Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

11:00-14:00, 15th October 2019, 2.10 Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, SW1P 3BT

Attendees

Andrew Christie Chair

Lucy Peake Grandparents Plus

Julie Selwyn Expert Advisor

Cathy Ashley Kinship Care Alliance

Charlotte Ramsden ADCS

Sarah Caton ADCS

Susie Charles LGA

Mark Owers Advisor to Board

Maggie Jones CVAA

Jan Fishwick CVAA

Teresa Williams Cafcass

Others:

Louise Smith LGA

Sophie Langdale DfE

Katy Weeks DfE

Kevin Woods DfE

Nicola Doyle DfE

Andrew Baxter DfE

Kathryn Lewis DfE

Lynsey Burridge NAVSH

Sam Mercadante CVAA

Hugh Thornberry Advisor to Board

Kevin Yong CSC Secretariat

Louise Jelks CSC Secretariat

Rae Buttenwieser CSC Secretariat

Kelly Kaye CSC Secretariat

Apologies

Rachel Dickinson ADCS

1. Welcome, introductions and matters arising

* This meeting will be Mark Owers last meeting as a member of the Board. Andrew Christie congratulated him on his appointment as DCS in Jersey and thanked him for his contributions to the Board.
* Andrew Christie noted amendments to the last meetings minutes on behalf of Sue Armstrong-Brown and Susie Charles.
* Andrew Christie also reviewed the action log – update attached.
* Andrew Christie proposed that Regional Chairs be provided with a briefing following this meeting to raise at the next regional board meetings. It was agreed that the briefing should also be sent to sponsors.
* Charlotte Ramsden will be stepping down as a regional sponsor for the North East as she feels she does not have the capacity for the position. The Secretariat and Andrew Christie will work together to find a replacement.
* Steve Kay, the regional chair for Yorkshire and Humber, has stepped down but his replacement has not yet been identified.
* In relation to the Forward Look there was a request for a future Board to cover the continuation of the Adoption Support Fund and the scope of legal aid and asked whether the DfE had any information on that. The Department is now going through the process of deciding how the budget agreed for 2020/21 will be allocated and will let the Board know when a decision has been made. The Government cannot yet comment on legal aid.
* Members requested a more detailed discussion on the impact of Brexit and enquired when the Board might table that conversation.
  + In the DfE there is a team within both the Department and the CSC team working on the impact that Brexit could have on children, services, and families. That work is ongoing and aligned with the Government, the timing of which is unclear but the lead on that can be invited to the next meeting if members require.
  + Relatedly, the previous Judicial Observer to the Board was involved in work related to Brexit. The President is trying to identify a new judicial observer for the group.
  + CVAA members need to prepare, but need more communication from the Department on preparation. ADCS has not discussed preparation and there is a lot of uncertainty around what will happen. There was a request that when the group discusses Brexit, it would be helpful to have an idea of the amount of cases we are talking about that would be affected by this. There is a need to understand assessments of families abroad in terms of Special Guardianships, and step parent adoptions. In the South West, step parent adoptions increasingly involve foreign parents.
  + Members felt that because there is so much uncertainty, the focus should be on current proceedings as there is not the capacity to focus on upcoming cases.
  + Cafcass can look at data around placements abroad, but don’t have data on adoptees.
  + The CSC team within the DfE can check how strong ties are between the Department and the Ministry for Justice, and see what can be circulated.
  + Charlotte Ramsden felt that a ministerial letter could be helpful.
  + Members agreed that this should be a substantive item at the next meeting.

**Action 1: Secretariat to add an agenda item in the January 2020 meeting about Brexit.**

1. Review of the first year of the VSH

Andrew Christie welcomed Andrew Baxter from the DfE and Lynsey Burridge from NAVSH to the meeting. The purpose of the discussion is to be a stock take of the first year of the new responsibilities for VSHs, as it is a topic that has been high on the list of the groups concerns and is connected to the Modernising Permanence work.

Andrew Baxter gave an overview of the paper that he wrote for the Board. He had three important updates: (1) the review has been reflective of how the work of the VS influences wider work in the DfE, the most important of this is the Timpson review which made a series of recommendations that were accepted by the Department. (2) The numbers of adopted children being excluded was similar to the numbers for looked after children, but levels were much higher for children in Special Guardianships, which needs to be considered in guidance. (3) There is an ongoing need for people to be registered on the school census and it is important that there is a continued push on this issue, especially as schools miss out on allocated money as well. (4) There is an ongoing concern about commitment around priority admissions

Lynsey Burridge spoke about the headlines from the report. 93% of respondents felt positively, but the main concern that people have is about accessing the money. Another headline is that expectations of VSHs need to be managed, they have a stronger focus on guidance rather than casework.

* 70% of people stated that they intended to use the VSH funding for a psychologist or teacher to act as an advisor for previously looked after children.
* Focus of many of these positions would be on training for schools and social workers, and would be an extension of work being done on attachment and trauma training.
* Uncertainty about the longevity of the funding has been a major barrier to longer term planning.
* Pupil Premium did come up, many VSHs want the funding, and it is part of a balancing act between case management and guidance.

The Board made the following comments:

* The feeling is that VSHs are very positive roles that are making a difference and that the expansion of the remit was welcome. However there is some nervousness about capacity and identifying children due to self-declaration. A big question is how we best use the role and make sure people are aware without opening the flood gates of expectations.
* Only 6% of authorities said they were pooling resources in RAAs.
* Andrew Christie commented that some of this is about the role of the designated teacher, and the involvement of school governors. There are hopes that the new Ofsted framework will make a difference, and there’s wider children-in-need work that needs to be done as well as a greater understanding about effective interventions.
* There is a lack of understanding about the experiences of children in Special Guardianships in schools. For Pupil Premium Plus, there needs to be more discussions of best practice.
* Lynsey Burridge is meeting with Matthew Brazier from Ofsted to discuss training. In terms of Pupil Premium, the Education Endowment Foundation has a toolkit on evidence-based use of Pupil Premium Plus. They are also creating a toolkit specifically for looked after children.
* There was a question about whether enough is being done to support carers as a cohort. It would be interesting to hear about the adopter perspective, but also keep in mind that SG awareness is very low. A big issue is that the narrative is framed around adoption.
* Andrew Baxter commented that the statistics on coverage could be skewed between adoption and SG, and so it could be useful to look at the coverage beneath that as there might be a difference.
* There is an issue that many Special Guardians don’t know that the child was previously looked after and so they are not alert to whether these funds will apply.
* Another issue is the transition from primary school to secondary school, and a need for greater engagement with secondary schools.
* It was important to recognise that in terms of SG children, they should be able to get funding whether or not they were in care because they’re still vulnerable. Good inclusive schools should have a package around SG children whether or not they were in care.
* It would be good to see an amalgamation on key messages on what’s been effective. The Right Balance for Families projects looked at the role of mentoring for adopted and SG children. It would be very helpful to have a document that pulls together information on innovative projects to see what’s common across projects that are working.
* More key themes from the VSH review:
  + There is an issue of what examples of best practice there are.
  + There is a dilemma in the system, some VSH start with model of overview while some develop a case management model.
  + There are opportunities for outreach and engagement. Kinship Carers groups and RAA leaders groups will follow up.

**Action 2: Andrew Baxter to write a document around the school census that kinship care groups can circulate.**

**Action 3: Mark Owers to discuss with the RAA leaders group how to build links with NAVSH and local VSHs to understand and spread good practice.**

1. Modernising Permanence Data workstream

Teresa Williams updated the group on the data work stream. The feedback at the last Board meeting was very helpful, and she has spoken to Kevin Yong about the timing for the workshops which will be held at Coram. The first one will be held just before Christmas, with one more before the January meeting. There has been progress around indicators, and if need be there will be a 4th workshop to ensure SG is fully incorporated into what is developed.

The first meeting will be on 18th December and will focus on the theme of permanency planning. The next two are provisionally planned for the 17th and 31st January.

It would be very helpful to have ASGLB membership at these meetings beyond just Teresa Williams, and regional chairs will also be invited.

Andrew Christie recognised that there can’t be new burdens on agencies when it comes to data.

1. Kinship Care Week Update

Lucy Peake thanked all those who got involved in Kinship Care Week and gave an update on activities. The week received no funding so the focus was on packaging what the various organisations do and making a massive noise. They received strong media coverage and the minister did a photo.

A parliamentary task force has been looking into kinship care, and a report will be released on 20th November and invitations will be sent shortly. The report will have an agreed set of recommendations, and the plan is for that to be completed by the end of the month. It would also be helpful to have involvement from the Secretary of State.

It’s important to recognise the significance of the voice of the child. Programmes like Adoptables, Adopteens and Bright Spots have been very effective at facilitating this.

Some LAs do run groups for children in Kinship Care but they can’t be made public.

**Action 4: Secretariat to add a discussion in the April 2020 meeting about Kinship Care Week in 2020.**

1. National Adoption Week

Kevin Woods summarised the event at Number 10 combining National Adoption Week and Black History Month. BAME adopter recruitment was a focal point of the discussion. The Board raised the following points:

* A question raised was to whether social workers are still looking for perfect ethnic matches.
* There is a lack of BAME representation on the Board and the ARG.
* According to statistics from Homes for Good, the black community is more willing to adopt than the white community, but many are fearful of bringing the state into their home. Social workers also have many misconceptions about the BAME community, and it is important that the regional boards and RAA leaders group ensure that social workers understand what the law says about transracial matching. It could also be helpful to have social worker training around race and recruiting BAME adopters.
* The RAA leaders group could work with other groups to create a national strategy, capture the requirements and the work that is being done already.
* In terms of the data, ADM decisions and ethnicity of children can be looked at. However a big issue is that sibling placements can have different fathers making sibling groups harder to place together. There is data collected on size of sibling groups, but none on the religion of the parents of the children.
* Additional analysis on adoption cohorts show that BAME adopters are more likely to make adoption a first choice, more likely to have a link to adoption within the family and less likely to have adoption support.
* Andrew Christie felt there was a range of issues related to recruitment, starting with understanding the data. He took the point that part of what the Board needs to be commissioning and asking is a series of questions about approval and support, and how effective it is to reach out to specific communities. The Board should add that to the list of questions put out to regions.
* There is a RAA steering group formed for recruitment and it would be helpful to come up with a 5 or 10 year plan. There’s a strategy meeting on November 12 that will have a definite focus on BAME recruitment and making broader links to the BAME community.

**Action 5: Mark Owers to share summary of action day and initial thinking of steering group with the Board.**

1. Modernising Permanence

Hugh Thornberry gave an update on the Modernising Permanence work and the two blueprints. The purpose of the blueprints is to help agencies think about the support services they provide in relation to adoption and special guardianship and identify good practice.

The Adoption Blueprint is drafted and will be shared with stakeholders to seek their views. The SG Blueprint is being developed using the same framework. It has been harder to pull together the SG Blueprint because the information it requires is harder to find and there is a lower response rate in terms of good practice. The aim is to finish the paper by the end of the month, and there is a meeting planned for 29 October to discuss how to take it forward. The difficulties with undertaking this work can inform the group on what the issues of engagement will be. The RAA leaders group has been involved, and there is a need to not just think about what it will look like online, but how to get people involved and using it.

The goal is to make it widely accessible and kept up to date, so making sure that lots of people are contributing to it is a big consideration. Other upcoming priorities for the Modernising Permanence work could be: educational support, a common unique identifier (e.g. NHS number), social work professional development and reinvigorating work that was commissioned by the Department around permanency.

The plan is to bring the Modernising Permanence steering group back together and ensure stakeholders such as ADCS, LGA and CVAA are happy with what is being produced.

The Board made the following comments:

* How SGOs are managed is very problematic. Implementation where the court makes its own motion is meant to be an aspect of flexibility. Agencies find themselves with very little time to prepare and train SGs in a way that would be unacceptable for adopters and foster carers. There needs to be more thought around the issue of children going into Special Guardianships before proper SGs have training or assessment.
* A question raised was whether the SG Blueprint should be published with so much uncertainty. The plan is for both blueprints to be finalised by January. We will ensure that everyone approves of the content and then consider the tactical question of whether the Board should progress with the Adoption Blueprint and not the SG Blueprint.
* Another thing to be considered is effort needed to maintain the blueprints so that they remain relevant. There needs to be an examination of what can be done without additional funding if that is the situation.
* A major issue is the question of what is affordable. The blueprint is intended to set out long term aspirations without knowing what resources will be available. While there’s no example of perfect practice, it’s helpful to pull together good practice from different places and give DCSs something to talk to leads about when discussion prioritisation.
* There’s huge variation in relation to pre-proceedings work and concern that there is a danger in saying that responsibility is with the Public Law Group. The ASGLB needs more judicial engagement.

Andrew Christie summarised the discussion with the following points:

* The group is recognising the immediate set of issues which needs to be addressed and there are some big tactical and strategic questions that there isn’t an answer to from this discussion.
* All stakeholders must be agreed and signed up to the material.
* The group should keep track of what is happening with the public law proceedings, and this could help make a decision in January about which package to proceed with.

1. 2018/19 Full Year Analysis

Kevin Yong summarised the data packet. The headline measures are:

* There is an ongoing fall in numbers on the children’s side, as well as a decrease in adoption orders.
* There is an ongoing trend downwards in terms of ADMS and placement orders, as well as a fall in best interest decisions.
* There is an increase of adopters in the system, particularly amongst VAAs and slightly less among LAs.
* Because of the fall in children and increase in adopters, the gap is closing but it is unclear if this will be a long term trend.

A question was raised about whether it would be possible to look at family and friends numbers, because it might help to understand how placements are being made and the regional differences around that. The LAC data would need to be analysed to determine this.

Andrew Christie noted that the decline in ADM decisions and regional variation will either be due to LA decision making or court outcomes and that both should be focusing on what is the best plan for the child and not anticipating what the court judgement will be or whether there are enough adopters available.

LAs have previously been asked about this and denied that it was happen but social workers do say it happens, so unclear what’s really going on. There needs to be better communication between local Family Justice Boards and LAs. The issue needs to be discussed with regional boards.

Analysis of the ASGLB data found a downward trend in conversions to placement orders, but not a significant one, suggesting that the whole system is recalibrating from point of best interest decisions.

Louise Jelks clarified that she was doing more detailed work on the drops in ADM and how that effects over regional changes, and will send that out to be circulated among the Board, regional boards and regional sponsors.

**Action 6: Andrew Christie to write to each regions asking what they believe is happening and causing the results.**