



Aspire Adoption Annual Report

1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019

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Introduction

This is the second annual adoption report for Aspire Adoption, summarising the work of the agency in the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. It has been written to ensure that the requirements of the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 are met.

The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/336069/Adoption_NMS_July_2014_for_publication.pdf

The 2013 Statutory Adoption Guidance can be accessed at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-statutory-guidance-2013>.

1. Local authority statutory responsibilities in respect of adoption

- 1.1 In accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, all local authorities have a duty to establish and maintain an adoption service in their area, to meet the needs in relation to adoption, of children who have or may be adopted, of adults who have been adopted, parents and guardians of such children and persons who have or may adopt a child.
- 1.2 Since 1 July 2017, Bournemouth Borough Council, the Borough of Poole, and Dorset County Council have delegated most of those functions, along with some statutory responsibilities in relation to special guardianship, to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency. It was one of the first Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) to be set up nationally.
- 1.3 Each local authority retains overall responsibility for their adoption and special guardianship services, continuing to have parental responsibility for their own Children in Care, but delegating most adoption and some special guardianship functions to Aspire Adoption. Regional Adoption Agencies are expected to work closely with colleagues in the voluntary adoption sector. Aspire Adoption works in partnership with Families for Children, a Voluntary Adoption Agency based in Devon but with an office in Dorset.
- 1.4 The name “Aspire Adoption” reflects the aspiration to learn, to build on existing good practice and achieve practice improvements in the delivery of services for children, adopters and others who benefit from or are in need of adoption and special guardianship services in the area covered by the Regional Adoption Agency.
- 1.5 In the financial year 2018-19, Aspire Adoption was hosted by Bournemouth Borough Council and funded by the local authorities of Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole. Future iterations of this report will reflect local government reorganisation from 1st April 2019, and the formation of Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole (BCP) Council, and Dorset Council. The Inter Authority Agreement which legally underpins the operation of Aspire Adoption is being revised to reflect those changes.

2. Division of roles and responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities

- 2.1 Aspire has been delegated all of the local authority statutory responsibilities for adoption, other than the court work leading to Care and Placement Orders.
- 2.2 Aspire has responsibility for recruiting, assessing and supporting prospective adopters, for non-agency adoption work including partner adoptions and intercountry adoptions.
- 2.3 The local authorities retain overall responsibility for their Children in Care, but have delegated case responsibility for the majority of children with adoption plans to Aspire following the granting of a Placement Order.
- 2.4 Aspire is responsible for family finding for all children with adoption plans. The RAA is also responsible for preparing children for a move to adoption, for preparing moving calendars or diaries, undertaking life story work and creating life story books.
- 2.5 Aspire undertakes special guardianship assessments for court on behalf of the local authority as part of care proceedings, or in private law applications.
- 2.6 Aspire provides support to all parties affected by adoption, including adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives, and also to special guardians, families created through special guardianship, and to the birth families whose children are subject to SGOs.
- 2.7 The table below sums up the division of responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities.

Function	Regional Adoption Agency	Local Authority
RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT		
Marketing and Recruitment Strategy	✓	
Adopter Recruitment and Enquiries	✓	
Assessment of Prospective Adopters – all Stage One and Stage Two functions	✓	
Completion of Prospective Adopter Report	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for approval of adopters	✓	
Post approval training	✓	
Matching	✓	
Post Placement training for Prospective Adopters	✓	
PERFORMANCE PLANNING		
Early identification of a child possibly requiring adoption		✓
Tracking and monitoring the child possibly requiring adoption	✓	✓
Support and advice to child care social worker on the adoption process	✓	✓
Sibling or other specialist assessments if commissioned by LA	✓	
Direct work to prepare child prior to placement	✓	
Preparation of the Child Permanence Report		✓
Agency Decision Maker for “Should be placed for Adoption” decisions		✓

Case management prior to the point agreed by the LA ADM		✓
Case management from point agreed by the LA ADM	✓	
MATCHING AND PLACEMENT		
Family finding	✓	
Looked After Child reviews	✓	✓
Shortlist and visit potential families	✓	
Organising child appreciation day	✓	
Ongoing direct work to prepare child prior to placement	✓	
Adoption Panel administration and management	✓	
Agency adviser role	✓	
Agency Decision Maker for Matching prospective adopters and child	✓	
Placement Planning meeting administration and management of introductions	✓	
Support to family post placement and planning and delivery of adoption support	✓	
Ongoing life story work and preparation of Life story book	✓	
Independent Review Officer monitoring of quality of child's care and care plan		✓
Support prospective adopters in preparation and submission of application for Adoption Order – including attending at court	✓	
Preparation of later life letter	✓	
ADOPTION AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP SUPPORT		
Assessment for adoption or special guardianship support	✓	
Developing and delivering adoption and special guardianship support plans	✓	
Agree and administer financial support to adoptive families pre and post Adoption Order		✓
Adoption and special guardianship support delivery including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Social events • Post adoption/special guardianship training • Independent Birth Relative services • Support with ongoing birth relative contact • Specialist Life Story practitioners • Adoption counselling and training 	✓	
Financial support to adopters and special guardians including adoption and special guardianship allowances		✓
SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS		
Receipt of application or court request for special guardianship		✓
Assessment of applicants for Special Guardianship	✓	
NON-AGENCY ADOPTIONS		
Step parent/partner adoption assessments	✓	
Intercountry adoption assessments and post approval and post order support	✓	

3. Headline activity data 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019

- 3.1 Seventy-five children had decisions made by the local authority Agency Decision Maker that they should be placed for adoption (SBPA). However, numbers dropped each quarter, from a total of twenty-eight in Q1 to ten in Q4. This was most noticeable in Dorset, where only one SBPA decision was made in that quarter.
- 3.2 Nearly 50% of the children with SBPA decisions in the year were over three, with the only child from Dorset with a SBPA decision in Quarter 4 aged eight.
- 3.3 Fifty-eight Placement Orders were made by the courts from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. Following on from the local authority decision that a child should be placed for adoption, Placement Orders give social workers legal authority to place a child for adoption.
- 3.4 Quarter 4 saw a fall in numbers of Placement Orders granted compared to the previous two quarters, with a differential between the number of local authority decisions that a child SBPA and the court making Placement Orders reflecting changes of plan during the court process. The highest proportion of changes of plan between SBPA decision and Placement Order were in Dorset.
- 3.5 Fifty children in the care of the local authorities of Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole were placed for adoption in the year. Numbers of children placed for adoption dipped in Quarters 1 and 2 of the year but have since continued to rise steadily, with fifteen children placed for adoption in Quarter 4, back to the overall average per quarter since Aspire went live.
- 3.6 Thirty eight percent of all of the children placed in the year were over three years of age, and over one in three were in sibling groups. The oldest child placed was nearly fifteen years old at the point of her placement for adoption with her foster carers. The oldest child placed for adoption not with her foster carers was eight years of age. Another youngster who was nearly eight at the time of placement was placed for adoption as part of a sibling group of three.
- 3.7 Eleven children were placed on an Early Permanent (EP) basis in 2018-19, an increase over the previous year when 7 children were placed. Early Permanence means that children can be placed on a fostering basis with approved adopters who will go on to adopt them if the courts agree a Placement Order. All of the children placed on this basis in 2018-19 either have or will be adopted by these families.
- 3.8 Of the 106 children placed for adoption between July 2017 and the end of March 2019, all but one remains in their adoptive placement or have been adopted. There was one placement disruption after the child had been with the family for eight months, in March 2019. A disruption meeting has been held.
- 3.9 Reflecting a national concern, there remain a group of priority children for whom Aspire is still family finding for internally and nationally. At the end of March 2019, there were thirty-six children with Placement Orders but not yet placed. These included six sibling groups of two, children with special needs including babies with global developmental delay, and youngsters over the age of five, including a girl aged nine.

- 3.10 Seventeen of the thirty-six children were either matched or with foster carers who were planning to adopt them. Two children were in Early Permanent placements and four other children are to be adopted by their foster carers, with assessments of those carers underway and post adoption support already agreed.
- 3.11 It has been clear in the last year that the most effective and efficient way to place these children is for Aspire to recruit and assess their own families to take children with more complex needs. For example, a family are currently being specifically assessed for twins aged eight for whom it has been impossible to recruit nationally, another eight-year-old is being matched inhouse. Recruitment activity is the priority in the coming year and is being stepped up to increase the overall number of adopters and targeted to recruit families who will consider the children currently waiting.
- 3.12 A total of seventy four children in care to the local authorities funding Aspire were adopted in 2018-19, averaging about eighteen each quarter since Aspire went live.
- 3.13 National adoption scorecards measure timeliness in adoption activity on a 3-year rolling average. They are published by the Department for Education a year later than the activity they are reporting on. Care also must be taken as small numbers can result in significant swings in averages if just a few children take longer to place for adoption. The outcome for the child is a positive one but can reflect negatively on the data. Aspire data for 2018-19 would suggest that for all three local authorities, of the children adopted in 2018-19, it took an average of 157 days between the local authority receiving court authority to place the child and the Aspire ADM deciding on a match to an adoptive family. The England average from the 2015-18 adoption scorecards is 201 days. It took an average of 461 days between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. The England average from the 2015-18 adoption scorecards is 486 days.

Days between a child entering care & moving in with their adoptive family

	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar
Bournemouth	272	347	323	1171
Dorset	482	268	466	472
Poole	327	256	227	973
	382	310	392	826
				461

Days between an LA receiving court authority to place & deciding on a match

	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	82	159	143	106	135
Dorset	107	87	243	207	189
Poole	116	104	44	233	139
	106	133	191	197	157

- 3.14 Numbers of adopters approved failed to meet sufficiency targets in 2018-19, largely because of staff absences in the team due to maternity and adoption leave coinciding with health issues for a further 2 members of the team. The introduction in October 2018 of a new case management system by Bournemouth Borough Council, Aspire's host authority, further slowed the team down. The number of adopters already approved and waiting helped to buffer the fall so that most children placed for adoption were still placed with Aspire approved adopters. The numbers of adopters in assessment were back to target levels by the end of the year using staff on fixed term and casual contracts and as the permanent members of the team returned to work.
- 3.15 Numbers of referrals for special guardianship assessments have continued to rise, with 148 in the year. The team were staffed and funded for no more than 100 referrals a year. There have been 51 withdrawals in the year prior to completion of the assessment, often after a significant amount of work has been undertaken.
- 3.16 Numbers of adoption and SG support cases have doubled in Quarter 4 compared to the previous 2 quarters, for no obvious reason. The majority of these were for adoption support rather than special guardianship support though more of the latter were crisis driven referrals. Over half of all referrals for adoption and special guardianship support in Quarter 4 were from Dorset.

The tables below illustrate adoption and special guardianship activity, quarter on quarter, for each local authority since Aspire went live in July 2017.

ADM/SBPA	2017			2018			2019	
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Total
Bournemouth	8	7	4	10	8	7	5	49
Dorset	9	8	7	15	7	7	1	54
Poole	1	4	3	3	4	4	4	23
Total	18	19	14	28	19	18	10	126

Placement Orders	2017			2018			2019	
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Total
Bournemouth	6	9	6	5	5	10	5	46
Dorset	6	8	5	5	11	6	3	44
Poole	3	4	2	1	3	2	2	17
Total	15	21	13	11	19	18	10	107

Placements	2017			2018			2019	
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Total
Bournemouth	5	4	8	3	6	7	4	37
Dorset	10	10	7	8	3	5	6	49
Poole	3	6	3	1	1	1	5	20
Total	18	20	18	12	10	13	15	106

Adoption Orders	2017			2018			2019	
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Total
Bournemouth	4	3	5	3	8	7	3	33
Dorset	7	9	3	12	2	12	9	54
Poole	0	9	3	7	4	2	5	30
Total	11	21	11	22	14	21	17	117

Special Guardian Referrals	2017			2018			2019		Withdrawn
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Total	
Bournemouth	4	14	8	13	15	13	7	74	23
Dorset	10	7	7	20	12	17	23	96	27
Poole	10	8	6	9	6	7	6	52	16
Total	24	29	21	42	33	37	36	222	66

4. Finance

- 4.1 Aspire is funded by the local authorities for whom it undertakes adoption and special guardianship services. The funding agreement was based on existing spend on adoption services, plus adjustments for additional responsibilities, tested against 6 agreed drivers.
- 4.2 The budget framework percentages agreed at the time of go live were for contributions of 44.6% from Dorset County Council, 38.3% from Bournemouth Borough Council and 17.1% from the Borough of Poole. The total annual budget in 2018-19 was £2,002,700, with funding of £885,200 from Dorset County Council, £777,900 from Bournemouth Borough Council and £339,600 from the Borough of Poole.
- 4.3 In the Inter Authority Agreement underpinning Aspire, it was agreed that any underspend would go into the Aspire Earmarked Reserve. There was £40,000 in the Reserve at the beginning of 2018-19 following underspends in the first 9 months after Aspire went live. In the Inter Authority Agreement, it was also agreed that any overspend was a shared risk and would be split proportionately between the 3 local authorities.

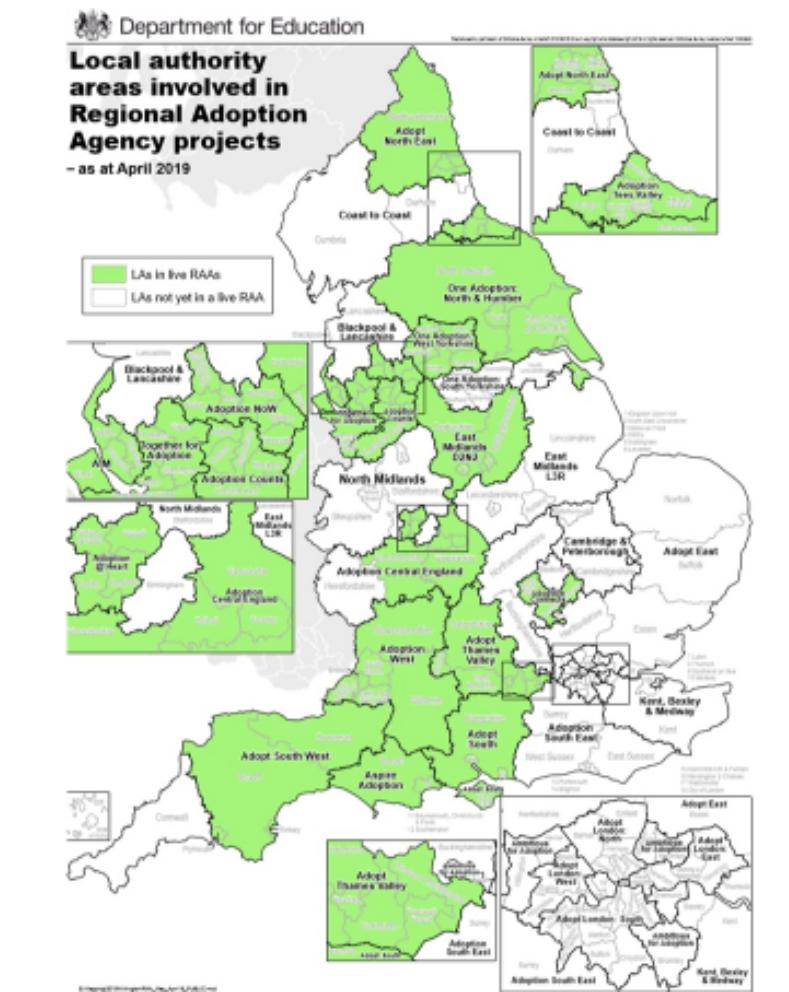
- 4.4 In 2018-19, there was an overspend on the staffing budget in line with agreements made at Aspire Management Boards to recruit casual staff and staff on fixed term contracts to manage the volume of activity. Aspire is also expected to cover inflationary growth so was required to meet pressures arising from the national pay award for 2018/2019, adding a further pressure of around £34,000 to the staffing budgets. Factoring in an additional growth element for increments pushed this pressure to £42,000.
- 4.5 The pressure on the staffing budget was offset to some extent by underspending in other budget areas, and by income generated by selling more Aspire assessed adopters to other adoption agencies than was spent buying in families for children for whom Aspire was family finding.
- 4.6 The overall budgetary position for Aspire for 2018/2019 was a £100,000 overspend. The £40,000 in the reserve offset that to some extent, leaving £60,000 to be split between the 3 local authorities. This translated into £22,980 from Bournemouth Borough Council, £10,260 from the Borough of Poole and £26,760 from Dorset County Council.
- 4.7 Whilst the staffing and interagency budgets remain a potential pressure into 2019-20, Aspire can still be seen as providing value for money. Removing children from the care system through adoption represents a significant saving for local authorities. The University of Bristol have estimated costs of £34,320 a year for every year a child remains in foster care. Aspire discharges most of the local authority statutory duties in respect of adoption and special guardianship, and had placed 106 children for adoption since July 2017, removing them from the care system, for a total budget of just over £2,000,000 a year. Had these children remained in the care system, the total cost per year to the three local authorities of all of those children remaining in care would have been over £3.6 million.

5. Commissioning

- 5.1 Most of the services which are the responsibility of Aspire are provided by staff directly employed by the RAA, other than an independent support service for birth families whose children have been adopted, and services provided by external therapeutic providers funded by the Adoption Support Fund.
- 5.2 The independent support service to birth relatives affected by adoption is commissioned out to Families for Children, the Voluntary Adoption Agency which is partnered with Aspire. Quarterly contract review meetings are held. The current contract runs to 31st March 2020.
- 5.3 Applications are made to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) (funded by central government) to pay external providers, when families need therapeutic services which Aspire cannot provide in house. Providers are checked out by the Bournemouth Borough Council Access to Resources Team (ART) prior to adding to the pan Dorset providers list. The ASF also generated some income for Aspire as some therapeutic services provided in house can also be claimed via the ASF, generating nearly £12,000 in the year. The future of the fund is uncertain after April 2020, dependent on the central government's Autumn Spending Review.

6. The national picture

- 6.1 At the beginning of April 2019, Aspire Adoption was one of seventeen RAAs established across the country, comprising of 77 Local Authorities, with others due to come on line in 2019/2020. The Department of Education is still pushing the agenda for regional adoption agencies, and at the end of March 2019, only 17 Local Authorities were not part of a regionalisation plan to go live by April 2020. The map below shows which RAAs were live or planned as at April 2019.



- 6.2 In the South West of England, Adopt South West (Devon, Somerset, Plymouth and Torbay) went live on 1 October 2018, Adoption West (Bristol, BANES, North Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, South Gloucestershire) went live on 1 March 2019, followed by Adopt South (Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Southampton, and Plymouth), on 1 April 2019. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have not yet engaged in the RAA programme.
- 6.3 There are two key areas of pressure for the emerging RAAs. The most immediately pressing is in relation to adopter sufficiency. At the end of February 2019, there were 1,032 children active on the national Adoption Register with Placement Orders, but no adoptive family identified. There were a further 110 children on hold, but only 288 approved adopters active on the Register.

- 6.4 Data from the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) for the end of March 2019 confirms that there were 125 children registered with SWAC and only 54 prospective adopters.
- 6.5 National data from the Adoption and Special Leadership Board for the 3rd Quarter of 2018-19 suggests a slight improvement in Registrations of Interest from prospective adopters and in numbers of those in assessment. However, there had also been an increase in the numbers of children waiting with a placement order but not yet placed with an adoptive family. 39% of the children waiting at 31 December 2018 had been waiting 18 months or more. Timescales for placing children for adoption in the adoption scorecards also seem to have stalled since 2017.
- 6.6 The children waiting longest are likely to be older, in sibling groups, of black, Asian, or mixed ethnicity (BAME) or with significant developmental delay or disabilities. Work is being undertaken at a national level to increase recruitment numerically and to target adopters for the children waiting longest.
- 6.7 The other area of national focus is in relation to adoption support. The future of the ASF is uncertain beyond April 2020, dependent on the central government Autumn Spending Review, and demand for services is rising. Aspire also has the pressure of having responsibility for support to special guardians too where demand is high. Work on this too is a priority for RAA Leaders.

7. Service Priorities for 2019-20

- 7.1 Aspire has the following key aims for the coming year-
- Decisions about adoption and special guardianship for children in care are made in a consistent way and informed by the evidence about what is in the best interests of the child.
 - Those children are then matched and placed without delay with suitable and well-prepared adopters or special guardians;
 - Once placed, children and families are given the support they need to thrive.
 - To achieve all of the above whilst remaining in budget.
- 7.2 To help deliver the aims set out above, activities are focused around the following strategic objectives:
- Recruiting a sufficiency of prospective adopters to continue to place the majority of Aspire children with families assessed by Aspire, with a surplus of families to ‘sell on’ to other local authorities and RAAs, bringing income into the RAA and contributing to national sufficiency targets;

- Targeting recruitment to families who will be able to meet the needs of children waiting longest and those with the most complex needs.
- Developing practice to ensure that all children are well prepared for the move to their adoptive family, that introduction plans are child focused and that children and families are supported after placement.
- Ensuring that assessments of special guardians are completed within court timescales and provide robust independent evidence to the LAs and courts to inform their permanence decisions for vulnerable children.
- Developing adoption and special guardianship support services to meet increasing need and demand, particularly in the light of continuing uncertainty about the future of the Adoption Support Fund.

8. Challenges for the year ahead

- Being able to recruit the ‘right’ kind of adopters at a time when there are difficulties nationally in doing so. If Aspire is unable to do so, there will be pressure on budgets from outgoing interagency fees for children exceeding income in from interagency fees for adopters who are matched with children from elsewhere.
- Managing the uncertainty around the continuation of the Adoption Support Fund beyond 2020 and managing demand to free Aspire staff up to develop their skills to deliver therapeutic services inhouse.
- Maintaining current staffing levels and managing capacity across all teams as a result of higher than expected demand in all areas of work.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 Demand has been high in all areas of work undertaken by Aspire Adoption since the RAA went live in 2017. A total of 106 children have been placed in new families through adoption. All but one of those placements has been successful. These are some of the most damaged youngsters in society. The courts do not make Placement Orders without being completely satisfied that a child cannot live with their birth family whatever support is provided to help them to turn their lives round. Legally removing parental responsibility and a parent’s legal rights in respect of a child permanently is a decision which is only taken when '*nothing else will do.*'
- 9.2 For the children placed for adoption, they have an opportunity to grow up in stable, loving homes, where the emotional damage of their early months or years can be repaired, giving them the best chance to grow up as healthy, happy individuals. Adopters come in all shapes and sizes, some with children by birth, others childless, single, married, in heterosexual or same sex relationships. For them, adoption is an opportunity to have a family or to extend their existing family. Adoption is life changing for them too.

- 9.3 The impact of these children's early experiences and having to form new relationships means that adoptive families will need ongoing support over the years. Demand for post adoption services has been high, with a significant amount of unmet need bubbling up as soon as Aspire Adoption went live. Families who had not received a service or who were on waiting lists for support services in the build up to the RAA going live overwhelmed the team with their needs in the first six to nine months. The backlog has now been cleared but demand remains high and at times the team has to operate a waiting list based on priority needs. Having clinical psychology support and an education specialist post is seen as innovative and has been key in managing and developing post order services. The development of group work has also helped to manage demand. However, this remains a pressure area for the coming year, particularly given the uncertainty of the future of the ASF.
- 9.4 Aspire is the only RAA to have included services to special guardians, both assessments and support. This is a model which the Department for Education have been very interested in, with the national focus on permanence for children now including special guardianship. The national Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) has now extended its remit to become the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB). Aspire's experience in assessing special guardians and in providing support to special guardians has been called on in a number of national debates. Andrew Christie, who chairs the ASGLB, has visited Aspire to talk to service users and been very positive about the model. The Department for Education are also very interested in the organisational structure of Aspire in this respect.
- 9.5 There is also interest nationally in the Aspire model of taking case responsibility for the majority of children with adoption plans from the point of the Placement Order. Aspire is not the only RAA to have done so but one of a handful of live RAAs to have done so from day one. Others are interested in the model but are moving towards integrated services for their RAAs incrementally, and so are not at a point where this is an option as yet.
- 9.6 Aspire was one of the first to go live, and is seen nationally as one of the most successful, of the live RAAs. A longitudinal evaluation of RAAs is underway by the University of Bristol, and Ecorys, and feedback from the initial two day visit in November 2018 was positive. There was feedback about the '*wide engagement from RAA staff, participating local authorities and stakeholders*'. They went on to add that '*There was a common view that the new structure worked well and frequently interviewees considered the connections between the RAA, partner LAs and external stakeholders (including the courts) to be one of the defining features of their model, and an important part of its success to date.... Shared themes from the interviews included the emergence of a more child-centred model, greater consistency across processes and pathways (e.g. early permanence), a more stable adopter journey, and improved quality (e.g. more robust and accurate assessment and case reporting, improved in-house matches, including harder to place cases), evidenced through a range of practice examples'*
- 9.7 Aspire has been part of two Ofsted inspections, for the Borough of Poole in 2017 and Bournemouth Borough Council in 2018. On both occasions, feedback was positive. From the Borough of Poole inspection report- '*Adoption services are good, and permanence through adoption is achieved for children from a range of different backgrounds and ages*'

'In the last year, the local authority has been successful in achieving adoption for an increasing number of children. This includes older children, brothers and sisters together, children from minority ethnic backgrounds and placements for children with complex needs.'

From the Bournemouth Borough Council Inspection report- *'The establishment of the regional adoption agency Aspire Adoption, managed by Bournemouth on behalf of three local authorities, has led to improvements in adoption performance, the quality of assessments and level of support to adoptive carers.'*

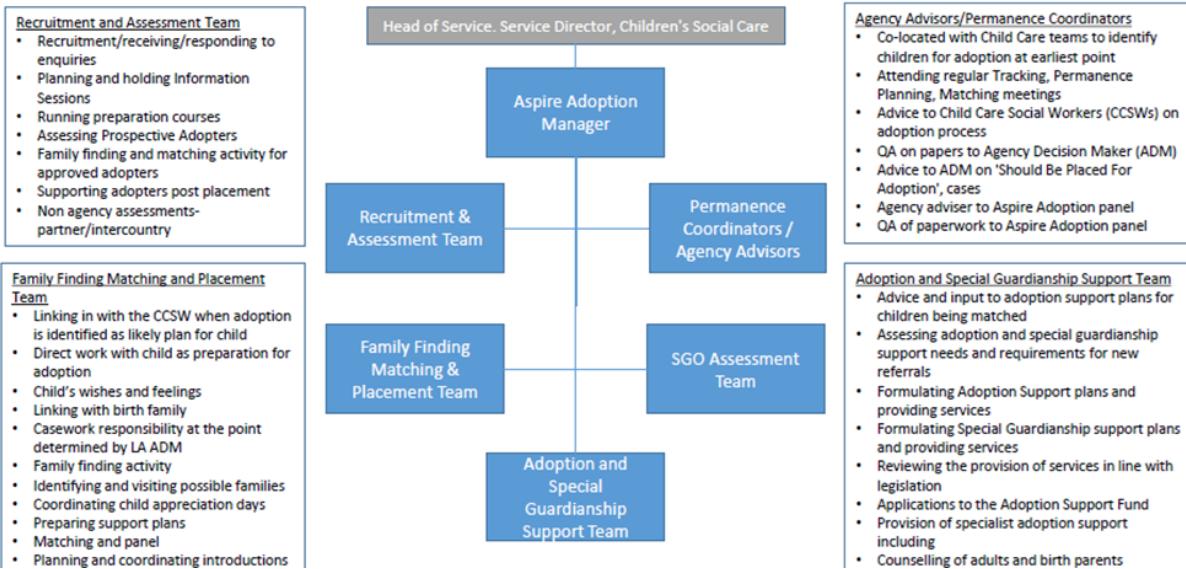
'Children are well matched with adopters who are able to access a range of therapeutic and support services to maximise their understanding of and care for children. Children's views and experiences are captured effectively, and direct and therapeutic input helps prepare them for adoption. Support plans are suitably considered and ensure that adopters have access to necessary practical and financial support to ensure a successful adoption as far as possible. An experienced adoption panel chair and an agency decision-maker provide appropriate scrutiny and challenge to adoption applications.'

- 9.8 Other live RAAs have struggled financially, needing significant injections of cash mainly because of overspend on the interagency budget. Despite the slowdown in adopter assessments in 2018-19, Aspire has managed to place the majority of Aspire children with Aspire assessed adopters, with a surplus of adopters to sell on to other adoption agencies, generating income for the RAA. The overspend in 2018-19 was therefore kept to a minimum. This is an area where all RAAs remain vulnerable, given that an individual adoption placement for a child costs at least £27,000, and in the Aspire model, the interagency expenditure has to be found from the overall RAA budget of just over £2 million pounds a year.

Appendix 1

Aspire Organisational Structure and Staffing

Aspire Adoption - Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) – Organisation Structure



1. Staffing

- 1.1 There are 44 permanent full time equivalent posts in Aspire, with the permanent staffing establishment supplemented by those on casual or fixed term contracts to increase capacity where needed. Many of the staff work part time, with the total number of staff comprising of social workers, support workers, and business support staff totalling about 65.
- 1.2 The service is led and managed by the Aspire Adoption Service Manager, Heather Freeman. Mrs Freeman is a qualified social worker, has a management qualification and is registered with HCPC.
- 1.3 The Recruitment & Assessment Team comprises of a team manager, practice manager and 7.0 FTE social workers. All are registered with the HCPC.
- 1.4 The Family Finding, Matching and Placement Team comprises of a team manager, practice manager and 5.5 FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with the HCPC, and 3 FTE family support workers.
- 1.5 The Special Guardianship Assessment team has a team manager, practice manager and 5.5 FTE social workers. All are registered with the HCPC.
- 1.6 The Adoption & Special Guardianship Support team has a team manager, practice manager and 5 FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with the HCPC. The team also has 3 FTE family support workers, a 0.4 FTE clinical psychologist and a 0.8 FTE education specialist.
- 1.7 There are 2 full time Permanence Coordinators, who also act as Agency Advisers to the Aspire Adoption Panel and Aspire Agency Decision Maker, and to the Agency Decision Makers in the local authorities in relation to decisions as to whether a child should be adopted.

- 1.8 The service is supported by 6 FTE business support staff including a senior business support officer, a panel administrator, and a marketing, media and monitoring officer.
- 1.9 All of the social workers employed by Aspire are registered with the HCPC, and many of the staff, including support workers, have additional qualifications including skills in a variety of therapeutic interventions such as theraplay, sensory integration, mindfulness and DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy).
- 1.10 Aspire also has access to dedicated clinical psychology support for staff and service users, and an educational specialist funded by the Virtual School Heads in Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset.
- 1.11 No agency staff are employed, as all posts are filled, and any vacancies attract a high standard of applications across all areas of the work undertaken by Aspire. Casual staff add capacity for one off pieces of work in the Recruitment and Assessment Team and the Special Guardianship Assessment Team. There are 3 fixed term contract staff as agreed by the Management Board. Two are in the Recruitment and Assessment Team and the third is providing maternity cover in the Family Finding, Matching and Placement Team.

2. Staff training and development

- 2.1 Staff in Aspire have access to training and courses run by Bournemouth as the host authority and access to external courses, dependent on budgetary restrictions.
- 2.2 All staff have monthly supervision and annual appraisals, and monthly team case and practice reflection sessions are facilitated by the clinical psychologists
- 2.3 Informal lunchtime professional practice sessions are also held on a monthly basis.
- 2.4 A staff forum for all staff in Aspire is held every 4 months to update on Aspire performance data, local and national issues relating to the service and to develop the team service plans.
- 2.5 Training for local authority staff was commissioned in October 2018 to raise standards in completing Child Permanence Reports.
- 2.6 A half day Signs of Safety briefing was held for Aspire staff in December 2019.
- 2.7 A half day training on Early Permanence was commissioned from CCS Adoption in November 2018 for staff in Aspire and in the local authorities.
- 2.8 An education conference on supporting adopted and permanently placed children was sponsored from the training budget in October 2018 for Aspire staff and designated teachers and learning support assistants in the geographic area.
- 2.9 There are plans for another conference in 2019-20 to make best use of the limited training budget by charging external attendees.

Appendix 2

Governance

The following is taken from the Inter Authority Agreement

SCHEDULE 2 – TERMS OF REFERENCE

Governance Structure



Part 1 – Strategic Partnership Board

1 Name:

The name of the Board for Aspire Adoption shall be the **Strategic Partnership Board** which is established pursuant to an Inter Authority Agreement between Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council and the Borough of Poole ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

2 Role:

The Board will provide advice, oversight and endorsement of the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption.

3 The Board will:

- 3.1 Provide and review the strategic direction of Aspire Adoption;
- 3.2 Oversee, review and endorse budget setting and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption;
 - 3.2.1 Oversee, review and endorse the Business Plan annually and make recommendations to the Councils for Aspire Adoption;
 - 3.2.2 Attempt to resolve disputes between the Councils under the terms of the Inter Authority Agreement.

4 Accountability and Responsibility:

- 4.1 Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that their nominated representative(s) (or named substitute) are available to attend all Board meetings, which will be scheduled in advance.

- 4.2 All members of the Board will be in a position to make decisions within their respective organisation, where appropriate.
- 4.3 All members of the Board will be responsible for reporting to their organisation, through their respective governance arrangements.

5 Meetings of the Board

- 5.1 The Board will meet every six months or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
- 5.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
- 5.3 The Chairperson will agree the dates, times and venues for the meetings of the Board. The meeting timetable will be scheduled over the year, to reflect both planned monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- 5.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
- 5.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.
- 5.6 Agendas and papers for the meeting will be sent out at least five working days prior to the meeting in order to provide time for members of the Board to read them and identify actions for their own organisations.
- 5.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

6 Membership:

- 6.1 The Board will consist of:
 - 6.1.1 Portfolio Holder and Executive Director for Childrens Services for Bournemouth Borough Council;
 - 6.1.2 Cabinet Member for Learning, Skills and Children's Safeguarding and Corporate Director for Children's, Adults and Community Services for Dorset County Council;
 - 6.1.3 Portfolio Holder and Strategic Director for Childrens Services for the Borough of Poole Council.
- 6.2 The Board will consult (so far as it considers proper and appropriate to do so):
 - 6.2.1 Representatives from local Voluntary Adoption Agencies/Families for Children; and
 - 6.2.2 A representative from Stakeholders.
- 6.3 Members of the Board should:
 - 6.3.1 Commit to attending the majority of meetings or nominate a suitable substitute who can attend in their place who will be expected to exercise

- the powers of the Member for whom they are substituting. Only Board members or their named representatives can attend Board meetings;
- 6.3.2 Uphold and support the Board decisions and be prepared to follow through actions and decisions for the Board proposals and declaring any conflict of interest should it arise;
- 6.3.3 Be prepared to represent the Board at stakeholder events and support the agreed consensus view of the Board when speaking on behalf of the Board to other parties.

7 Voting – Quorum

- 7.1 No quorum is necessary for the routine business and the receiving of reports. However where the Chairperson determines that a critical decision is required there must be a representative from all the Councils.
- 7.2 In the spirit of effective collaboration and partnership working, the Board will always seek to come to agreement through consensus and unanimity following debate and discussion where all the members will be encouraged to participate.
- 7.3 The Members of the Board will be expected to subscribe to the seven principles of public life in their work and decision making. The principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- 7.4 Members will be expected to declare any personal interests in the business of the Board and to withdraw from participation where such interests are prejudicial or pecuniary.

Part 2 – Operational Management Board

1 Name:

The name of the Board for Aspire Adoption shall be the **Operational Management Board** which is established pursuant to an Inter Authority Agreement between Bournemouth Borough Council, Dorset County Council and the Borough of Poole ("the Councils") for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency.

2 Role:

The Board will provide support, advice and management to Aspire Adoption to ensure that statutory requirements and the Business Plan is delivered effectively.

3 The Board will:

- 3.1 oversee the implementation of the Aspire Adoption Budget and Business Plan;
- 3.2 oversee the commissioning arrangements and operational performance against agreed local priorities and targets and in line with national priorities and targets.

4 Accountability and Responsibility:

- 4.1 Each Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that their nominated representative(s) (or named substitute) are available to attend all Board meetings, which will be scheduled in advance.
- 4.2 This Board will report to the Strategic Partnership Board.

5 Meetings of the Board

- 5.1 The Board will meet quarterly or at a greater or lesser frequency if it so decides.
- 5.2 The Board will elect a Chairperson and Vice Chairperson from amongst its members.
- 5.3 The Chairperson will agree the dates, times and venues for the meetings of the Board. The meeting timetable will be scheduled over the year, to reflect both planned monitoring and evaluation requirements.
- 5.4 The Chairperson shall normally preside at all meetings of the Board.
- 5.5 The Chairperson will be responsible for agreeing meeting agendas and draft minutes for circulation.
- 5.6 Agendas and papers for the meeting will be sent out at least five working days prior to the meeting in order to provide time for members of the Board to read them and identify actions for their own organisations.
- 5.7 Minutes of meeting will be circulated within 5 working days after the meeting with an action list.

6 Membership:

- 6.1 The Board will consist of:
 - 6.1.1 Service Director for Children's Social Care for Bournemouth;
 - 6.1.2 Assistant Director – Care and Protection for Dorset;
 - 6.1.3 Head of Children & Young People's Social Care for Poole; 6.1.4 Childrens Services Commissioners from each of the three Parties;
- 6.1.5 Adoption Aspire Manager.
- 6.2 Members of the Board should:
 - 6.2.1 Commit to attending the majority of meetings or nominate a suitable substitute who can attend in their place who will be expected to exercise the powers of the Member for whom they are substituting. Only Board members or their named representatives can attend Board meetings;
 - 6.2.2 Uphold and support the Board decisions and be prepared to follow though actions and decisions and declaring any conflict of interest should it arise;

- 6.2.3 Be prepared to represent the Board at stakeholder events and support the agreed consensus view of the Board when speaking on behalf of the Board to other parties.

7 Voting – Quorum

- 7.1 No quorum is necessary for the routine business and the receiving of reports. However where the Chairperson determines that a critical decision is required there must be a representative from all the Councils.
- 7.2 In the spirit of effective collaboration and partnership working, the Board will always seek to come to agreement through consensus and unanimity following debate and discussion where all the members will be encouraged to participate.
- 7.3 The Members of the Board will be expected to subscribe to the seven principles of public life in their work and decision making. The principles are selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- 7.4 Members will be expected to declare any personal interests in the business of the Board and to withdraw from participation where such interests are prejudicial or pecuniary.

Appendix 3

Registered Manager/Responsible Officer and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) Role

- 1.1 Until 1st April 2019, the Registered Manager/Responsible Officer for Bournemouth Borough Council, under regulation 5 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, was one of the service managers in Bournemouth. In Poole, the role was undertaken by the Head of Children and Young People's Services. In Dorset, the role was undertaken by the Senior Manager, Placements and Resources. All are members of the Aspire Operational Management Board. From 1st April 2019, the role will be undertaken for BCP Council by the Service Manager for Aspire Adoption, and by the Senior Manager, Placements and Resources for Dorset Council.
- 1.2 In 2018-19, there were two Agency Decision Makers for Aspire Adoption and Bournemouth Borough Council, a service manager and the Director of Children and Adult Services in Bournemouth Borough Council. They were responsible for Should Be Placed for Adoption (SBPA) decisions for looked after children from Bournemouth Borough Council, for decisions about the suitability of Aspire adopters, and for all matches made within Aspire for looked after children who originated from the local authority areas of Bournemouth, Poole or Dorset Council.
- 1.3 In Poole, agency decisions about whether a child should be placed for adoption were shared between a service manager and the Head of Children and Young People's Services in Poole. In Dorset, the ADM role for SBPA decisions was undertaken by the Senior Manager, Placements and Resources .
- 1.4 From 1st April 2019, the Senior Manager, Placements and Resources will continue as ADM for Should Be Placed for Adoption decisions for looked after children from Dorset, and 2 service managers and the interim Director of Children and Families in BCP Council will take on the ADM role for Aspire and BCP Council. All have social work and management qualifications and are registered with HCPC.

Appendix 4

Aspire Adoption Panel

- 1.1 Aspire Adoption operates an Adoption Panel, constituted in accordance with legislation, regulations and guidance. The panel has an independent chairperson, and 15 members on a Central List from which each panel is drawn. There is no legal maximum number of panel members at each panel but in practice, a maximum of 6 or 7 attend each panel, including the panel chair and a social worker. The designated doctor for looked after children in the local authorities funding Aspire is also the agency medical adviser and is a full member of the panel.
- 1.2 The panel is serviced by a panel administrator and has access to legal advice if needed. The professional advice to the panel is provided by the two Permanence Coordinators, one of whom attends each Panel to ensure the smooth running and to advise on policies and procedures.
- 1.3 Current membership includes individuals with personal experience of adoption as adopters and adopted adults. It also includes experienced social workers with direct experience of adoption work, a psychotherapist with experience of working in a child and adolescent mental health setting, and panel members with experience of working in an educational setting.
- 1.4 Members of the Central List from which individual panel membership is drawn reflect the diversity of modern society as far as possible, and include those who are single, in heterosexual and same sex relationships. One panel member on the Central List has personal experience of disability. There is some diversity in terms of age, with panel members in their 30s and others who are retired. Although most panel members are of white British ethnic origin, one panel members is of black African ethnicity and another is of Indian descent.
- 1.5 The functions of the panel in relation to adoption matters are
 - to recommend whether prospective adopters are suitable to adopt a child;
 - to recommend whether a proposed match between a child and prospective adopters is a suitable one.
 - In circumstances where a child is relinquished for adoption and no Placement Order is applied for, the panel will recommend whether the child should be placed for adoption
- 1.6 The panel can also give advice about the numbers and ages of children in relation to prospective adopters, also about post adoption contact, delegated parental responsibility and adoption support. The panel has a consultative role regarding the agency's policies and procedures, and a monitoring role regarding quality assurance and ensuring that the time scales set out in the Adoption & Children Act 2002 are met.
- 1.7 The Aspire Adoption Panel makes recommendations based on detailed written reports prepared by the child's social worker and adoption social worker, and the social worker and team manager's attendance at panel to clarify points if needed.
- 1.8 When considering the approval or deregistration of prospective adopters or a match between prospective adopters and a child, adoptive applicants have the option of attending panel in person, to provide scope to discuss and clarify any issues relevant to the application.

Applicants who decide not to attend in person are not disadvantaged in any way and no judgement is made from their decision not to do so although every effort will be made to assist their attendance.

- 1.9 The recommendations and advice of the panel are referred, along with the final agreed minutes of the meeting, to the Agency Decision Maker, for a decision to be made and conveyed to all parties within the time scales laid down in the Adoption & Children Act 2002.
- 1.10 The Panel chair is independent, is an experienced chair and an adopter of 2 children. He attends both the Aspire Operational Management Board and the Aspire Strategic Partnership Board and presents a report to the Boards every 6 months in line with standard 17 of the Adoption Minimum Standards, on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement. His most recent report is included as Appendix 5

Appendix 5

Aspire Adoption Panel Chair's Bi-Annual Report January 2019

Introduction

This is my third Report as Chair of Aspire's Adoption Panel.
Panel is working very well now as an established and integrated team.

Panel

Panel met on fourteen occasions between July 1st and December 31st 2018. Workload has been consistent, but manageable. Our priority has been, and remains, to ensure that matches are heard as quickly as possible.

Use of IT to distribute papers to Panel members electronically has rolled out relatively smoothly. Whilst there have been some hardware issues, most particularly the operation of the iPads given the security settings put in place, these are being addressed and have not greatly disrupted the functioning of Panel.

Improved methods of working have continued to grow organically, enhancing the way by which recommendations are delivered by panel members. Feedback from our Agency Decision Makers has been positive in respect of the format in which Panel's recommendations are presented.

Time keeping remains a challenge particularly in respect of accommodating the detailed questioning of some Panel members within the time frame allotted. 'Asking pertinent (and tricky) questions' has therefore been added as a topic at Panel's Training Day on January 25th.

Our Vice Chairs have chaired Panels successfully during the period.

Panel Focus

Panel's focus remains entirely on the child(ren).

We have focussed appropriately on issues of safeguarding, particularly when considering applicants for approval. This has continued to include the ability to deal with stress, applicants' presentation when frustrated, stressed or angry and the ability of their support networks to assist and mitigate at stressful moments.

Other common themes at approval have included the potential issues arising from obesity, financial arrangements and in the case of those applicants who have suffered from infertility, evidence that they have come to terms with and grieved appropriately for their loss of any birth child of their own.

Similarly, we continue to keep the child(ren) at the centre of our scrutiny when considering matches. We ensure their needs are at the forefront of the matching process and that adopters have been appropriately and fully prepared.

A growing focus for Panel during consideration of matches has been contact arrangements and the support plan. It has been heartening to see an increase in the number of contact plans including direct contact for adopted children with their siblings and extended families.

Appraisals

All panel Members have completed appraisals for 2018, and I was appraised by the Agency Decision Maker in July 2018.

Appraisals of Panel members have commenced for 2019, with the majority scheduled for early February.

Panel Business

Aspire's Adoption Panel has undertaken the following business over the past year.

	January – June 2018	July – December 2018	Total 2018
Approvals	26	16	42
Approvals deferred	0	1	1
Matches	23	22	45
De-Registration	1	5	6
Total	50	44	94

Adopters

Panel has considered 17 recommendations for approval in the six months from July to December 2018. All but one of those presented have been approved. Those approved included heterosexual couples, same sex couples and single females. In most cases the recommendation for approval was unanimous during this 6-month period although in one case the chair had to use his casting vote. One case was unanimously deferred for further work and has not yet been brought back to Panel.

Matches

Panel has considered 22 matches in the second six months of 2018, involving 27 children. The vast majority of matches continue to be with prospective adopters who have been approved by Aspire. In the second six months of 2018 there were 4 out of agency matches, in comparison to two in the first six months of the year.

Quality of Social Worker Reports

I am pleased to be able to report the quality of Social Worker reports has continued to improve overall.

PARs increasingly contain all the information needed for Panel to make an informed decision. APRs have also improved in terms of their content and it has been heartening to note a considerable reduction in the amount of formulaic response in these reports and more focussed and individual comments being made.

The quality of CPR and continues to vary, however as I have mentioned previously many of these do not originate with Aspire workers.

Panel have focussed recently on the provision of photographs of birth family members in the CPR, it being a document likely to be referenced by the adopted person during their exploration of their identity later in life.

The use of external social workers to complete assessments is also an issue. In general, where agency workers have been used the quality of their paperwork has been less good and has required Panel to undertake a greater degree of scrutiny when considering those cases.

Training

No Panel Training has been held during this period. The session booked for November having been moved to January due to work commitments

Regional Activity

One of the Vice Chairs has represented Aspire at the South West Adoption Consortium Panel Chairs meeting in Bridgwater and I have attended the London and the South East Panel Chairs meeting at Coram BAAF Headquarters.

Positives

Aspire's Panel continue to work well as a team, Panel is offering appropriate scrutiny and challenge, reports are of a good standard. Our Panel Advisors offer excellent support to Panel, provide appropriate advice and have ensured efficient Panel operation.

Vulnerabilities

There are a number of vulnerabilities for Panel, some of which have continued since my last report. I believe the root cause lies with the work and time capacity of the Panel Advisors in particular. Given the other roles they undertake, there have not been able to prioritise anything other than core Panel work.

Looking back at the vulnerabilities identified in my last report:

The predominance of female members of panel remains, as does a lack of adopters. I am not the only male on Panel and one of only two adopters, the other also fulfilling the role of social work member on occasion. Potential new male adopter Panel members have been identified, but as yet interviews have not been arranged for them.

Feedback of outcomes to Panel continues to be an issue, as does the collation of feedback in general. From social workers and adopters attending panel and from Panel members about the quality of paperwork.

Reporting on outcomes and feedback from adopters and social workers has yet to become an integral, regular part of the Panel agenda.

There has been no Panel training during this six-month period, although some Panel members have attended training events focused upon particular aspects of adoption work. The postponement of our November session was as a result of workload preventing the Panel Advisor team being able to create suitable training sessions and materials for the day.

Additionally, there have been occasions when the Panel Advisors have reported pressure of workload prohibiting them being able to fully quality assure Panel papers. This has created a vulnerability where elements of the PAR collected later in the case have not been cross referenced or answered within the paperwork.

I hope that the capacity to create time to help them fulfil some of these items better will be form part of the consideration of job planning during staffing reviews moving forward.

Conclusion

In spite of some increased vulnerabilities, I am pleased to report Aspire's Adoption Panel has established itself well and is operating effectively. We continue to address longer term vulnerabilities with the full engagement of the Panel Advisors and support of Aspire's senior management. I should be clear that we continue to work well in providing a good level of independent scrutiny of those adopters being approved by Aspire and the matches being made by the agency.