

Adoption Counts Adoption Panel**Adoption Panel Chairs 6 monthly report in respect of Cheshire East****(October 2019 – March 2020)****1. Introduction**

The second half of the year has been a busy one for Panel. As one of the newer chairs to Adoption Counts, I have been impressed by the overall efficiency and quality of work submitted to panel. It is evident that panel members are committed to their role and are knowledgeable and skilled in their understanding of the lifelong implications of adoption.

During this period two long standing Panel Chairs have resigned due to emerging commitments, and two new chairs have been appointed

Panel Chairs meet regularly with the Regional Director, Operational Manager and the Panel advisor to review the operation of the panel, to consider practise improvements and work closely together to support consistency of practice in all aspects of panel performance.

In between these meetings, there is very good communication between senior management and the chairs, with any queries or issues dealt with promptly and efficiently.

The panel advisor provides a very valuable conduit between the panel and the wider areas of Service. As she does not have any managerial responsibility for the cases presented, she is in a strong position to support the panel's quality assurance function and is able to raise concerns before matters are presented to panel. Having a dedicated panel advisor supports consistency across the RAA and the local authorities. When the dedicated panel advisor is not available, the role is covered by the Adoption Team Managers.

Prior to panel, the advisor works closely with the Panel Chairs to ensure that cases are in good enough order to present and to ensure that the item is regulatory complaint. It is extremely rare for there to be major concerns. This is reflection of the robustness of the pre panel quality assurance by managers and the standards the agency sets.

Administrative support to panel is highly efficient, with papers sent well in advance. The quality of draft minutes is good and are sent to chairs in a timely manner, again supporting swift decision making by Agency Decision Makers for the benefit of children and adopters.

2. Overview of panels

Before the move to virtual panels (26.03.2020) - meetings were held every two weeks on Fridays at Unity House in Salford; every three weeks on Thursdays at Etrop Court in Wythenshawe; every six weeks on Wednesdays at Etrop Court (these were moved from a Friday at the start of the year to allow p/t workers to attend more panels and to support the administrative side); every six weeks on Tuesdays, predominantly at Cledford House in Middlewich, occasionally at Etrop Court.

The frequency of panels supports the timeliness of approvals and matches. The timetabling of panel items is based on need, and therefore panel will be convened even if there is only one item to be presented.

3. Panel membership

At the end of the reporting period on 31 March there were 52 active panel members. The make-up is as follows- 3 panel chairs (one having resigned in Dec 2019 and another in Feb 20. Two new chairs were appointed and started their posts in Oct 19 and Jan 20), 21 Social worker representatives (1 is on maternity leave and another on long term sick leave), 19 Independent Members (including one vice-chair), four Medical Advisors, two Elected Member, and 3 Local Authority representatives.

The 19 Social Workers are made up of representatives of both Adoption Counts and the Local Authorities: 9 representing Adoption Counts; 2 for Cheshire East; 4 for Manchester; 5 for Salford and 1 for Stockport. The 3 Local Authority representatives are from Stockport and have a health or children and families background.

During the period October to March, resignations were received from 5 Social Workers although one returned as an independent member having moved to another agency and 2 chairs. There has been a change to one elected member following the elections. We continue to seek a diverse panel membership to reflect our population and demographics and during the reporting period have recruited four additional independent members as well as ten new Social Workers. Some further applications are yet to be processed given a delay following the current situation with Covid-19.

Adoption Counts panels strive to have panel members from varied backgrounds, life and personal experiences and whilst we have several adopters on panels and adults who were adopted, it is recognised that it would be hugely beneficial to have a birth parent who has had a child adopted.

The Agency also recognises that the panel membership should be more diverse and is actively seeking to attract a more diverse membership.

Panel member appraisal

The vast majority of appraisals were carried out during the reporting period. The themes and issues have been collated by the Agency Adviser and have been used to inform the Chairs' appraisals and further development of panels.

The way in which appraisals are held has been changed to an electronic system, with a third of Panel members invited in for a face to face discussion. All Panel members have been given the option to attend their appraisal in person. This has been done to ease the pressure on the Panel Advisor and Panel Chairs as the previous appraisal process became very lengthy and protracted given the

number of panel members and their varied availability for an additional meeting outside of panel times.

Annual panel training

Adoption Counts continues to run two Panel Development Days per calendar year. The last one took place on the 20th Nov 2020. The areas that were discussed were an update on the agency, ground rules, panel members views, the voice of the adopted adult, The voice of the child, contact, CPR tools and purpose of CPRs, feedback from a learning review, what makes a good PAR, Checks and ex-partner references, panel feedback and a joint staff and panel member session was held. There was considerable feedback from the day which was overwhelmingly positive regarding the training and the content delivered. Feedback regarding practice issues has been carefully considered and has informed the continued development of how panel is run and managed. A further panel development day was planned during the next review period (26th of April 2020) although this is to be postponed due to the current situation with Covid-19.

4. Panel Business

Cases considered by panels (October 2019 – March 2020)

Panel Business							
	No. of panels	No. of items considered	Matches	Approvals	SHOBPA	De-reg	Adopter review
Panels held at Manchester spoke	13	49	26	20	2	0	1
Panels held at Salford spoke	12	38	15	21	1	0	1
Panels held at Cheshire East spoke	4	9	5	4	0	0	0
Panels held remotely via video conference	2	7	3	3	1	0	0
Panels held at Stockport spoke	Panels are no longer held at Stockport spoke due to difficulties around securing an appropriate venue. Panels that would have been held in Stockport are now held at the Manchester spoke.						
Total	31	103	49*	48	4	0	2

*54 children matched – 44 single children and 5 sibling groups of 2

Out of the 49 matches for 54 children, 10 were fostering for adoption – which is 20% of the total matches and 19% of the children.

5. Panel scrutiny – timescales

Matches			Approvals		
A1 met	25	46%	Stage 1 met	7**	17.5 %
A1 not met	29	54%	Stage 1 not met	33**	82.5%
A2 met	23*	45%	Stage 2 met	19	40%
A2 not met	28*	55%	Stage 2 not met	29	60%

* Three children (two from Salford and one from Cheshire East) were relinquished, hence no Placement Orders were granted so no A2 figures are available.

** Out of 48 approvals, 8 were fast tracked so did not go through Stage 1

Agency specific data matches					
Agency	Total children matched	A1 met	A1 not met	A2 met	A2 not met
Cheshire East	15	3 (20%)	12 (80%)	2** (14%)	12** (86%)

** One child was relinquished, hence no A2 figure is available.

Comments

There is wide variation in the above figures across local authorities, however a number of factors impact timelines of placement such as age on entry into care, sibling group, complexity of need, etc.

Each local authority will be analysing their own cohort of children via the national scorecards and comparisons with both regional and statistical neighbours, and using tracking data, with narrative provided by Adoption Counts.

6. Panel scrutiny – Quality of reports at the final audit

RAA data of quality of reports. All agencies					
Matches, 54 CPRs			Approvals, 48 PARs (4 unknown gradings) *		
Outstanding	3	6%	Outstanding	1	2%
Good	50	93%	Good	42	88%
In need of improvement	1	2%	In need of improvement	1	2%
Inadequate	0	0%	Inadequate	0	0%

Information considered as Cheshire East specific data - out of 15 children matched				
Agency	Outstanding	Good	In need of improvement	Inadequate
Cheshire East	0 and 0%	15 and 100%	0 and 0%	0 and 0%

** Data has been collected from 54 CPRs and 48 PARs. We are missing grading's from 4 PARs as there was no recorded feedback provided on these. This inconsistency has reduced from the previous reporting period and is being further addressed to ensure all data is tracked for future reports.*

All percentages have been carried to the nearest decimal.

Work to improve the quality and consistency of the reports within Adoption Counts and the 5 partner Local Authorities remains ongoing. For Prospective Adopters Reports - In the reporting period, 2% were outstanding, 88% good and 2% being in need of improvement to be good. There was data missing from 4 PARs at the final audit although their first audits graded them as least as being good (trying to obtain) – the omission of these 4 gradings is due to a change in the usual Agency Advisor where cover is needed and the number of missing data has significantly reduced from the last reporting period.

There have been no inadequate PARs. These figures show that PARs remain fairly consistent in terms of being of good quality from the previous reporting period where 77% were graded as good and 8% were graded as outstanding. Whilst there are less reports graded as outstanding, many good reports had outstanding features.

Adoption Counts continues to take on a mentoring role for the 5 partner Local Authorities to guide and support workers with their understanding of the purpose of the report and desired practice in completing these with further training having been delivered. There has been an improvement from the last reporting period whereby 60% of the CPRs were graded as good and 27% as being in need of improvement to be good. For this period there has been an improvement with 6% being outstanding, 93% as good and 2% as being in need of improvement to be good.

The new quality assurance process is now underway and so CPRs are audited by the relevant Adoption Counts Team Manager prior to SHOBPA consideration and then again by either the Team Manager, Family Finder or Senior Practitioner before matching panel. This is to ensure that CPRs are graded as being 'Good' as a minimum and that the final report is submitted to panel rather than reports still requiring amendments.

There have been a small number of CPRs still requiring some additional work following submission as identified by the Panel Advisor and/or Chair. The bulk of these cases have had the suggested amendments completed in a timely manner allowing the case to be heard as per the schedule. Even these CPRs have told and explained the child's journey but needed additional work to enable them to be appropriate for the adopters and adoptee to have as lifetime documents.

As per the previous Chairs report, clear CPR guidance has been completed and ongoing training has been provided to Family Finders via their regular development days as they are taking a lead role in mentoring Social Workers. Drop-in clinics are being offered to Social Workers and further training sessions are being planned. Information regarding the new audit process and panel expectations has been distributed amongst the five partner Local Authorities for dissemination amongst the staff and Team Managers. Guidance on the panel gradings has been developed and has been shared with panel members/Family Finders at the most recent Panel Development Day to help support panel members understanding of what 'good' looks like and what more might need to be done to achieve a grading of 'outstanding'.

7. Attendee feedback

Both the Social workers and adopters are asked the following questions; -

- 1) Before attending panel were you clear about panel's function?
- 2) Were you given sufficient notice about the date and time of panel?
- 3) Were panels members introduced to you?
- 4) Did panel members treat you with courtesy and respect?
- 5) Did panel members seem familiar with your case?
- 6) Were panel member's questions relevant to the issues they were considering?
- 7) Were you given the opportunity to clarify points raised?
- 8) Were the recommendations made by the Panel Chair clear?
- 9) Attendees were asked to grade their overall experience from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent)
- 10) Add any further comments you would wish to make.

Feedback from evaluations

Evaluation is gathered through both an online form and paper forms. The forms are given to applicants on the day of the panel. Just under a third of adopters completed feedback forms, interestingly only 9 social workers completed feedback for the agency in relation to their experience of panel. The agency encourages all to complete feedback forms as this is part of its continuous learning culture. The panel advisor is working with the teams to encourage more participative feedback.

Adopter feedback

34 feedback forms were received from adopters during this period. The comments were overwhelmingly positive. 29 attendees rated their overall experience as excellent with 4 attendees rating their experience as a 4, and one at three. This attendee felt uncomfortable about the tone of a question asked but responded positively to other feedback questions.

Overall every question was responded to with a yes. Comments ranged from:

"My social worker explained everything in detail about the panel "

"I was nervous going in. I went in and all the panel members made me feel very comfortable and it was nice to see smiling faces"

"It was clear that they had reviewed our case files and made relevant notes about our experiences"

"We were made to feel very welcome by the panel chair, the overall experience was positive. "

Grading of overall experience

Overall, the feedback is overwhelmingly positive and demonstrates the work that is done by social workers to ensure that adopters understand the role of panel and what to expect. It is evident that panel conducts itself in a professional manner, is aware of how nerve wracking it is for applicants and approved adopters at the matching stage and does its best to make people feel relaxed.

Social worker feedback

Social work feedback has been more difficult for the agency to obtain. An analysis of the feedback shows a variety of experience. Two thirds of the three responses are very positive, with an overall experience of 5. Two felt they had a more negative experience. Interestingly one social worker felt that the chair had spent too much time speaking with the applicants before panel as she had already done this. This in contrast to other feedback. Both of the more negative observations were that the questions from panel should have been directed at them rather than the applicants.

“Felt some of the question could have been directed at me “

This is in contrast to other feedback which was “the questions put to the professional and the applicants were very relevant and obviously well thought out “

It is important for panel members to learn from negative as well as positive feedback. The panel advisor is efficient in bringing to panels attention particular feedback that is relevant to improve our functioning.

I am confident that the agency continues to seek and encourage both social workers and adopters to feedback to the agency their experience of panel.

Analysis

As one of the newer chairs, my experience of the agency and the Panel has been overwhelmingly positive. The feedback and the quantitative analysis supports my observations. The administration of panel is efficient, the quality of paperwork and verbal presentation is on the whole good with some outstanding features. The agency is closely collaborating with its partner local authorities to both drive up standards and to gain greater consistency.

In relation to timescales, there does appear to be a wider variation across local authorities, and it may be helpful for panel for the agency and the local authority to share their individual deep dive analysis on their particular cohort of children. Fostering to adopt remains a priority for the agency and this evident from the PARS, that is on the agenda right from the beginning

In reference to timescales for approval, stage 1 remains a challenge as the complexities in sourcing references in a timely way, often leads to delays in Stage 1.

There is a very evident learning culture in the agency ranging from senior managements willingness to respond to issues raised by chairs, to the range of training opportunities open to adopters. From observations at panel and from feedback, adopters are well prepared for the task ahead of them and are confident that the agency will support them going forward.

The agency recognises that panel needs to widen and diversify its membership, and it would be right and proper that panel members are given further training to enhance their understanding of anti-discriminatory practice in adoption work

8. Conclusion

At the time of writing this report, panels were moving towards a virtual world, due to the impact of Covid 19. This is a very different experience for both panel members and adopters. The way that the agency responded in the first few weeks gives me confidence that going forward into recovery, it will keep children as the focus of their service delivery. Panel has responded to the challenges thus far, but it's hard to predict what the impact will be on Children services over the next few months and whether the pandemic will adversely affect recruitment going forward.

9. Recommendations

1. That the agency continues to improve timeliness in relation to approval timescales.
2. It would be helpful for panel to have an increased understanding of the variation in timescales for children.
3. That the agency seeks to recruit a greater diversity of panel members.
4. That the agency consider offering additional training to panel members in relation to anti discriminatory in adoption work.
5. That the agency works with panel to elicit more feedback from social workers and to use this to improve panel performance.

Anne Tully

Independent Panel Chair

June 30th