**South East Region Adoption Leadership Board**

**AGENDA: Feb 23 2024 10-11.30**

**Chair:** Dr Mac Heath (CHAIR Milton Keynes), Lorna Hunt VICE CHAIR (Service director PACT), supported by Rebecca Eligon (SESLIP consultant), Teresa Rogers (adopt Thames Valley), Rachel Reynolds, Carole Atkins

**Apols:** Michael Wilson, Adopt South, Amy Coombs (Adoption Partnership), Sandra Carnell (Bucks), Kevin Yong (Corum), Richard Morris (CAFCASS)

**Introductions**

Minutes from the last meeting were agreed and apologies noted.

**Item 2: analysis of adoption breakdown**

TR presented the data which is over a 5 year period up until last year. Also did a piece of work looking at complexity of children placed. Identified a correlation between complexity and number of disruptions. ATV came out the highest in the country which was worrying to us. Average rate of disruption was 2% whereas ATV was 5% and realised it is 2 LAs that are quite high and some significant factors in that – a sibling group of 4 which was unusual and a sibling pair where the adoptor had a tumour which distorted the figures. Again, on complexity ATV came out the highest in the country. Which raised questions about are we too ambitious for the children. We put together all the minutes from the disruptions in that period, last year there were none but this year there are likely to be 2. We have done some analysis on the themes but there is research from Beth Neil and she is looking for participants and we will be participating in that research.

MH said even in their small RAA there is difference in practice between MK and Central Beds with MK perhaps more focused on adoption, perhaps looking at older children, but also a perception that this is delayed permanence.

A reflection from MK that placement breakdown is rarely about practice in the RAA but more influential things that are outside control of RAA. TR noted that there was a trend in placements further away with complex needs which then impacts on ability to support. TR reflected that they do have relatively high numbers of over 5s, but all agreed that small numbers can impact on data analysis.

LH reflected that she was surprised about ATV being high, but not surprised about the link between complexity and breakdown.

RR said that in Adopt South they are in line with average, but the narrative behind it isn’t always there. For example, they had a sibling group aged 5 and 7 who had complex needs and shifted their plan to fostering so that counts as a disruption even though permanence was not affected as they stayed in the same placement. RR noted that they have averaged around 3 a year and they place around 120 a year. There isn’t always rhyme or reason. RR said they appointed a chair to just look at disruptions, and reflected it can often go down to the resilience of the adoptors. From our analysis it is a about their empathy, expectations rather than their skills, support and experience. It was down to their expectations. CA agreed that professional knowledge and training is different to the emotions and relations with the birth family and acceptance.

The group reflected that it will be interesting to see if this changes over next 3 years, and variation with VAAs who have to go through RAAs to access ASGSF. It will also be interesting to see how things change as a result of the 3-year rule consultation. Will it be easier in the South East given we are net greater supporters of adoptors who are in the North. TR said this was discussed yesterday at RAA leaders and views were mixed and on balance slightly more in favour of no change to the 3-year rule. It raised a lot of questions.

RR noted that the caution around changes was inheriting other support plans, and we know because children are more complex they need more support and early support. Also not knowing how many would be in your area and the level of demand you would be supporting. And then for those RAAs placing far away they are giving that over to someone else and they might not get the support they need. There is also the relational bit around the relationship the adopters built with the adoption agency and that would then go. RR said views were strong and she felt caution over something you wouldn’t have control over.

RR gave an example, they have a family that they want to transfer and the other RAA can’t have a meeting until July, but whether getting rid of the 3 year rule will make a difference is questionable.

CA said she agrees with the view that RR just put forward. As an agency they rarely place externally (2 external vs 10 internally) so it will have quite an impact. I can see both sides of it.

**Action:** MH said if DCSs are asked then our position is we are conflicted/mixed in respect of our views on changes to the rule the 3-year rule. Colleagues agreed.

LH said from a VAA perspective we would, on balance, prefer not to have the 3 year rule as we have good relationships with our home RAA, whereas we have to work through so many.

MH returned to disruptions and said in the context of children’s social care if there were no re-referrals at the MASH he would say thresholds are too high, but if it is higher than 20% he would say we are closing too early. So, what is the range of disruption we would expect for disruption that represents an appropriate level of risk. For example if it is nil that might suggest we are not being ambitious enough for our children and we should expect some level of disruption. Does 2-3% feel a realistic level of disruption. RR said she agrees. Fostering breakdowns happen all the time, and experienced carers give notice and we just find another placement. This is not an unusual situation and some of our children have had multiple placements in fostering. We all beat ourselves up about adoption disruption, but some of these children have had a number of fostering moves.

TR said do we take that risk, it might be the only placement choice and it is worth a try. Should we be more careful and say no it isn’t good enough.

RR said we don’t think about all the complex ones that have worked, we need to learn just as much from the ones that have been successful even though they were risky. We have placement stability meetings with the LAs and often that is successful with MDT input and we can put support in and can turn things, but we don’t have enough reflection on how and why they turned around.

Group agreed there will always be some as we are dealing with complex cases and delays in the courts, and the care proceedings may have started 2 years ago and that brings additional complexity, with another relative coming out the woodwork.

**Action:** Group to build into their own performance monitoring/reflections that one or two per RAA/2-3% feels the right proportion of disruptions.

MH asked if the demographics highlighted in the report were things that resonated (e.g. higher levels of disruption for Pakistani children), colleagues said it didn’t and may reflect trends in other parts of the country.

TR said the other thing that is impacting is ‘together apart’ assessments. MH said some of those assessments are not that evidenced-based to the particular circumstances of that group of siblings.

LH said that it would be interesting to understand the decisions around keeping together in the case of breakdown and whether it isn’t sometimes better to have strong contact with a sibling that moves out if the adopters can keep one, rather than to disrupt both siblings.

MH thanked colleagues for the discussion and said the key message was to look underneath the data.

**Item 3: data**

MH asked if there were any issues in the data worth flagging and discussing in KY’s absence. TR said one of the issues highlighted is the number of adopters approved nationally is declining and there is large variation with the North under-performing.

TR reflected that they have survived because they had a surplus but next year there could be a different picture because there won’t be as many adoptors for the children placed.

LH said looking on Linkmaker the numbers of children has gone up, it did go down to 250, but we can see 577 children this morning and that has been increasing. Kevin would say there has been recruitment in the south but challenges elsewhere. Therefore as a region are we are then supporting more children from out of the region? There is real concern about the adopter gap and especially for sibling groups. Two VAAs (action for children and SAFA) are closing and those will be going to other organisations. And St Francis and Families for Children closed last year and there are conversations going on with the DfE about that. Recruitment in the South East is steady, but the Midlands and North is very difficult.

MH said he did a peer review with the North region chaired by Warrington and it is interesting, it was so evident we are a relatively affluent place with pockets of deprivation where they are the opposite. The north south divide was so evident and so it is not surprising there are differences in the adoption pool.

**Item 4 continuation of this meeting**

The group had agreed to review and consider the future of this meeting after a one year period given that there are other fora for RAA leaders to meet.

LH said she values it especially as she as a VAA leader is not always part of wider RAA conversations. Themed discussions are really helpful, and having Richard here from CAFCASS is helpful and he also isn’t part of the RAA conversations. Also helpful for MH to link with directors and the boards for RAAs don’t always have DCSs or even ADs

TR echo everything Lorna says. TR said she finds the opportunity to meet as a region helpful and would welcome it continuing and quarterly feels right

RR – agree – I know we have our RAA leaders but it is a big group and so value the regional focus here. We wouldn’t have the depth and detail and reflection space. The RAA meetings are very rushed and packed.

CA said they are an RAA after 10 Jan and up and running. She attend the meetings for Sandra who attends the RAA leaders meetings.,

**Future agenda items**

Possible discussion topics for the coming meetings this year:

* PLO working group report
* Safeguarding for children who are from outside the area, is there anything Blackpool case of child who died in adoption (Leiland James).
* Post order direct contact.

Upcoming meetings: April 17 2024: 2-3.30pm

 July 17 2024: 2-3.30pm

 October 16 2024: 2-3.30pm

**Action log:** This action log was updated on 17 April 2024

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|  | **Action** | **Responsible** | **Date issued** | **Status** |
| **76** | Group to build into their own performance monitoring/reflections that one or two per RAA/2-3% feels the right proportion of disruptions. | all | Feb 2024 | complete |
| **75** | MH said if DCSs are asked then our position is we are conflicted/mixed in respect of our views on changes to the rule the 3-year rule. | MH | Feb 2024 | complete |
| **74** | KY asked MH to flag with DCSs the need for LAs to work more closely with RAAs to improve quality of data. | MH | Oct 2023 | complete |
| **73** | KY noted there was a project on case management systems and KY to keep group updated on that. | KY | Oct 2023 | Open |
| **72** | Discussion on strengthening policy/practice regarding birth families. What is good practice, how might we share it? Idea of online conference? Discuss on Oct agenda | MH | July 2023 | closed |
| **71** | Discuss analysis on disruption (could KY produce something for Jan meeting?) | KY | July 2023 | complete |
| **70** | Review whether new ALB is working after Jan2025 meeting (1 year) | MH and all | July 2023 | complete |
| **69** | MH to liaise with Sarah Johal around future direction of travel | MH | April 2023 | closed |
| **68** | Item at next meeting on strategic and practical direction in South East Courts | RE | April 2023 | closed |
| **67** | Refresh the membership list in ToR (done) get a new rep for Slough (to do) | RE/MH | April 2023 | complete |
| **66** | future discussion on reasons underlying delay. Discussed at July meeting | RE | April 2023 | closed |
| **65** | RE MH and LH to meet to review terms of reference, meeting dates to align with operational regional meeting and resolve membership and oversight of Kinship (meeting with Sarah Daly to agree) | RE MH LH | Jan 2023 | Closed |
| **64** | RE to benchmark pay, training and support from different LAs re: kinship care | RE | Oct 2022 | Closed (move to kinship care group) |
| **63** | RE to set up buddying scheme to pair up SG practitioners from different LAs to share practice | RE | Oct 2022 | Closed move to kinship care group) |
| 62 | MH to flag issues re: SG oversight at DCS meeting | MH | Oct 2022 | Closed |
| **61** | RE and LP to set up first lunch and learn for Kinship Care week, and schedule the remaining sessions | RE LP | Oct 2022 | Closed |
| **60** | MH to write to DCS group to consider Bucks joining an existing RAA | MH | April 2022 | Closed |
| **59** | MH to raise issue of contact/family time at national board as a task to consider nationally | MH | April 2022 | Closed |