**South East Region Adoption Leadership Board**

**Minutes and action log: Oct 18 2024 3-4.30**

**Invitees:** Dr Mac Heath (CHAIR Milton Keynes), Lorna Hunt VICE CHAIR (Chair Adopt Thames Valley and PACT), Kevin Yong (CORUM lead), Amy Coombs (Adoption Partnership), Richard Morris (CAFCASS), Rachel Reynolds (Adopt South), Teresa Rogers (Adopt Thames Valley), Rebecca Eligon (SUPPORT Sector Led Improvement Programme), Michael Wilson (Adopt South), Carol Atkins (Bucks),

**Apols:**, Hilary Loades Bannon (Brighter Futures/Reading)

**Item 1: Introductions, minutes and actions from last meeting:** MH welcomed the group and said it was good many in the group had been able to meet recently due to adoption week. MH shared that part of wanting to retain this meeting was about keeping the adoption agenda on DCS’s minds and MH notedhe was pleased to see good DCS engagement and level of debate at Friday’s meeting on adoption and RAA leadership. The conversations last week have a synergy with the themed discussion today around family time. Earlier last week there was another meeting around how experienced ADMs operate and how they are able to appropriately record and reflect decision-making and how open to challenge that has become.

MH reflected that he found these quarterly meetings helpful to shape DCS agenda and what he needs to feed into that.

**Action:** The group agreed the minutes and actions from the last meeting.

**Action:** KY noted there was a project on case management systems and KY to keep group updated on that.

**Action:** Group agreed in January to review this group.

**Item 2: best practice on family time within adoption**

MH introduced the discussion: What do we feel we need to do differently, does it feel like postcode lottery? MW said I am struck by language, contact vs family time. MW noted that the PLO is made up of lawyers who have often written a report which is so protective of adoptive parents, the language birth parents, for fathers who didn’t give birth. It frames the limitations of the service we might offer. We also need to see within the lens of anti-racist, inclusive practice, relational practice and referring to families as birth families as though the decision has already been made that the children might live with some other family.

MW reflected that the other part of this agenda is the tendency to think about this as an adoption issue, so a thing for RAAs and VAAs as opposed to a thing for LAs to think about and their role as corporate parents. It also relates to the commissioning work of the national strategy group. As a group we should be thinking about whether we are the right people to provide these services, and what would really encourage take up and impact. If there was a conference, it is much bigger than care plans already enacted. We’ve got to be clear about moral responsibility, what does that carry for LAs, and how do we make sure it is connected to families who are impacted forever.

MH said there is a challenge for social work profession around family support and approach and are we the right people to do it, and if not where would it best be done.

AC said it was an interesting discussion, starting at the start with compassionate social work. Children’s services feels like a fight, a fight to safeguard child, the environment and attitude around that whole approach is ‘a fight’. The social workers focus is about safeguarding that child, so when it turns over to securing permanence everyone is a bit broken by it all. And RAAs then working with social workers who are fearful of parents, and that feeds into adoptive parents and their expectations. It is much bigger than just keeping in touch and arranging contact. We do need to go back to the beginning about how support is in place to enable change in families so that adoption isn’t needed, and when it is, so that families feel part of, rather than done to. I do believe there is a way to work with families so they do not end up in a place where they do not feel they can engage and they are so battered by the process that ‘contact’ then retraumatises them. And for social workers that same approach to ensure they don’t feel similarly battered and over-focused on the risk that parents present.

MH noted that the wider point he came away reflecting on was that the answer isn’t falling on one agency. .

LH said they took over a project working with birth families which has been real learning curve for PACT. LH agreed with AC that how we can do it best really requires us to go back to the earliest stage.

MH reflected that family safeguarding as a model and having adult workers could also strengthen approaches to working with families where there isn’t a child present any more.

TR said she would agree with a lot that has been said. I think you need expertise which sits in RAA. We have less than 2 workers on support and less than 2 on letter box, but TR noted it is crucial to the future of adoption that we get things right. We know courts are not agreeing care plans for adoption if they are not confident around the plans to maintain relationships with siblings and other family members. And if the other option is long term fostering which is equated to so much cost to the child and the system in terms of risk of breakdown we need to think creatively around how we can meet court requirements so that adoption is on the table. TR noted that she has just put in place a business case for a keeping in touch team of £200k.

RM from CAFCASS shared that these findings and discussion are relevant to 50 cases he’s just reviewed in South East. This review showed three key themes around reluctance, hope and frustration. Reluctance- change in tone to care plans going to court – they don’t appear to be giving same assurance; hope- seeing more relationship-focused social work practice in the 50 cases reviews, and frustration – in the South East we have the largest density of long-running cases in the country. RM noted that together those three themes have driven a reduction in adoption orders and placement orders. It is good to see a confirmation of what I am seeing in case records in the conversation we are having today.

AC said long protracted care proceedings are impacting on things - they are seeing increasingly complex children and complex family situations. We commission out to Barnadoes who do birth parents at preparation groups, contact, training. AC, like others said they are still working with fear, because parents are contesting cases and family time is difficult in that context. AC agreed that the process doesn’t enable meaningful relationships between adopters and parents. As RAAs we need to be better to share good practice - sibling groups that continue to go on holiday together even if placed separately.

MH wondered the extent to which Local Authorities have lost knowledge and skill to RAAs in this area. Is there an opportunity for RAAs to share practice/training for front door workers about these issues?

MW noted that unless we have a good understanding of adoption and post adoption among workers in safeguarding who may have never been near an adoption it will be difficult to address these issues. MW said we have commissioned training provided by adopters which we provide to LA social workers twice a year. Take up is really low. It is deliberately designed for busy social workers, bringing to life what it feels like to be an adoptive family.

RR noted they now have one of the children’s teams in scope in their RAA and they are making ADM decisions for Hampshire and Isle of wight in bringing those relationships.

AC reflected it is reassuring that MW’s training uptake is tricky. We also get asked to do learning from disruption, CPRs, we have a whole host of workshops, but take up is low – it is so frustrating. I agree it is because we are perceived as a bit over there for Meday, Bexley and Kent. The bigger impact we are focusing on is around our agency advisors that advise ADMs. We can influence there, we have permanency planning leads that attend meetings, we need to be proactive in that space across all the RAAs.

MH can we increase knowledge, efficacy of our managers especially around need to pull in adult workers where needed.

CA have been interested in hearing RAA perspectives on this, we are now a RAA in Bucks but we are still one council. We have varied relationships at sometimes it feels family finding can’t happen in collaboration with families early enough, whether it is about life story work, because of fears of antagonising the birth families whilst they are still in proceedings but it could be an important way to recognise and help them see they have an ongoing role.

**Item 2: Data**

KY Shared q1 data and made an appeal to MH to reach out to LAs to work with RAAs to improve quality of child data. **Action:**  KY asked MH to flag with DCSs the need for LAs to work more closely with RAAs to improve quality of data.

KY outlined that come January 2024 there will no longer be a surplus of adopters. Recruitment and approvals have been falling, there is a backlog in cases and some children not scheduled at court until next spring. Over next 6 months will be seeing more decisions coming, and if recruitment and approvals don’t increase then there will be that shortfall.

KY said that a third are active family finding according to the data, but LAs report higher numbers than the data. KY noted that we need to understand how bad the sufficiency data really is. Need to understand the availability of adopters who appear to be waiting. EP parents won’t show as having a child as they aren’t yet placed for adoption, also need to better understand the numbers on hold. About half those on hold may not progress is the informal insight KY is getting.

KY reflected that there is going to be a CSR and perhaps a new government, if we want support and investment in adoption, we need to show what is being put into the system is or is not having the outcomes desired

In the South East generally there is an increase in POs compared with a drop in POs compared to rest of country. Jump in AOs is likely due to court backlog. Adopters in the South East are mirroring national trend on fall of approvals, and pipeline has also been falling. Although it is worth noting there is an increase in stage 1 pre assessments so hopefully that will lead to an improvement in 4-8 months. KY noted that the data is showing longer timescales in stage 1-2, Adopt South see fast moves, but some families are taking a pause, perhaps for their own circumstances. KY noted that when he spoke to RAA leaders they said some of situations are quite complex so it may take longer than standard 4 months. All that elongating of timescales doesn’t help with approval numbers.

Overall the data shows that SE has better sufficiency than the rest of the country and will perhaps still be in surplus but the rest of the country won’t be so the South East may well be providing adopters to the rest of the country.

MH then opened for discussion. MW would be interested to understand the impact of iRM on decision making on whether people should be moved out the system earlier. We are more cautious because we know we have to go through that process. It would be an interesting conversation to have. The other question is, is it a bad outcome for adoption to be going down if kinship is going up. It is also problematic as the data isn’t connected. MW noted that they are seeing children not getting adoption and then having poorer outcomes in LT fostering. Is there any evidence that a 4 month adopter approval is better than 6 month assessment. And if not, then why are we heading to a standard when originally the target was 50% approved in 4 month when now we are all chasing 100% at 4 month. It is time the sector looked at whether these indicators are the right ones.

AC said they are also struggling with the timescales and need to address these issues

RR said they have a stage 1 team that chases DBS, medicals, references and so we are able to be really driven and that’s how they are addressing timescales - notingt it isn’t a magic wand. We do also close a lot we close 50% quite early.

MH agreed and reflected that quick doesn’t always mean right

LH said checks in stage 1 can be incomplete but can still go to stage 2 and then if issues can be picked up in IRM. LH said RR approach sounds amazing in approach to timelinesss.

On KY’s earlier point about the accuracy of the data, AC said she has just completed validation and if she hadn’t it wouldn’t be correct, because the family finding codes and some dates are missing. AC noted that the knowledge we have in RAAs will be more accurate than the data coming out of management info in LAs. RR said it would be better for RAAs to submit, at the moment we send to LAs to submit and that still increases inaccuracies.

KY closed by saying the best way to influence the measures is via the national working group.

**Item 3: RAA round up**

CA – We have signed a contract working toward formal launch for Bucks. We are having difficulties recruiting staff to the service which is a first. The RAA is at early days

LH – PACT will remain same, and but help Bucks develop their RAA. Various partnerships in place both with South East RAAs and nationally e.g. EP work with Adopt South

RR – really pleased they have recruited an Ed Psych, someone has applied for clinical psych role, so setting up MDT, as well as EP project with PACT. Have a campaign for 3 little boys and we are hoping this will be successful too as there has been good media coverage linked with adoption week.

AC- getting more established, Pan regional approach to commissioning, good national resources provided to support adoption week

MW – focus is on prepping for ofsted,

TR- started adoption week with a regional play day, launching EP film which is available nationally, had problems recruiting clin psych and EP, but also just recruited.

**Action log:** This action log was updated on 26 January 2024

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|  | **Action** | **Responsible** | **Date issued** | **Status** |
| **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 |
| **58** | MH to meet LP and RE to consider next steps for Special Guardianship | MH | April 2022 | Closed |
| **57** | TR to feedback on top 100 analysis and actions (once surveys and interviews complete) | RR/TR | Jan 2022 | complete |
| **56** | RR to feedback on impact of sibling worker (in 6-12 months) | RR | Jan 2022 | complete |