 3 VAAs, with the hope of funding all VAAs that need assistance through July.

Finally, there are plans to hold a UK-US summit discussing adoption issues with the Trump administration, as they are interested in the ASF scheme. Once it has been decided what the format of the summit will be, ASGLB members will be informed.

Judge Baker gave his view on the activity of the courts. Some of his observations were:

* There is a huge backlog in cases across all jurisdictions because of the closing of courts. They’ve managed to have remote hearings, but there is a limit on the number of cases that can be held remotely.
* More courts are opening, and the hope is that the 1 meter social distancing change will allow further openings and create a greater ability to hold hearings.
* Hybrid hearings are being introduced where some still attend remotely but they have faced lots of technical difficulties. Many are hoping that as more get used to remote hearings the use of them can be expanded. However, many vulnerable parties still find them very challenging.
* Another strategy being considered is to extend court hearings, but this would also have big implications.
* In terms of adoption, the number of adoption applications and orders have fallen significantly, and the numbers of placement orders will likely be reduced.

Cathy Ashley raised concerns about the use of freedoms and flexibilities that are being used. Kevin Woods responded that very few of the flexibilities are being used, and that due to concerns about local outbreaks, the DfE wants them to remain in place. However, this will be reviewed at the end of July.

John Simmons queried about the number of ASF applications being used to aid Special Guardians. Kevin Woods informed the group that while he doesn’t have exact numbers, more of the ASF Covid-19 scheme is being used for Special Guardians than the usual ASF scheme, and the DfE are hoping to learn from this so that more Special Guardians are able to access the usual ASF scheme. RAAs have been coordinating ASF bids.

Andrew Christie added that it’s clear that through this there has been good local learning, but in terms of how adopters and Special Guardians get information, some RAAs have better connectivity with their adopter and special guardian community then others and there is still work to be done.

1. Data Update

Louise Jelks gave the board a brief update on the data. Q4 data collection was delayed due to Coronavirus, and the new deadline is 7 August, the same time as the 903 returns. The Q1 collection will be done as part of the Q2 collection, and the impact of coronavirus will be reflected in the Q1 and Q2 data. Additionally, in response to Black Lives Matter, the secretariat produced a paper looking at children waiting and adopters waiting based on ethnic background, which found that BAME children and adopters both wait longer.

* Board members agreed to hold a more substantive discussion relating to Black Lives Matter at the next Board meeting.

In terms of the data work stream, Kevin Yong has drafted a data model and circulated for comment and input, once the feedback is received the model will be revised and there will be an update at the July meeting.

Some points of discussion were:

* The DfE is looking at bringing together data front Cafcass, MoJ, and the DfE to be able to have a comprehensive look at what is going on, and will circulate among board members in confidence.
* Andrew Christie felt that although the results of the paper on BAME children and adopters were unsurprising, the issue needed more substantive discussion.
* John Simmonds felt that the issue is being proactively discussed in recruitment campaign questions about being proactive in terms of matching.
* Cathy Ashley also felt that the board should examine the numbers of children from some backgrounds ending up in the care system, pointing to the number of black children in kinship care. It’s important to look at how ethnicity plays out in the wider system.

**Action: Shelagh to raise at the RAA leaders group the question of transracial matching and feedback at the July board meeting**

**Action: Sue Armstrong Brown to send AUK adoption barometer to Secretariat for circulation**

1. RAA Update

Shelagh Mitchell gave the board an update on the work of the RAA leaders group. The recruitment campaign was put on hold due to covid-19, and the group is discussing plans to have it live from September but slightly different from the original intentions. In discussions with Local authorities, it is clear that they are anticipating a surge in demand. RAAs have been reporting seeing delays in placement orders, and expect there to be a level of exhaustion among social workers, resulting in a rise in workers taking leave. In terms of the flexibilities, RAAs only report using it as needed on adoption panels. There have been virtual visits, but due to lockdown easing face to face visits may be able to start again.

The work streams of the RAA leaders group has fallen into 5 strands: assessment, matching, transition, support and social workers. They are collecting best practice from all areas and are hoping to share the work soon.

RAAs have reported that although they are not seeing more families coming forward for aid, those who were already engaged with RAAs and LAs have a higher level of need. The provision of the ASF Covid-19 scheme has been very useful. Finally, there hasn’t been a dip in recruitment but there have been delays, particularly for GP medical assessments.

Some comments from board members were:

* John Simmonds was concerned about the lack of data. The sector often relies on hearing about local experience but there is a lack of data and the science that is needed to underpin what we learn.
* The ARG discussed that there is a lack of communication on a local level. Members have been working within their channels to support the RAAs’ messages.
* It’s good that RAAs and LAs are working together to get help for Special Guardians but it would be good for RAAs and VAAs to work together as well, and for everyone to be aware of what extra resources there are.

1. Discussion on key issues facing adoption and special guardianship

Members discussed how Coronavirus has effected adoption and special guardianship. Some key points were:

* Sue Armstrong Brown informed the board that AUK believes there has been an increase in disruptions. They have measured increased pressure in half of adopted families. 54% are experiencing anxiety. There are also increased mental health issues in children, with a third experiencing child to parent violence. There is an expected increase in pressure on vulnerable families and the sector needs to plan for that. The most vulnerable groups have been: single adopters, families with sibling groups, and families where the relationship between parents has been suffering.
* Lucy Peake observed that in special guardians, because they are likely to be older, poorer and in worse health, they have faced a unique set of challenges. Grandparents Plus has been working with kinship carers from BAME communities who have also faced the crisis in a different way. At the beginning of the crisis there was high fear of the virus and dying from it among carers. Many children in special guardians who were receiving therapy lost access to those services abruptly. There has also been an increase in child to carer violence, starting in around mid-April. Similarly, there are concerns around how to support children and carers as they go back to school. Grandparents Plus has been asking for more financial support for SG families.
* Coronavirus has exposed that universal support for vulnerable families is patchy. There was a suggestion that Pupil Premium Plus could be used for support during return to school.
* There are concerns about the suggestion of punitive measures to enforce social distancing in schools as this could result in more exclusions. The DfE could also look at mixed return and blended education.
* Many placements have been delayed because of an inability to do a final contact meeting.
* In Wales, potential adopters have been given a letter to submit to GPs to explain the assessment is under a time constraint, and that could be useful practice in England as well.
* AUK has produced a report showing higher dropout rates for further education among adopted students and asked that the level of support needed for higher education be considered. We could take this pause point to reset how much support adopted children can get.
* Lucy Peake asked that kinship carers be considered as a priority group for a vaccine.

Andrew Christie thanked the attendees for making the call, and reminded the group that there would be another meeting in July.

**Action:** Andrew to write to Ministers on implementing legal aid for special guardianship cases