Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board  
11:00-13:00 3rd April 2019, The Foundry, 17 Oval Way SE11 5RR

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| Attendees  Board members: |  |
| Andrew Christie | ASGLB Chair |
| Sue Armstrong-Brown | Adoption UK |
| Cathy Ashley | Family Rights Group |
| Al Coates | ARG representative |
| Rachel Dickinson | ADCS President (incoming) |
| Jan Fishwick | CVAA Board representative |
| Stuart Gallimore | ADCS President (outgoing) |
| Maggie Jones | CVAA |
| Mark Owers | Independent Advisor to the Board |
| Lucy Peake | Grandparents Plus |
| Charlotte Ramsden | ADCS, HCAN Chair |
| Julie Selwyn | Expert Advisor |
| John Simmonds | Expert Advisor |
| Teresa Williams | Cafcass |
| Others: |  |
| Sara Caton | ADCS |
| Nicola Doyle | Department for Education |
| Louise Jelks | ASGLB management service |
| Kathryn Lewis | Department for Education |
| Sam Mercadante | ASGLB management service |
| Hugh Thornbery | Modernising permanence project consultant |
| Kevin Woods | Department for Education |
| Grace Toller | ASGLB management service |
| Apologies: |  |
| Sue Lowndes | RAB Chair, London |
| Justice MacDonald | Judicial Observer |
| Cllr Lucy Nethsingha | LGA |
| Katy Willison | Department for Education |

1. Minutes and actions

* Regarding the discontinuation of the Adoption Register’s contract, there was a concern that there is some ambiguity around the duties of local authorities. Some are worried that they will be penalised by Ofsted for not referring children to the Register.
* Given that many agencies will now be relying on Linkmaker, the Board wants to ensure that they are aware of its different features, such as its option to produce reports on family finding status for children a local authority has referred.

**Action 1: Andrew Christie to write to RABs to ask them to ensure that their local authorities know about the feature of Linkmaker which can produce a report with family finding status for all children an agency has referred to Linkmaker.**

**Action 2: RAB sponsors to ensure that regional boards consider the LGA Permanence Pack and ask that it is raised with lead members.**

* Maggie Jones updated the Board on the status of After Adoption which is in the process of closing. The VAA has been working on transferring all their current cases and electronic records of all adoptions made in the last two years to other VAAs.
* All their historic records are in storage, Manchester City Council has volunteered to take responsibility for those even though After Adoption covers an area that reaches beyond the boundaries of Manchester. After Adoption are working to mitigate any limitations this might place on adopted adults’ ability to access their records during the transition.
* All Board members convey their regret at the closure of After Adoption. It was agreed that CVAA will provide a paper on systemic issues which are currently placing pressure on VAAs for the next Board meeting.

**Action 3: CVAA to provide a paper on systemic issues which are currently placing pressure on VAAs for the July Board meeting.**

* Charlotte Ramsden notified the Board of the establishment of a working group led by ADCS and CVAA to discuss the work that should be covered by the interagency fee. So far, the group has raised some interesting questions about what the standard of an interagency placement is, and what the fee should pay for. It will then work towards an agreed universal standard for an interagency placement, and by extension will discuss how work that goes beyond the agreed standard should be represented in the cost of the placement.
* Based on these discussions, the group will go on to consider the baseline service for sibling placements and how additional work should be reflected in the interagency fee structure for siblings.
* This should not suggest an assumption that ADCS will uplift the fee next year, rather it will lead to clarification around what the interagency fee should pay for.

1. Consultation work with special guardians/ contact with special guardians

Sam Mercadante provided a report of the programme of engagement events the ASGLB as held with special guardians. This programme has entailed four meetings with over 50 special guardians around the country. The key findings from these events were summarised in the paper provided.

* One of the most important issues that the attendees highlighted was the deficit of information, advice and preparation when becoming special guardians. Attendees did not feel that they were given information proactively by social workers. Many experienced the relationship with local authorities as adversarial. Many had not been told about Pupil Premium Plus or the ASF.
* Furthermore, several attendees expressed a reluctance to go to GPs or discuss issues with schools for fear that children would be removed from their care.
* Several Board members reported on the various groups which are currently working on assessment of special guardians with the judiciary. Concern was expressed that this might lead to proposals for a series of uncoordinated initiatives.
* It was noted that the missing voice in these working groups is that of special guardians; the discussion is very court focused, but what is going on in the court arena needs to be related to other aspects of the world, as experienced by special guardians.
* It was suggested by some Board members that some of this work might be rushed. All that said, the Board concluded that we should treat this as an opportunity to address some of the issues that special guardians have raised.

1. Modernising Permanence

Hugh Thornbery provided an update on the Modernising Permanence project. The workplan for 2019/20 is divided into three parts:

* 1. Data;
  2. Blueprint; and
  3. Life-long identity.

Teresa Williams has agreed to lead work on the data set. The approach will be to first consider where the key data gaps are on the issues the Board is most concerned about, and then to agree how those gaps may be filled with other existing data sets. One of the principles of this workstream will be to avoid the collection of new data, as agencies are concerned about additional burden.

Mike Hall has completed the adoption support blueprint as a paper product, and the steering group have agreed that it should be developed into a digital product to make it accessible and easy to update. Mike Hall and Hugh Thornbery are currently looking at how to move forward with the part of the blueprint that will focus on special guardianship support, which should be complete by September.

The blueprint is intended to be a useful tool that will allow local authorities and other services to benchmark their services and identify good practice around the country.

**Action 4: ASGLB management service to circulate the final draft of the blueprint and the draft implementation plan with the ASGLB minutes.**

The life-long identity workstream can be further broken down into three parts:

* 1. Support for birth parents
  2. Birth family relationships within adoption
  3. Birth family relationships within special guardianship

Feedback from the RAB chairs’ teleconference reflects the concern that there is insufficient capacity in the system to increase activity in this area. Consequently, this will have to be tied into the workforce development element of the Modernising Permanence project.

It was noted that there will be an event in the summer to disseminate learning from the Lifelong Links project which supports the development of positive relationships, including with family members, for children in care.

Board members and attendees had the following comments on the Modernising Permanence work:

* On the subject of contact, it was agreed that adopters often hold the keys to how this plays out in a child's life. Adopters are often very closed to this in the early years but are more open to it later on, by which time birth family relationships may have broken down. It is therefore important to have these discussions early on and explicitly identify this issue as a part of the adopter journey.
* Many of the ARG members commented that they would now be in support of contact with birth parents, and some felt that they had missed out by not engaging in this in the earlier stages of adoption. They advised that this should be conveyed to prospective adopters during the approval process.
* The assumption by the courts that contact is a good thing is not always a positive.
* The Board needs to consider how children’s identity is informed by developments in the digital age.
* Issues around birth family contact and relationships can be different for special guardians where they have a complex relationship with the birth parents. The responsibility of managing this is often placed on special guardians. The sector should develop proposals for developing ways of reducing the stress on special guardians when dealing with this.

1. RAA update

A paper provided laid out issues raised by the ARG that some adoptive families may be let down during the transition to RAAs. This means that records and contact information is lost, or not shared between the local authority and RAA which can have consequences that range from an inconvenience to a safeguarding issue, for example when a family requires support but their social worker does not know how to contact them.

DfE had since told ARG members that it would work with Deloitte to ensure that RAAs have systems of proper contact with existing adoptive families before going live, and that adopters will be informed of the shift from local authority to RAA. This will mean that families receiving support will know how to contact their social worker from the day their RAA launches.

1. System Performance Update

Kevin Woods put forward DfE’s views on the provided data pack:

* There is concern that ADM decisions and adoption order numbers are going down, however there are other factors that may be affecting this. For example, it is possible that decision reversals are not being properly recorded and therefore are not reflected in the data.
* There is anecdotal evidence that some local authorities are finding it difficult to get court time in order to have a decision for adoption reversed**.** Furthermore, the 2018-19 figures may be revised in the Q4 return and could show an uplift in numbers.

**Action 5: RABs to discuss the issue of the continuing drop in permanence orders and report back to the July RAB chairs’ teleconference.**

**Action 6: ASGLB management service to bring more information on reversals to the next ASGLB, including a breakdown of why the reversal decisions were made.**

Board members expressed continued concern about adopter sufficiency, as the gap between children waiting with placement orders and approved adopters is still growing:

* In some areas the children waiting were not ‘hard to place’ and a sustained approach to matching was beginning to see results
* There is a need for RABs to work together and with the voluntary sector to match with children who are waiting with approved adopters.
* Some Board members suggest that agencies may be losing adopters in the process, or that the process is taking longer.
* There is anecdotal evidence that adopters are taking longer in stage one, partly because adopters are choosing to pause before starting stage two, and that there is an increasing delay at matching stage because the reports on children are inadequate. This seems partly due to the rapid turnover of child protection social workers, which can mean that there is no one who knows the child or that the report was completed in a piecemeal manner, issues which only become apparent during the family-finding process.
* Attention was brought to the importance of nurturing (prospective) adopters during the adoption process; it is important that they have as positive an experience as possible.

**Action 7: RABs to discuss what further action they can take to match children waiting with approved adopters, including using the voluntary sector.**

**Action 8: Sue Armstrong-Brown to gather adopters’ views on how they experienced their adoption process and provide a note at the next ASGLB meeting.**

Next meeting: 23rd July 2019