Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board

10th April 2018 11:00- 13:00,

Department for Education, Sanctuary Buildings, Room 2.14

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| **Attendees** |  |
| **Board members:** |  |
| Andrew Christie | Chair |
| Cathy Ashley | Kinship Care Alliance |
| Sue Armstrong-Brown | Adoption UK |
| Tabitha Brufal | Department for Education |
| Tracey Coffey | RAB Chair (North West) |
| Anthony Douglas | Cafcass |
| Stuart Gallimore | ADCS, President |
| Carol Homden | First4Adoption |
| Charlotte Ramsden | ADCS, HCAN Chair |
| Julie Selwyn | Hadley Centre, University of Bristol |
| John Simmonds | CoramBAAF |
| **Others:** |  |
| Nicola Doyle | Department for Education |
| Esther Kavanagh-Dixon | ADCS, policy officer |
| Kathryn Lewis | Department for education |
| John Myers | Department for Education |
| Kyri Papassavva | Department for Education |
| Hannah Smith | Project consultant |
| Louise Smith | LGA |
| Hugh Thornbery | Project consultant |
| Grace Toller | ASGLB management service |
| Kevin Woods | Department for Education |
| Alex Wylde | ASGLB management service |
| **Apologies:** |  |
| Annie Crombie | CVAA |
| Justice MacDonald | Judicial observer |
| Mark Owers | Professional advisor to the AGSLB |
| Cllr Lucy Nethsingha | LGA |
| Katy Willison | Department for Education |

**1.** **Welcome and introductions**

The Chair welcomed members to the first meeting of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board, and extended a welcome to the new ADCS president, Stuart Gallimore, and Cathy Ashley, representing the Kinship Care Alliance.

Under matters arising, John Simmonds presented a summary of the work of the Nuffield Foundation Family Justice Observatory, which aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system. Julie Selwyn offered to share the Observatory’s first set of data on adoption with Board members for their information.

**ACTION 1:** Julie Selwyn to circulate the observatory’s first dataset to Board members

**2. The changing face of adoption and special guardianship support**

Hugh Thornbery introduced a report setting out the draft findings from the project. He reported that feedback from the Adopter Reference Group (ARG) and RAB chairs on the draft findings was positive. The Board were asked to provide their views on whether the report reflected the range of issues that needed to be considered, whether the suggested programme of work was right, and what the priorities should be going forward.

Board members were positive about the overall conclusions and tone of the report; and agreed with the recommendation to set up a steering group to take this work forward. The Board agreed that in prioritising future work, the focus should be on what areas are likely to be realistically deliverable and have the most impact.

In the discussion of the report, individual Board members also made the following points:

* That this report highlights the need for more work to be done to get a better understanding of the issues facing special guardianship; some issues relating to adoption and SGO support are distinct and should not be conflated;
* That the report could be more explicit in outlining partnership responsibilities with other bodies, such as CCGs;
* That the restriction of the Board’s focus to SGOs for children previously looked after is problematic, since one of the most important issues facing special guardianship is the inequality in support arrangements between different types of legal status and the perverse incentives this creates;
* That the report could expand its analysis of SGO-specific issues, for example, the legal advice given to families, issues relating to kinship carers having to give up work, financial difficulties facing special guardians, access to the ASF, and issues around contact.
* That the report could give greater weight to the views of children and young people and should be restructured around the perspective of the child.

The Board also discussed the requirement in legislation for LAs to produce an adoption support plan, which the Secretary of State has the power to review. This power could potentially be used to ensure that RAAs are fully complying with their legal obligations to provide a comprehensive adoption support service.

**ACTION 2**: Chair to discuss how to prioritise the recommended work streams with project consultants, Hugh Thornbery and Hannah Smith.

**ACTION 3**: Management Service to work with project consultants to set up a steering group to take forward the Board’s work on support services.

**3.** **Scoping on the Board’s agenda on special guardianship**

The Chair introduced a brief paper setting out a proposal for a piece of work to explore and define what the Board’s priorities should be in relation to special guardianship.

It was suggested that issues relating to SGOs for children not from care should be included within the scope of this work. However, since the remit of the Board is limited to children in care, it was agreed by the Board that this group would not be able to consider these issues but should consider the question of whether the current remit of the Board in relation to special guardianship is right.

**ACTION 4:** Management Service to organise the first meeting of a task and finish group on special guardianship as set out in the paper

**4. Adopter sufficiency**

Alex Wylde introduced the data pack for Q3 2017-18 and provided an update to the Board on adopter recruitment. The latest data showed an increase in ADM decisions and adopter approvals; though Board members were cautioned that these figures did not yet amount to any discernible trend and did not change the overall picture of adopter sufficiency.

The Board discussed the role of adoption scorecards in monitoring adopter sufficiency. Some Board members expressed a concern that the DfE is not planning to produce scorecards for VAAs, as this would fail to properly acknowledge their role in addressing the issue.

The Board then turned to the update on adopter recruitment actions. Board members discussed the ongoing action to request recruitment plans from local authorities and RAAs, and it was agreed that it would be helpful to request the same information from the VAA sector as part of this exercise.

Board members discussed the proposal to collate evidence about what works in recruitment. Members expressed the view that this duplicated work that has already been done and that the focus should be on sharing existing research and evidence.

Generally, the Board agreed that the current plan was insufficient, and that the Board should set out a public statement of how it is working with the sector to address the issue. It should set out targets for recruitment and track performance against these.

**ACTION 5:** Chair to write to CVAA to ask VAAs in England for projections of adopter approvals over the next 8 quarters.

**ACTION 6:** Management service to work with the Chair, ADCS and CVAA to prepare a plan of action on how recruitment trajectories will be used, targets set, and progress monitored.