

Cabinet

3 November 2020

Aspire Annual Adoption Report for the period from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): All Councillors

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

Report Author: Jennifer Warr
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Report Status: Public

Recommendation: Cabinet are asked:

1. To note the activity undertaken by Aspire Adoption to secure adoption and special guardianship families for children.
2. To note appendix 2 Interagency Agreement is under review to reflect there are now two Councils involved rather than three.

Reason for Recommendation:

1. Executive Summary

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.

Since 1st 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.

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.

This report details the adoption and special guardianship activity undertaken to secure permanence for Dorset Council's children.

2. Financial Implications

None identified

3. Climate implications

None identified

4. Other Implications

The adoption service exists to promote good permanence outcomes for children in care

5. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: LOW

Residual Risk: LOW

6. Equalities Impact Assessment

7. Appendices
N/A

8. Background Papers
N/A

Introduction

This is the second annual adoption report for Aspire Adoption, summarising the work of the agency in the period 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020.. 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://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/270100/adoption_statutory_guidance_2013.pdf

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 1st 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 As a result of local government reorganisation in April 2019, Aspire is now funded by two councils, namely Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Council and Dorset Council. On 1st April 2020, staff in Aspire were TUPE transferred to Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Council, which now hosts the RAA. The Inter Authority Agreement was revised to reflect the change in council boundaries.

1.4 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.

1.5 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.

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 on the following page 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	✓	
PERMANENCE 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 01/04/19 to 31/03/20

3.1 Seventy three children had decisions made by the local authority Agency Decision Maker that they should be placed for adoption (SBPA), compared to 75 the previous year.

3.2 In 2019-20, 42 of the SBPA decisions were for children from the BCP Council area, and 31 from the Dorset Council area. Numbers each quarter fluctuated within each local authority, with nineteen in Q1 of 2019-20 in BCP Council, nine the following quarter and only 4 in quarter 3. There were only 5 or 6 in Dorset across all quarters, apart from quarter 3 when there were 14.

3.3 There is no clear pattern which can be identified within or across the local authorities in relation to numbers of SBPA decisions each quarter to manage workloads for staff in Aspire, or to manage the workload of the Agency Decision Makers in each local authority. A total of 199 SBPA decisions have now been made since Aspire went live in July 2017, an average of 18 SBPA decisions per quarter across the local authorities funding Aspire.

3.4 Forty six Placement Orders were made by the courts from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020. 27 were for children from the BCP Council area, 19 from the Dorset area. 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.

3.5 There continues to be a significant discrepancy between the number of local authority decisions that a child should be adopted and the courts making a Placement Order. This has been discussed with both local authorities, who have been given the relevant data to consider the reasons for this in relation to their permanency planning. It partly reflects the time lag between a SBPA decision and the final court hearing date, or a local authority change of plan before the final court hearing or the court making an alternative permanence plan for the child.

3.6 Fifty two children in the care of the local authorities of Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole and Dorset were placed for adoption in the year, compared to 50 the previous year. 33 of these were from the BCP council area, and 19 were from the Dorset Council area. A total of 158 children have been placed for adoption since Aspire went live, an average of 56 each year.

3.7 Nine children were placed on an Early Permanent (EP) basis in 2019-20, compared to eleven in the previous year. 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 the children placed on this basis in 2019-20 either have or will be adopted by these families.

3.8 Of the 158 children placed for adoption between July 2017 and the end of March 2020, all but 3 remain 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 9 year old moved from her adoptive family within a week of placement in 2019; and a 15 year old who was due to be adopted by her foster carers decided against being adopted in February 2020. Disruption meetings are always held to learn lessons when a child placed for adoption does not go on to be adopted.

3.9 At the end of March 2020, of the 38 children waiting with Placement Orders but not yet placed, and where the plan continues to be adoption, 1 child has been matched but cannot be placed because of ongoing court proceedings, 2 children are in EP placements. Matching is progressing for most of the other children where the local authority has legal agreement to place for adoption. There are 5 children who are being adopted by their foster carers, 13 where panel dates are already booked. Links are actively being pursued for 4 more children.

3.10 There were 13 children where Placement Orders had been granted but no family is currently being explored. Of these, 9 are boys, 4 are girls; 4 are in sibling groups; The youngest child is 2 and a half but needs to be placed with her sibling; there are 2 children aged 3 and a half, one of whom also needs to be placed with a sibling; the oldest 2 children are aged 9; 2 children are aged 8; 2 are aged 7; and 2 are aged 6. There are also 2 boys aged 4. Internal and external links are being followed up for all these children but without any likely matches identified as yet.

3.11 It has been clear in the last two years 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. Recruitment activity has been the priority in the coming year and was 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 40 children were adopted in 2019-20, lower than the previous year but with 48 children in adoption placements at the end of March 2020. Adoption applications are not usually lodged with the court until after the second Child in Care review after placement, about 3-4 months after a child has been placed with their adoptive family. Some prospective adopters need longer still before they feel ready to lodge the application, which can lead to delay as the court application is the prospective adopters' application, not the local authority's application. There were 10 children where the prospective adopters do not feel ready to lodge their application at the end of March 2020, 8 of whom were in interagency placements.

3.13 There are also 13 children in adoptive placements where it is too soon to lodge the adoption application, and 10 applications already lodged with the court. Others are ready to be lodged but the slow -down in Adoption Orders is likely to continue for some time as the courts are having to prioritise their work to focus on children at risk and stopped accepting adoption applications in mid -March 2020 because of the Covid crisis. Seven applications were taken to court to lodge in mid -March but were not accepted. There are 3 others ready to be lodged, with hopes of the courts finding a working solution in early April.

3.14 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. The available published data is for the 3- year period 2015-18 but provisional data for 2016-19 has been drafted. Care has to 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.

3.15 Aspire data for 2019-20 would suggest that for the Aspire local authorities, it took an average of 160 days between the local authority receiving court authority to place the child and the ADM deciding on a match to an adoptive family. The England average from the provisional 2016-19 adoption scorecards is 170 days. It took an average of 356 days between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. The England average from the provisional 2018-19 adoption scorecards is 389 days.

A1 Days between a child entering care & moving in with their adoptive family (England average from the provisional 2016-19 scorecard is 382 days)

	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	304	404	357	354	355
Dorset	220	725	313	534	412
Poole	233	267	248	280	255
	263	467	328	402	356

A2 Days between an LA receiving court authority to place & deciding on a match (England average from the provisional 2016-19 scorecard is 170 days)

	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	123	201	153	134	155
Dorset	64	304	188	234	203
Poole	42	62	54	43	51
	92	235	145	164	160

3.16 Numbers of adopters approved in 2019-20 more than met the year's sufficiency target of fifty new adoptive families, with 60 families approved compared to only 33 in 2018-19. The recruitment of 2.25 full time equivalent fixed term social workers in the team helped to achieve this turnaround, as well as staff on maternity and adoption leave returning to work. Recruiting at this level allows for most Aspire children to be placed with Aspire assessed adopters,

provides a surplus to meet national sufficiency needs and brings income into Aspire to offset the cost of any interagency placements which need to be purchased for Aspire children.

3.17 For the last 2 years, numbers of referrals for special guardianship assessments have settled to between 42 and 33 each quarter, and the total number of referrals for each year has been 148. The Special Guardianship Assessment Team were staffed and funded for no more than 100 referrals a year, so have been under considerable pressure in terms of capacity, especially as these reports are court ordered and timetabled to be completed in no more than 12 weeks, often less. Assessments of prospective special guardians take place across the country and not just in the wider Dorset area. In the last year, assessments have been undertaken in Bristol, Dudley, Gosport, Hull, Lancaster, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Oxford, Peterborough, Rotherham and Walsall.

3.18 The number of withdrawals or discontinuations prior to the report being filed with the court has fallen in the last year from 52 in 2018-19, to 38 in 2019-20. This reflects the joint work between the local authorities and Aspire to ensure that viability assessments are more robust and that prospective special guardians have a clear understanding of what a Special Guardianship Order would mean to them their families and the child, as early as possible.

3.19 The provision of post order adoption and special guardianship support is a statutory requirement and where demand has been seen to be rising not just locally but on a national basis. Numbers of open adoption and special guardianship post order support cases in Aspire have remained high, with at least 240 open cases at any one time. At the end of November 2019, that figure had reached nearly 300, with 44 cases held on duty.

3.20 By the end of March 2020, caseloads ranged from 26-38 cases for full -time social workers or support workers, and 14-17 cases for part time workers. The case load weighting system evidenced that workers had double the number of cases which was felt to be manageable and did not take into account the additional responsibilities of covering the daily duty rota, running monthly support groups, workshops or training, managing indirect contact (letterbox) cases, managing direct contact with birth relatives, or linking in with other professionals e.g. linking in with local schools.

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

ADM/SBPA	2017		2018				2019				2020	Total
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	8	7	4	10	8	7	5	8	5	2	8	72
Christchurch	n/a	1	1	0	0	2						
Dorset	9	8	7	15	7	7	1	5	6	14	6	85
Poole	1	4	3	3	4	4	4	10	3	2	2	40
Total	18	19	14	28	19	18	10	24	15	18	16	199

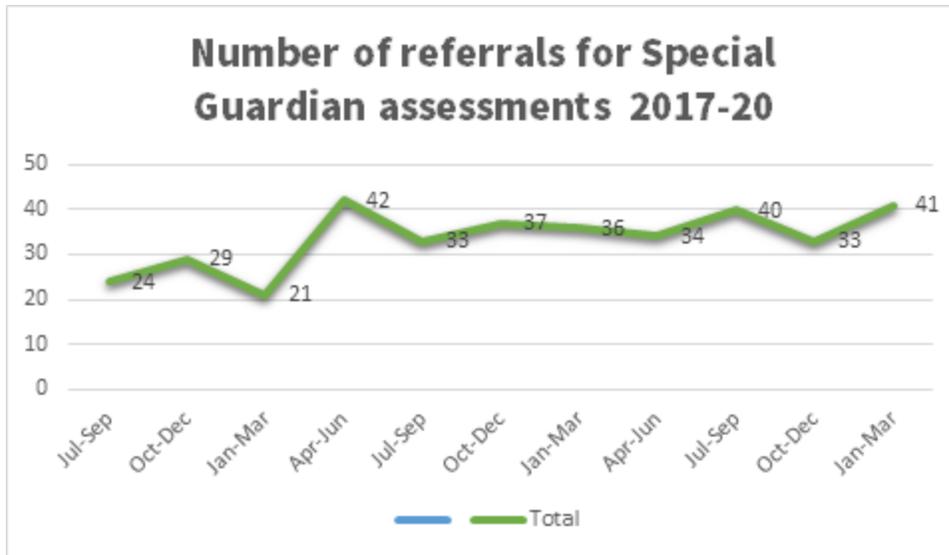
Placement Orders	2017		2018				2019				2020	Total
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	6	9	6	5	5	10	5	4	4	3	5	62
Christchurch	n/a	1	0	0	1							
Dorset	6	8	5	5	11	6	3	2	5	6	6	63
Poole	3	4	2	1	3	3	4	4	4	2	0	30
Total	15	21	13	11	19	19	12	10	14	11	11	156

Placements	2017		2018				2019				2020	Total
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	5	4	8	3	6	7	4	4	7	3	7	58
Christchurch	n/a	0	0	1	0	1						
Dorset	10	10	7	8	3	5	6	5	8	2	4	68
Poole	3	6	3	1	1	1	5	3	2	4	2	31
Total	18	20	18	12	10	13	15	12	17	10	13	158

Adoption Orders	2017		2018				2019				2020	Total
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	4	3	5	3	8	7	3	5	5	6	3	52
Dorset	7	9	3	12	2	12	9	4	5	4	3	70
Poole	0	9	3	7	4	2	5	1	1	2	1	35
Total	11	21	11	22	14	21	17	10	11	12	7	157

Early Permanence	2017		2018				2019				2020	Total
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
Bournemouth	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	7
Christchurch	n/a	0	0	1	0	1						
Dorset	2	1	0	1	3	0	0	1	0	2	0	10
Poole	1	2	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	2	1	9
Total	3	5	0	2	6	1	2	2	1	5	1	28

Adopters	2017		2018				2019				2020	Total
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
	9	12	15	11	3	12	7	16	14	17	13	129



4. Finance

4.1 Aspire is funded by the local authorities for whom it undertakes adoption and special guardianship services.

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. This was adjusted at the time of local government reorganisation in April 2019, to 59% from BCP Council and 41% from Dorset. This equates to a total budget of £2,102,700 with contributions of £857,840 from Dorset and £1,244,860 from BCP Council.

4.3 In the Inter Authority Agreement underpinning Aspire, it was agreed that any underspend would go into the Aspire Earmarked Reserve. In the Inter Authority Agreement it was agreed that any overspend was a shared risk and would be split proportionately between the local authorities.

4.4 The provisional Budget Monitoring position for the period April 2019 to March 2020 excludes the final end of year closedown adjustments that take place therefore these figures are still the draft position until the closedown is completed. However, they are not expected to vary considerably from this position.

4.5 It appears that Aspire will be able to balance its expenditure without having to request any additional funding from the 2 partners. This is a positive position given the pressures seen during the year and is thanks to the tight control of the

staffing position before March, as well as additional income generated in Quarter 4 despite the delays in Panels due to the Covid-19 situation.

4.6 The two key areas of budgetary pressure are salaries and interagency expenditure and income. The overspend in salaries is largely arising from previous Management Board decisions to invest in staffing with the ambition to deliver further interagency fee income. The position of interagency expenditure and income shows a net surplus Income position of £102,000, highlighting that the policy of increasing staffing to generate further income has so far delivered results to help in balancing the overall Aspire position.

4.7 At the Aspire Strategic Partnership Board in February 2020, it was agreed that contributions for 2020/2021 would remain the same, relying on continuing to deliver high levels of Interagency Fee income in order to balance the budget.

4.8 The funding for 2020/2021 was agreed as a frozen position but there are costs that will rise regardless, including approximately £36,000 for the pay award, increments for staff not on top of their grade, as well as the increase in the cost of the interagency fee for interagency placements through Voluntary Adoption Agencies, and the impact of the Covid-19 crisis.

4.9 There is sufficient funding to balance the budget in 2019/2020 but the position for 2020/2021 generally continues to be extremely volatile.

4.10 Aspire is not carrying any reserves to help smooth the position however the advantage of sharing the costs in this partnership means the risk of overspend is shared proportionately by each authority. The increased scale of Aspire gives opportunities for management of workload across the service, and these are always explored before making commitments to increasing spending levels.

4.11 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. To the end of March 2019, Aspire had discharged most of the local authority statutory duties in respect of adoption and special guardianship, and had placed 106 children for adoption, removing them from the care system, for a budget of just over £2,000,000 a year.

5. Commissioning

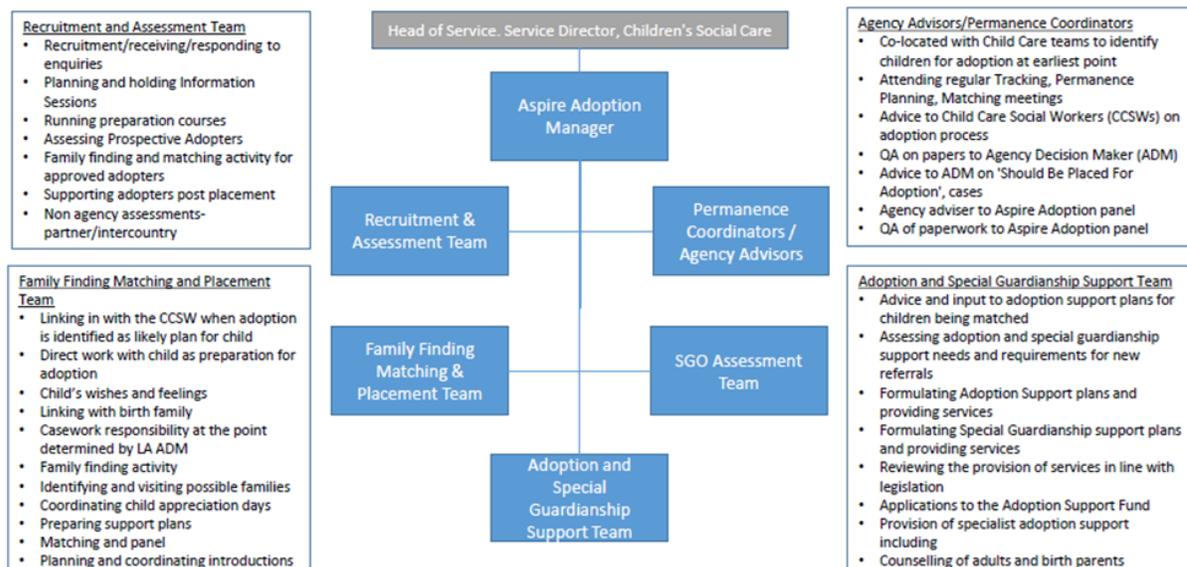
5.1 Most of the services which are the responsibility of Aspire are provided by staff directly employed by the RAA, other than an independent support service for birth families whose children have been adopted, and services provided by external therapeutic providers funded by the Adoption Support Fund.

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 2021.

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, Christchurch, Poole Access to Resources Team (ART). The ASF generates income for Aspire for therapeutic services provided in house which can also be claimed via the ASF, generating over £28,000 in the year.

Appendix 1 Aspire Organisational Structure and Staffing

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



6. Staffing

6.1 There are 45 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.

6.2 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 Social Work England.

6.3 The Recruitment & Assessment Team comprises of a team manager, practice manager and 7.0 FTE social workers. All are registered with Social Work England

6.4 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 Social Work England, and 3 FTE family support workers.

6.5 The Special Guardianship Assessment team has a team manager, practice manager and 5.5 FTE social workers. All are registered with Social Work England.

6.6 The Adoption & Special Guardianship Support team has a team manager, practice manager and 5 FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England. The team also has 3 FTE family support workers, a 0.4 FTE clinical psychologist and a 0.8 FTE education specialist.

6.7 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.

6.8 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.

6.9 All of the social workers employed by Aspire are registered with Social Work England, 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).

6.10 Aspire also has access to dedicated clinical psychology support for staff and service users.

6.11 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.

7. Staff training and development

7.1 Staff in Aspire have access to training and courses run by Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Council as the host authority paying for these from the Aspire training budget of £8,000 a year. They have access to external courses, but only dependent on budgetary restrictions.

7.2 All staff have monthly supervision and annual appraisals, and regular team case and practice reflection sessions are facilitated by the clinical psychologists

7.3 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.

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 Children's 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 through 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

8.1 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 has been undertaken for BCP Council by the Service Manager for Aspire Adoption, and by the Senior Manager, Placements and Resources for Dorset Council.

8.2 In 2019-20, the Agency Decision Maker for approvals of prospective adopters was the Aspire Service Manager. There were also Agency Decision Makers in each local authority for Should Be Placed for Adoption (SBPA) decisions for their Children in Care and for matches of those children.

8.3 All of the Agency Decision Makers have social work and management qualifications and are registered with Social Work England and previously with HCPC.

Appendix 4 Aspire Adoption Panel

9.1 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.

9.2 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.

9.3 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.

9.4 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 member is of black African ethnicity and another is of Indian descent.

9.5 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

9.6 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.

9.7 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.

9.8 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.

9.9 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.

9.10 The Panel chair is independent, is an experienced chair and an adopter of 2 children. He attends the Aspire Strategic Partnership Board and presents a report to the Aspire Operational Management Board and Strategic Partnership Board 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 Panel chair's report January 2020

Introduction

Introduction

This is my fifth Report as Chair of Aspire's Adoption Panel.

Panel continues to work very well now as an established and integrated team. Mitigation of vulnerabilities has continued and we remain focussed on the child in all of our deliberations.

I would highlight for you in this report the detail provided on Panel make up (as requested by the August meeting of the Strategic Partnership Board), the new feedback system introduced to better scrutinise social worker reports and Panel training, which has concentrated upon learning from disruptions.

Panel

Panel will have met on sixteen occasions between July 1st and December 31st 2019. Workload has been consistent, but manageable. Our priority has been, and remains, to ensure that matches are heard as quickly as possible.

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 continues to be positive in respect of the format in which Panel's recommendations are presented.

I'm pleased to report too that time keeping has improved, with fewer over-runs, thanks to training and interventions to encourage more succinct questioning.

There are currently 15 members on the Central List, of whom 9 members including the chair and two vice chairs are independent members.

The membership of the panel consists of:

- An independent chair who is also an adopter.
- A medical adviser.
- 14 women and 2 men.
- 14 are white, 13 British and 1 Canadian. 2 panel members are black British. One panel member has a partner who is Polish.
- 2 panel members are gay.
- 1 panel member is registered disabled.
- 1 panel member is currently a single parent to dependent youngsters. 2 others have experience of having been single parents.
- 3 panel members were adopted as children.
- 4 panel members are adoptive parents. Their children were placed aged between 18 months and 6 years and are now aged between 7 and 24. Two of the adopters also have birth children.
- 5 panel members are registered social workers. Of these 2 work for BCP Council, 2 work for Aspire and 1 is an independent social worker. The independent social workers was previously a CAFCASS guardian.
- 2 additional members have medical backgrounds.
- 1 panel member was a magistrate in the family court.
- 1 panel member has a background in education.
- 1 panel members is a psychotherapist.

The average age of the current Central List is 54. Four members are under 50, six members are aged 50-60 and five are over 60.

The panel members come from a range of social and economic backgrounds.

One social worker who is appointed to the panel, is currently on maternity leave. It is unclear at this time whether she will be in a position to continue as a member when she returns to work.

The panel meets two or three times a month and it is expected that panel members commit to a minimum of one panel in three. To be quorate, the panel needs to have five members, which must include a chair or vice chair, an independent person (which could be the chair or vice chair) and a social worker. Usually six members are booked to attend each panel, and will include a mix of social workers, and those with personal or professional experience of adoption.

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(re) 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, most particularly in the case of older children.

Appraisals

Annual appraisals for all Panel members commence on 24th January 2020 and will be completed by the end of February.

Panel Business

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

	July – December 2019	July – December 2018
Approvals	31	16
Approvals deferred	2	1
Matches	27	22
De-Registration	3	5
Total	63	44

Adopters

Panel has considered 31 recommendations for approval in the past six months, all those presented have been approved. Those approved included heterosexual couples, same sex couples (both male and female) and single females.

Recommendations for approval were not universally unanimous, with reasons for deferral including those relating to weight and health issues. Two couples were not approved as adopters, one after presentation of a short report, the other after a full assessment.

Matches

Panel has considered 27 matches in the last six months,. The vast majority of matches continue to be with prospective adopters who have been approved by Aspire.

Quality of Social Worker Reports

The quality of social worker reports remains high. Since October 2019 a new feedback system, using forms complete by Panel Members has been in use.

This has been successful in identifying issues for workers and more importantly for their managers in highlighting strengths and weaknesses in the reports.

The issue of analysis rather than narrative remains one at the forefront of Panel's concerns, the new system highlighting specific examples with which the Panel Advisers and Team Managers have been able to feed back comments to workers.

Training

Our autumn Panel Training event was held at the Kinson Hub in November. It concentrated upon adoption matches that had disrupted during the year.

All bar two Panel members attended and we looked in detail at both national research into the reasons for disruption and also at two recent disruptions of matches made through Aspire. The concentration being upon learning for Panel around scrutiny of the match and whether opportunities to identify the vulnerabilities that led to the disruptions could have been better highlighted.

Our conclusion was that in both cases it would have been difficult to identify the eventual issues that led to the disruption occurring, but that better, possibly more tenacious questioning would have been of benefit.

Conclusion

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 have been identified and are being addressed through training and consultation with Aspire's management team.