

People and Health Scrutiny Committee

8th June 2021

Aspire Adoption Annual Report

For Review and Consultation

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

Local Councillor(s):

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

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

The People and Health Scrutiny Committee consider the progress and performance of Aspire and identify any areas to be focused upon in managing the Council's relationship with Aspire.

Reason for Recommendation:

To ensure that support from People and Health Scrutiny Committee is maintained.

1. Executive Summary

Dorset Council has a duty under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to establish and maintain an adoption service for its area and along with BCP Council discharges this duty through a delegation of functions to Aspire Adoption, a Regional Adoption Agency. Dorset retains overall responsibility for its adoption and special guardianship services, continuing to have parental responsibility for its own Children in Care but most adoption and some special guardianship functions are delegated to Aspire Adoption.

The appended report is the fourth annual adoption report presented by Aspire Adoption, summarising the work of the agency in the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. It has been written to ensure and provides the Council with an opportunity to satisfy itself that the requirements of the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013 and the Adoption Minimum Standards 2014 are met.

This report provides a summary of the comprehensive self-evaluation of Aspire Regional Adoption Agency and provides an overview of the areas of strength and areas for development focusing on:

- Local authority statutory responsibilities in respect of adoption
- Division of roles and responsibilities between Aspire and the local authorities
- Headline activity data 01/04/20 to 31/03/21
- Finance
- Commissioning

2. Financial Implications

Section 5 of the Annual Report identifies cost pressures and a likely overspend for 2020/21 of £167,000. That section of the report comments upon staffing and caseload implications. A new service manager was appointed on the 6th of April 2021 with a remit to work with Dorset and BCP to stabilise the future financial position whilst retaining the quality of services. An extraordinary board is set for the 17th of May to review the financial arrangements.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

N/A

4. Climate implications

N/A

5. Other Implications

N/A

6. Risk Assessment

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

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

N/A

8. Appendices

Aspire Adoption Annual Report for the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021

9. Background Papers

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.

Aspire Adoption Annual Report

for the period from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021

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Introduction

This is the fourth annual adoption report for Aspire Adoption, summarising the work of the agency in the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. 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.

- 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
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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	✓	
PERMANANCE PLANNING		
Early identification of a child possibly requiring adoption		✓
Tracking and monitoring the child possibly requiring adoption	✓	✓
Support and advice to childcare 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	✓	
Inter-country adoption assessments and post approval and post order support	✓	

3. Headline activity data 01/04/2020 to 31/03/2021

- 3.1 Fifty-two children had decisions made by the local authority Agency Decision Maker that they should be placed for adoption (SBPA), compared to 73 the previous year. This is a significant decrease and is attributable to delays in care proceedings and restructures within the local authorities.
- 3.2 In 2020-21, 26 of the SBPA decisions were for children from the BCP Council area, and 26 from the Dorset Council area. Numbers each quarter fluctuated within each local authority, with eighteen in Q2 of 2020-21 in BCP Council, and only two in quarter three and one in Q4. Similarly, in Dorset there were ten in Q1 and Q3 but only three in Q4.
- 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 251 SBPA decisions have now been made since Aspire went live in July 2017, an average of 16.7 SBPA decisions per quarter across the local authorities funding Aspire.
- 3.4 Forty-one Placement Orders were made by the courts from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. Nineteen were for children from the BCP Council area twenty-two 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 52 the previous year. Twenty-nine of these were from the BCP council area, and twenty-three were from the Dorset Council area. A total of 210 children have been placed for adoption since Aspire went live, an average of 14 per quarter.
- 3.7 Eleven children were placed on an Early Permanent (EP) basis in 2020-21, compared to nine 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 210 children placed for adoption between July 2017 and the end of March 2021, all but 5 remain in their adoptive placement or have been adopted. 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 2021, of the 35 children waiting with Placement Orders but not yet placed, and where the plan continues to be adoption, seven children have been linked / matched to adopters, 2 children are in EP placements, the plan is that five children will be adopted by their foster carers, and we are actively family finding for five children.
- 3.10 There were 10 children where Placement Orders had been granted but the decision has been taken to rescind the decisions. Of these, 5 are boys, 5 are girls; 4 are in sibling groups. The reasons for rescinding the SBPA decisions are due to the children remaining with their foster carers or because adoption is no longer felt to be a viable plan.
- 3.11 It is clear that the most effective and efficient way to place children is for Aspire to recruit and assess their own families to take children with more complex needs. Recruitment activity has been the priority and targeted to recruit families who will consider the children currently waiting.
- 3.12 A total of 59 children were adopted in 2020-21, compared with 41 the previous year but with 36 children in adoption placements at the end of March 2021. 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.

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. The available published data is for the 3-year period 2016-19. 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.

3.14 Aspire data for 2002-21 would suggest that for the Aspire local authorities, it took an average of 270 days (BCP) and 177 days (Dorset) 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 2016-19 adoption scorecards is 178 days. It took an average of 301 days (BCP) and 333 days (Dorset) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. The England average from the provisional 2016-19 adoption scorecards is 376 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)**

		2020		2021		
		Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
		443	202	365	348	301
			277	302	493	357

443	227	331	389	321
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		2020		2021		
		Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
BCP		443	202	365	348	301
Dorset			277	302	462	333

Total	443	227	331	372	311
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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)

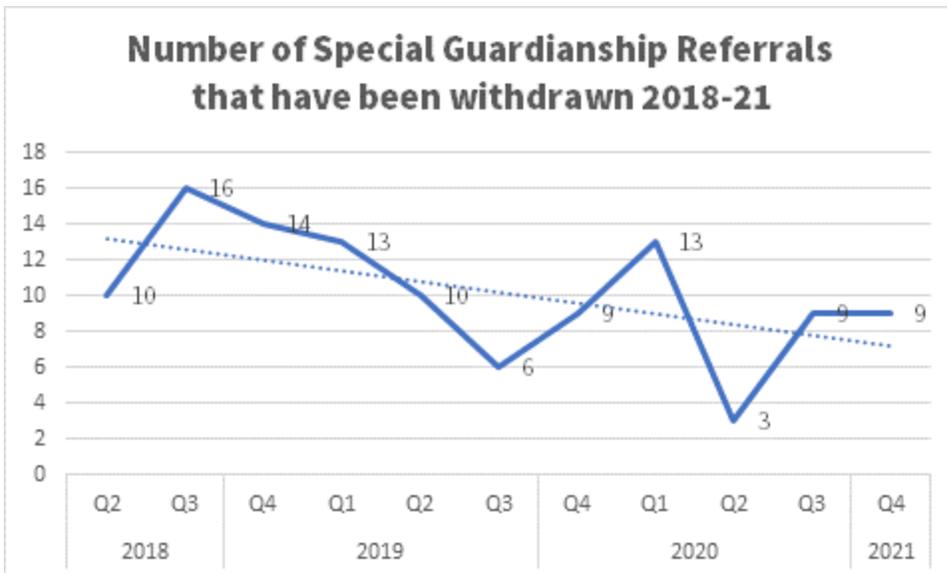
	Apr- Jun	2020 Jul- Sep	Oct- Dec	2021 Jan- Mar	
BCP	206	464	163	128	270
Dorset		171	109	270	177
Total	206	355	133	162	238

3.15 Numbers of adopters approved in 2020-21 fell slightly short of the target for the year of 50 with 48 families approved compared to 60 in 2019-20. The reduction in number of approvals is attributable to the reduction in staffing in the R&A team during 2020-21. Sufficient recruitment 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.

3.16 For the last 3 years, numbers of referrals for special guardianship assessments have settled to between 42 and 30 each quarter, and the total number of referrals for each year averages 134 with 140 in 2020/21 and an increasing trend line. 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, areas where assessments have been undertaken include the West Midlands, Oxfordshire, Somerset, London, Yorkshire, Sussex and Wales.



3.17 The number of withdrawals or discontinuations prior to the report being filed with the court has fallen in the last year from 38 in 2019-20 to 34 in 2020/21 with a downward trend line. 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.



- 3.18 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 259 open cases at the end of March 2021.
- 3.19 By the end of March 2021, caseloads were an average of 41 cases for full - time social workers or support workers. The case load weighting system evidenced that caseloads were far higher than advised 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.
- 3.20 The tables below illustrate adoption activity quarter on quarter for each local authority since Aspire went live in July 2017.

Adoption Orders		2019			2020			2021	
		Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	
BCP	6	6	8	5	2	15	5	16	63
Dorset	4	5	4	3	0	9	6	6	37
Total	10	11	12	8	2	24	11	22	100

Placements

	2019			2020			2021
	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec

BCP	7	9	8	9	8	8	6	7	62
Dorset	5	8	2	4	8	5	3	7	42

Total **12** **17** **10** **13** **16** **13** **9** **14** **104**

PO's

	2019			2020				2021	
	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
BCP	8	9	5	5	3	7	8	1	46
Dorset	2	5	6	6	8	4	4	6	41

Total **10** **14** **11** **11** **11** **11** **12** **7** **87**

SBPA

	2019			2020				2021	
	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
BCP	19	9	4	10	5	18	2	1	68
Dorset	5	6	14	6	10	5	8	1	55

Total **24** **15** **18** **16** **15** **23** **10** **2** **123**

EP

	2019			2020				2021	
	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	
BCP	1	1	3	1	3	1	1	1	12
Dorset	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	3	7

Total **2** **1** **5** **1** **4** **1** **1** **4** **19**

Adopters	2017		2018				2019				2020				2021
	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	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	13	15	10	10

4. Covid-19

- 4.1 During 2020-21 Aspire had to respond to the covid-19 pandemic. The majority of work changed to on-line including most visits to adopters and special guardians, court hearings, preparation courses, adoption panels, meetings and supervision. Staff have primarily been working from home with a limited number attending the office when required. Visits to children where Aspire holds case responsibility have continued.
- 4.2 Despite the restrictions Aspire continued to place children with adopters, assess and approve adopters and special guardians, and provide support throughout the lockdowns.
- 4.3 Aspire was assisted by a government grant of £55,504 to provide additional support to adoptive and special guardian families which included access to additional social work support, education advice, psychology support, workshops and subscriptions to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting.

5. Finance

- 5.1 Aspire is funded by the local authorities for whom it undertakes adoption and special guardianship services.
- 5.2 The budget framework percentages agreed at the inception of the agency in 2017 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.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 The provisional Budget Monitoring position for the period April 2020 to March 2021 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.
- 5.5 It appears that Aspire will be £167,000 overspent in 2020/21, after the application of covid-19 funding towards the loss of income. There are several reasons for this including a reduction in the income generated from interagency fees, this was largely due to covid-19 and the reduction in family finding activity in many local authorities. It has also been necessary

to purchase adoption placements for children whose needs could not be met by Aspire adopters.

- 5.6 Since Aspire went live in 2017 the staffing budget has not increased, however, the cost of staffing has increased each year due to increments and pay awards. The intention was that the staffing costs would be offset by interagency fee income and in last two years the budget has balanced, however, with increasing staffing costs and reduced ability to sell placements this financial year has been challenging and has led to a significant overspend.
- 5.7 In order to balance the budget the staffing levels in Aspire were contracted which resulted in increased caseloads, reductions in the number of adopter assessments, and difficulties with allocating special guardianship assessments.
- 5.8 Aspire does not currently 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.
- 5.9 The board being aware of the unstable financial position commissioned an external review to examine the quality of the service it provides and in particular whether it offers value for money.
- 5.10 The external review reported in December 2020. It concluded that Aspire offers high quality services for adopters and children and is value for money for the authorities. (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.)
- 5.11 It should be noted that whilst cost pressures for staffing and external placements remain a new service manager was appointed on the 6th of April 2021 with a remit of working with Dorset and BCC to stabilise the future financial position whilst retaining the quality of services. An extraordinary board is set for the 17th of May to review the financial arrangements.

6. Commissioning

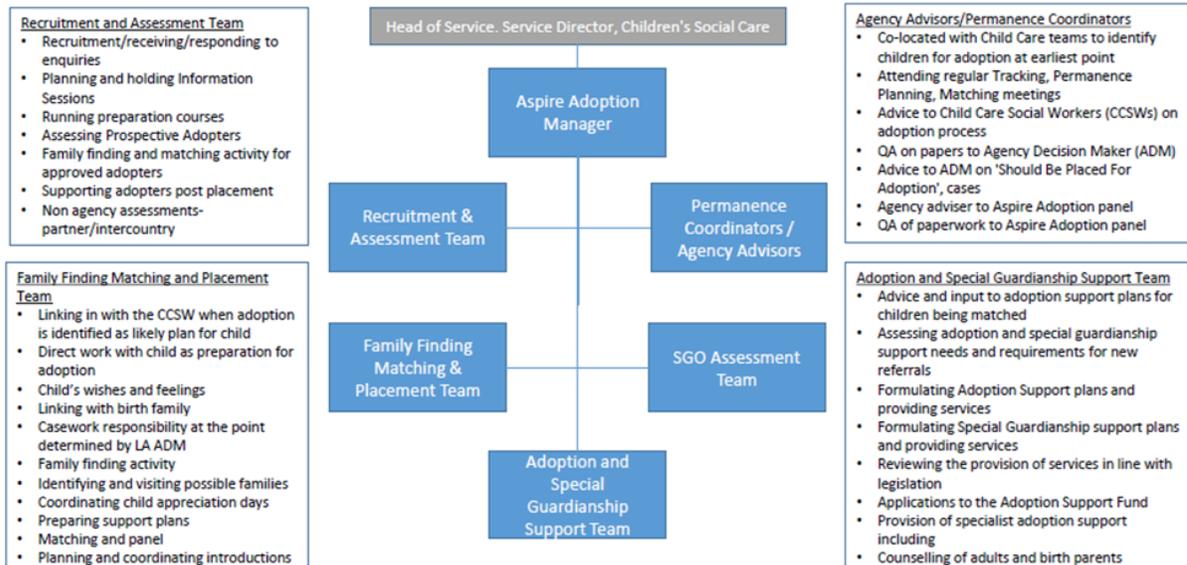
- 6.1 Most of the services which are the responsibility of Aspire are provided by staff directly employed by the RAA, other than an independent support service for birth families whose children have been adopted, and services

provided by external therapeutic providers funded by the Adoption Support Fund.

- 6.2 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 September 2021 and the plan is to review the contract during the first quarter of 2021/22.
- 6.3 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 £3020 in the year.

Appendix 1 Aspire Organisational Structure and Staffing

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



7. Staffing

- 7.1 There are 42.61 permanent full -time equivalent posts in Aspire (reduced from 45 in April 2020), 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 54.
- 7.2 The service is led and managed by the Aspire Adoption Service Manager, Jennifer Warr, Jennifer Warr is a qualified social worker, has a management qualification and is registered with Social Work England.
- 7.3 The Recruitment & Assessment Team comprises of a team manager, practice manager, 0.5 Family Support Practitioner and 5.69 social workers. This is a reduction of 1.31 FTE Social Workers since April 2020. All are registered with Social Work England
- 7.4 The Family Finding, Matching and Placement Team comprises of a team manager, 0.81 FTE practice manager and 4.3 social workers (a reduction of 1.2 social workers since April 2020) FTE social workers, all of whom are registered with Social Work England, and 3.64 FTE family support workers.
- 7.5 The Special Guardianship Assessment team has a team manager, practice manager and 4.27 social workers – this is a reduction of 1.23 FTE social workers since April 2020. One FTE social worker is on maternity leave and is only backfilled with 0.5 FTE social worker meaning that the actual number

of staff in the team currently is 3.77 FTE social workers. All are registered with Social Work England.

- 7.6 The Adoption & Special Guardianship Support team has a team manager, 0.81 FTE practice manager and 4.31 FTE social workers, which is a reduction of 0.69 FTE social workers since April 2020, all of whom are registered with Social Work England. The team also has 2 FTE family support workers, and a 0.4 FTE clinical psychologist.
- 7.7 There are 2 FTE 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.
- 7.8 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.
- 7.9 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 therapy, sensory integration, mindfulness and DDP (Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy).
- 7.10 Aspire also has access to dedicated clinical psychology support for staff and service users.
- 7.11 No agency staff are employed, 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. The 3 fixed term contract staff in place at the beginning of the year have now transferred into permanent positions as they became available when staff left. There is one part time social worker contracted to cover maternity leave and another full-time social worker contracted to cover a vacancy.

8. Staff training and development

- 8.1 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. In 2020/21 12 members staff attended Dyadic Developmental Parenting training.

- 8.2 Staff have monthly supervision and annual appraisals, and regular team case and practice reflection sessions are facilitated by the clinical psychologists
- 8.3 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 Children's 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
Children's 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.
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- 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 was undertaken for BCP Council by the Service Manager for Aspire Adoption, and by the Senior Manager, Placements and Resources for Dorset Council and since 1st April 2020 the role has been undertaken by senior managers in BCP and Dorset.

- 8.2 In 2020-21, 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 16 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 members 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
- a. In 2020/21 the Adoption Panels have all been held virtually due to the covid 19 pandemic. The panels have adjusted well to the new way of working and business has been uninterrupted.

Appendix 5 - Panel chair's report April 2021

Aspire Adoption Panel Chair's Bi-Annual Report

June 2020 - March 2021

Introduction

At the meeting of the Strategic Board in January 2021 we agreed that the Panel Chair's Report should move to a six-monthly cycle aligned with Aspire's Financial Year. This report therefore reflects data for the twelve months to 31st March 2021 and also panel performance between 1st July 2020 and 31st March 2021.

Panel continues to operate virtually, having also completed training and appraisals using this format over the last few months.

Our focus continues to be the best interests of the children for whom we approve adopters and agree matches. I would like to pay tribute to my Panel colleagues and the Aspire staff with whom we work, who have universally shown incredible resourcefulness, resilience and good humour in adjusting our practices to ensure no interruption to our work, while reflecting changing Government guidance.

Panel

Panel met on twenty-five occasions between July 1st 2020 and March 31st 2021.

There are currently 17 members on the Central List, of whom 9 members including the chair and two vice chairs are independent members.

Panel membership has changed in the last nine months to a greater extent than at any time during Aspire's existence. This has been largely as a consequence of changes to team structure in BCP and Aspire and the loss of social work members who had been working in both organisations. This vulnerability was identified in the autumn and recruitment was undertaken for more independent social work members, of whom panel now has four, reducing the reliance on the remaining social work members from within Aspire.

Two of our adopter members also retired, leaving the two male members of Panel as the remaining adopter members. A further recruitment process has just been concluded where an additional, female, adopter has been recruited.

Membership of Panel now consists of:

- An independent chair who is also an adopter.
- Two medical advisers.
- 15 women and 2 men.
- 15 are white, 13 British and 1 Canadian. 2 panel members are black British. One panel member has a partner who is Polish.
- 3 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.
- 2 panel members are adoptive parents. Their children were placed aged between 18 months and 4 years and are now aged between 7 and 15. One of the adopters also has birth children.
- 6 panel members are registered social workers. Of these 2 work for Aspire and 4 are independent social workers. One independent social worker was previously a CAFCASS guardian, two were managers within Aspire, one was a senior manager in Children's Services for Dorset Council.
- 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 panel members come from a range of social and economic backgrounds.

Covid-19

During July 2020, Panel continued to meet virtually using Skype as the platform for contact. In August we moved to using Microsoft Teams, which has been a more versatile and user-friendly medium.

From attending Panel Chairs' meetings arranged by both Coram BAAF and SWAC it has become clear that Aspire's Panel has been unique in continuing to operate normally throughout the Pandemic.

Many other agencies stopped holding Panel meetings during the first lockdown. Most now have resumed but in a different format, often with the questions prepared in advance and asked by the Chair only.

We have not followed this route, rather operating as normal with each Panel member asking their own question and with time built in to discuss questions before speaking to applicants.

A unique, and I feel essential, part of our maintaining a 'normal' Panel routine online has been the introduction of a Teams call between the Chair and prospective adopters ahead of Panel. This has enabled any technical issues to be resolved, a description of how the Panel will work to be given and management of expectations around timescale and virtual meeting etiquette.

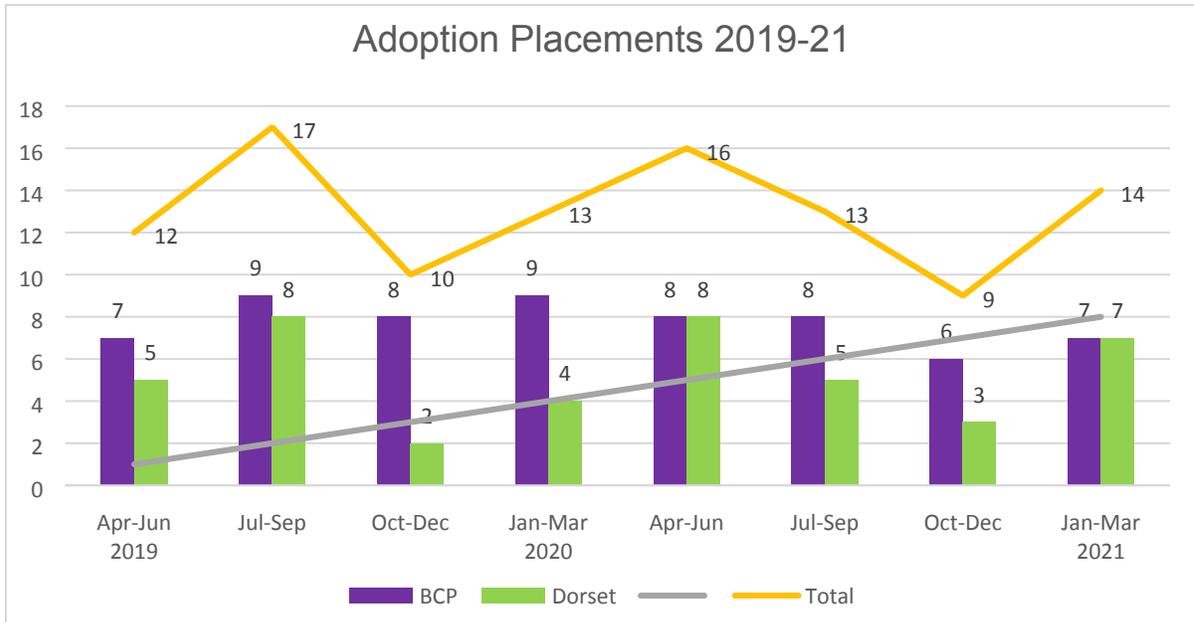
Panel Business

Aspire's Adoption Panel has undertaken the following business over the past nine months:

	July 2020 – March 2021	January – June 2020	July – December 2019	January – June 2019
Approvals	33	28	31	23
Approvals deferred	2	0	2	1
Matches	34	26	27	25
De-Registration	3	3	3	1
Should be placed for adoption	1			
Review of Adopters	1			
Total	74	57	63	50

Matches of children with adopters

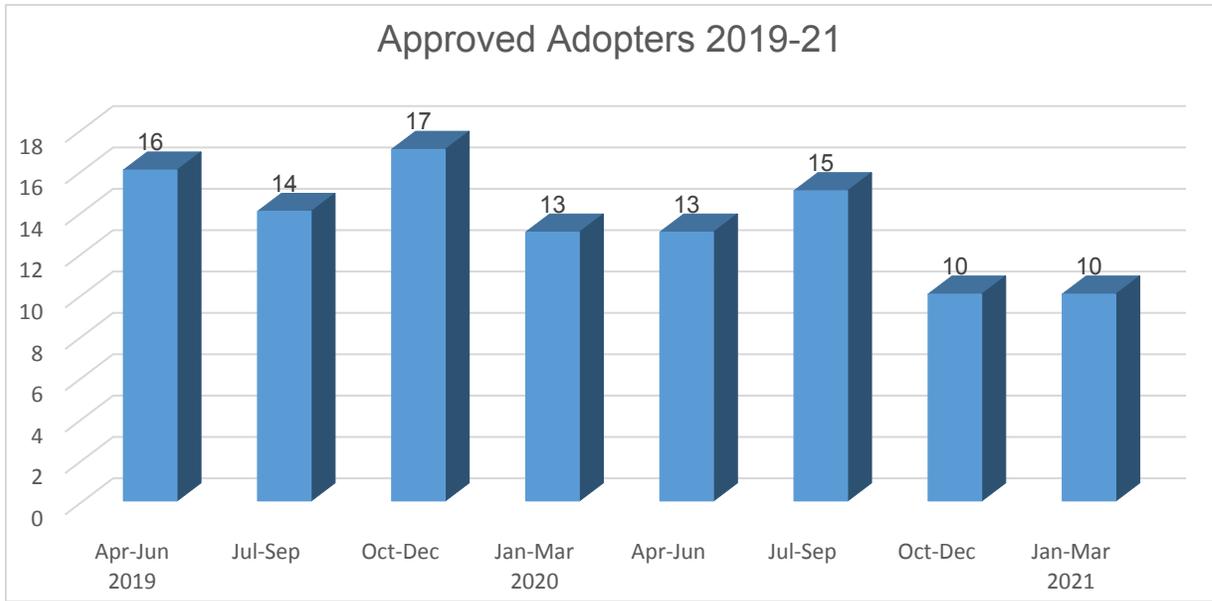
The statistics for Adoption Placements show the number matches to have remained consistent in the last 12 months.



Adopters

Panel considered 34 recommendations for approval in the period July 2020 to March 2021, all those presented were approved with the exception of two applicants. A single adopter was deferred by ADM after being approved by Panel as a consequence of additional information coming to light post Panel. The second case was that of a couple whose approval was deferred at the end of March 2021. This case is being re-considered with the additional information required provided, at the April 7th Panel.

Those approved included 29 heterosexual couples and 7 same sex couples. Additionally, there were four single carers presented for approval to Panel during the period.



Appraisals

Annual appraisals for all Panel members commenced in January 2021 and all but one member's appraisal have been completed at the time of writing this report.

Quality of Social Worker Reports

The quality of social worker reports remains high. The feedback system established in October 2019 continued until lockdown. Obtaining feedback from Panel members was challenging during 2020. I am pleased to say that a system for managing the feedback process was agreed at the beginning of 2021 and has been operating effectively since then.

Training

There have been three Panel training events held remotely between July 2020 and March 2021.

Focus has been on disruptions, medical advice, particularly in the respect of obesity, questioning and Panel feedback.

The Future

Feedback from other Panels points to there being a preference to remain virtual as the effects of the pandemic diminish. Having discussed our future arrangements with both Panel Advisors and members there is a strong feeling that we should return to meetings in person as soon as it is safe to do so.

Subject to Government restrictions it is our intention to operate in person from August or September 2021. The universal feeling being that meeting adopters provides an additional level of understanding and insight.

Virtual Panels will still be used where requested by adopters, where we need to consider cases at short notice and where adopters are geographically remote.

Conclusion

Despite the enormous challenges for us all over the last year, I am proud to report that Aspire's Panel continues to work well.

We have been able to offer appropriate scrutiny and challenge, reports are of a good standard. Our Panel Advisors and administrators have provided outstanding support to Panel and have approached the challenges of switching to virtual meetings with pragmatism and proactivity.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Jayne, Karran, Angela and Tanya for their support, advice and good humour.