

WEST MERCIA AND AFTER ADOPTION SERVICE DESIGN PROJECT

A project of collaborative service design, facilitated by After Adoption and supported by DfE funding through the sector expansion grant programme



PROJECT REPORT

April 2016

after
adoption

The logo for 'after adoption' features the word 'after' in a lowercase, sans-serif font above the word 'adoption' in a larger, lowercase, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a white silhouette of a family consisting of two adults and three children of varying heights.

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Service Design Project – West Mercia and After Adoption

Summary

Introduction

The West Mercia Project is about a partnership approach to addressing current barriers to the successful placement of hard-to-place (htp) children across the identified Local Authorities within West Mercia region and to utilise After Adoption's approach to child-led recruitment and innovative service solutions. We aimed to achieve this by implementing a strategic plan for enhanced service development and delivery, so that all children in these areas have the opportunity to grow up in a family of their own. The identified aims and barriers at the outset of the project were:

Aims:

- Reduce the time it takes to place htp children for adoption and increase the number of htp children who are linked successfully
- Improve customer service across the shared geographical region
- Develop a successful holistic strategy to improve recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters for htp children

Barriers to Success:

- A lack of ambition for their htp children
- Existing cultural perceptions of some children being 'unadoptable'
- Under-developed approach to working with prospective adopters to widen their scope for considering a broader range of children and the support needed to enable them to do this
- Inconsistent approach to good customer service.

To improve placement outcomes, there needs to be a strategic approach to overcoming barriers and a commitment to cultural change. After Adoption sought to address critical practice issues and develop best practice to ensure a high-performing and ambitious service.



DfE Expansion Grants Programme

The main aim of the DfE's Expansion Grants programme was to build significantly the capacity and market share of the voluntary adoption sector to recruit sufficient adoptive parents to meet the needs of children who are harder to place. This included the 'flow' of new harder to place children and the 'stock' of harder to place children who are *already* waiting for placements. The DfE was particularly keen to use the third round of expansion grant funding to drive more targeted family finding for these children and to encourage VAAs to build effective partnerships with Local Authorities.

The first Expansion Grant Round was launched in April 2014 with a second Grant Round which ran in August 2014. The third round of funding was distributed in January 2015. The third round funded agencies were required to use the funding to assist their agency to place up to 30 harder to place children by 31 March 2016.

Who After Adoption sought to involve at scoping phase:

- Directors of Children's Services in each of the 4 Local Authorities
- Transformation Consultant and Manager appointed by WMA
- Training Consultant Delivery Partner

This approach was built on:

- Engaging and consulting with employees in identifying barriers to successful permanency planning
- Developing ideas for new models for permanency planning focussing on quality and expediency
- Delivering training and tools identified to achieve these aims
- Implementing change

What After Adoption contributed:

- Sector expertise
- Knowledge experts
- Experience of working with over 70 local authorities
- An award-winning track-record of Outstanding service provision (Ofsted 2015)

About After Adoption

After Adoption is a national adoption support and voluntary adoption agency with hubs in Manchester, Liverpool and the Midlands and satellite offices throughout England and Wales. We have been providing adoption support services successfully for over 25 years, to over 70 local authorities, and offer a range of bespoke services to meet the needs of adoptive families on an individual and group basis. We also offer a family placement service, known as 'Families that Last' offering a unique child-led recruitment service which focuses on finding families for children considered harder to place.

Background to Project

Supported by a DfE Expansion grant, After Adoption approached the collective four Local Authorities, at the time known as WMA, who were due to launch their single agency service. Together we sought to work collaboratively with WMAs adoption and children's services to help to identify ways and means to improve their business performance, achieve maximum efficiencies and develop robust processes that ensure the best possible outcomes for children for whom adoption is the preferred option. This was carefully timed to begin at the outset of the launched single service, to have maximum input at the service design phase.

Shortly after being successfully awarded the DfE grant, the WMA authorities announced the disbanding of the WMA single service, whilst maintaining an express commitment to moving forward with the transformation programme. This led to several changes to the original project, with an agreed focus on collaborative working across the authorities and with After Adoption to:

- Refer up to 30 children considered hard-to-place to After Adoption's child-specific recruitment service
- To provide consultation on permanency planning processes used within Telford & Wrekin adoption service, the learning from which would be cascaded by and between Local Authority partners
- To develop a pilot app with Shropshire's adoption service and After Adoption, focused on improved customer experience and satisfaction
- To develop and deliver, in consultation with staff across all authorities, a bespoke training platform for staff involved in the delivery of permanency planning for sibling groups.

Governance

After Adoption and West Mercia took a joint governance approach to overseeing the strategic aims and objectives of this project. Terms of Reference were agreed at the outset and members appointed held the following roles:

- After Adoption CEO – Chair
- After Adoption Director of Strategic Development
- After Adoption Workstream Leads
- WM Directors of Children's Services
- WM Assistant Directors of Children's Services

The Project Team

Gail Jackson, Director of Strategic Development, Project Lead

Iain Moore, Head of Business Development

Barrymore James, Head of Adoption

Shelagh Beckett (External Delivery Partner)

Partners:

Shelagh Beckett, Child Care Consultant

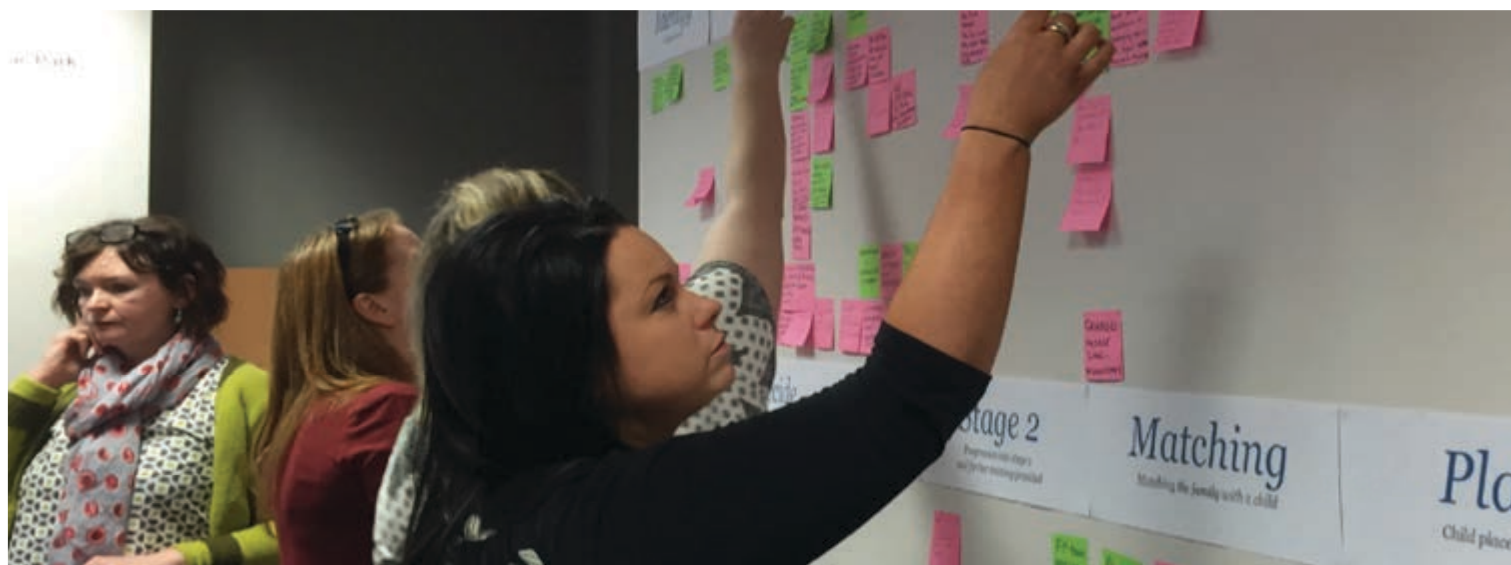
Strand 1 – Family Finding

The family finding strand of this project aimed to place up to 30 of West Mercia's children considered hardest to place for adoption with families recruited by After Adoption using our child-led model of family finding, through our service known as 'Families that Last'.

After Adoption's child specific family finding model is unique. This is proven to work by integrating child-led recruitment with high quality preparation of adoptive families and seamless access to adoption support services. The child-led model aims to build around the child an individual plan for recruitment, preparation, placement and post placement support. It enables all involved to be focused on what the child's needs are and who is best able to meet these needs. The objective is to recruit adoptive parents who have a lifelong commitment to adoption and who are recruited and trained to meet the specific needs of the child who is to be placed.

It invites 'a person-centred approach' to family finding, the underlying principle being that for those children with multiple needs and competing demands there is a clear method of monitoring progress and early identification of when it is likely family finding may be less successful, or where additional assessment of the child's needs is required to aid in preparation for adoption. This service also ensures the timely recruitment of adopters as the process includes concurrent assessment, preventing further delay in the matching of children for adoption.

The child-led approach captures the attraction of children through the psychological and emotional connections that are made when children are shown as individuals with their own unique characteristics and personalities. The adoptive parents gain a deeper understanding of the child and their needs earlier in the process and have more time to take on board, and plan for, possible future challenges, while accessing the full support of the Families that Last team.



In total, 15 children overall were referred to After Adoption for child specific recruitment. Of these 15 children:

- 4 were pre-order children (without a Placement Order and still in proceedings) - still active
- 4 were referred in May 15, 2 of which were withdrawn in Oct 15, 1 was placed with prospective adopters in Nov 15 and 1 referral was placed on hold
- 4 were referred in June 15, of which 2 are still active and 2 were placed on hold
- 1 was referred in October 15 – this child is provisionally matched with a plan for panel in February 2016.
- 2 were referred in February 2016

Overall, 5 of the 15 children were either placed on hold by the LA or withdrawn. Of the remaining 10 children, 4 are being profiled and monitored internally as we do not have Care Orders, 1 has been placed and 1 has a match and introductions are in April 2016. The remaining children are subject to ongoing external profiling.

Profile of children referred:

All children referred via the project were considered harder-to-place. Of the 15:

- 2 were from BME backgrounds
- 7 were in sibling groups
- 9 were aged 5 or older
- All children had specific, identified additional needs

Strand 2 - Permanency Planning

Early permanency planning is essential for all looked After children to avoid drift and ensure that all children are enabled to reach their full potential from a safe and secure base. Although permanency can be achieved through a number of different routes, this project focussed on an analysis of existing early permanency planning for children for whom adoption was the best outcome, with a focus on key recommendations moving forward to improve outcomes.

Key recommendations made:

Legal planning meetings – with a focus on consultative involvement of key professionals from within adoption and fostering services, who can champion adoption on behalf of children for whom this might be the preferred option. This would also facilitate parallel planning discussions and an early alert to the adoption service so that a prospective family could be identified or recruited at the earliest possible point either from within or externally through a specialist adoption agencies. This early involvement for the adoption and fostering services also helps in the gradual cultural change in ‘what is an adoptable child’ and places the adoption professionals in the early debates regarding why not adoption for a child; many whom they would not be aware of due to long term planning decision being considered at that time. This additional level of scrutiny, focus on child-centred planning and a shared understanding of the evidence, will better equip the local authority to present their position within the court setting when presenting their permanence plan in court.

Permanency planning meetings – with the focus on:

- supporting and promoting good practice, by assisting professionals to develop clear permanence plans for their children through involvement of those involved with the child
- taking on robust assessments and mobilising staff in different parts of the service to deliver these plans in a timely manner, **and**
- ensuring that the child remains at the centre of all arrangements made.

More specifically, the meeting will provide a consultative and quality assurance role in relation to key permanence activity.

Permanence tracking meetings – To monitor and scrutinize where children looked after are on their journey through the care system, with a clear focus on timescales. Permanence tracking meetings specifically will monitor:

- All permanence plans and their progress
- Family finding for children and its progress
- Children in the care system for over 5 months who don't have a clear care plan
- Age specific tracking e.g. all children under the age of 10 so as to get clarity regarding their plans
- Life story work
- Monitoring the reasons for changes in a permanence plan and the time frame for these changes to occur so as not to incur drift
- Monitoring children with long term fostering plans to see if any of them could be better supported through adoption or an SGO.

Through working with the local authorities is clear that they all do good work in regards to young children with plans of adoption. The key point here is the need for more of a holistic

approach to decision making for children needing permanence at an earlier point in the process. Fostering and adoption having a consultative role in the above enables this to occur and for a local authority to be more adventurous with permanence planning for hard to place children based on the experience of those involved in family finding and supporting adoptive families.

The development of a data tracking system which records the journey of a child with a permanence plan including all of the key processes above, also enables senior managers involved in these meetings to know who to monitor, ask the right questions and make decisions based on knowing who and where their children are.

Strand 3 – Pipeline Improvement

The WM partners identified the need to improve the journey of their customer and increase customer satisfaction with the process of adoption.

After Adoption sought to create an app which will guide prospective adopters with the adoption process, updating them on progress and notifying and prompting for action from both the adopter and the agency.

The main outcomes of this would be:

- higher levels of engagement with adopters to increase persistence in the process
- increase flow through the process via prompts to personal devices thereby reducing delay for children
- understanding of the behaviour of adopters
- improved customer service

Progress to date developing the app

We began the project with a MOU with Apadmi - an app developer - and verbal commitment following pre and post submission discussion from Social Care Network (SCN) - developers of Charms - to develop the app. The model we had discussed with Apadmi and SCN was for Apadmi to develop the app which SCN would support to be given secure access into Charms.

Date and details of meeting	Present	Activity	Outcomes
6th August Development Meeting (Apadmi Offices)	After Adoption Apadmi SCN	Outline adoption process for Apadmi. Charms - Walkthrough backend system set up and capabilities; clarify how CHARMS data be exposed to new mobile client Clarify security and agree model to ensure security of app and of Charms.	Commission of Apadmi to carry out a specification phase of the project to cost up the full development and map out a development course.
14th September Update Meeting	After Adoption Apadmi	Update from Apadmi on the specification phase. Identified need to further explore dependencies within Charms.	Need for further discussion with SCN to clarify database structure for Apadmi to link into
24th September Development Meeting (SCN Offices)	After Adoption Apadmi SCN	Drill into the structures within the database for the app to link into.	Agreed subset of progress items to link to which creates a more clearly defined parameters for the app

On 1st October we received an email from SCN letting us know they do not see it as effective for their business to develop an app and indicated they are considering extending their existing fostering app to include adopters. They acknowledged the impact of this on ourselves and the fact this was a reversal of their position. At the meeting on the 6th October the CEO of SCN stated he

would not allow access to secure data given stringent compliance to security. This position was subsequent to discussions held on the development day in August.

6th October Meeting to discuss with SCN	SCN After Adoption (inc CEOs of both agencies)	Clarify SCN position and seek to find alternative ways to progress.	Proposed model to put to Apadmi would be that Apadmi developed app as Design only project, then SCN implemented the app as a Charms project.
16th October Discussion with Apadmi	After Adoption Apadmi	Clarify whether design only project is realistic way to progress	Agreed that design only project would be possible.

12th November: Apadmi provide draft specifications for design only process

Specs then shared with SCN for comment and work between After Adoption, Apadmi and SCN to develop final specs for design only process.

Decision on app development

Following this process we had a proposed way forward which consisted of:

- Apadmi commissioned to create design for an app which can be used as a blueprint by database provider to create an app
- SCN provided with this blueprint and they are able then to create the app linking with Charms.

While this was still a viable solution our concerns at this point were:

- SCN would be accepting the blueprint without any commitment to implement as an app within Charms and without any commissioned piece of work it would be difficult to hold them to any timescale. We would not have any influence over whether or how much SCN charged other VAAs and LAs for use of the app
- The expansion grant funding would be going to commission a piece of work (Apadmi's design phase) which would then be handed to a private company (SCN) and we do not feel this sits well with us nor is an appropriate use of public funds.
- There is no guarantee that SCN would implement the app in line with the blueprint and no guarantee the app will be of appropriate quality to significantly improve the adopter experience
- Our initial plan was to create an app which linked into a database with the ultimate goal of being able to link into other databases if that became necessary. This app through SCN would be linked to Charms and we would not have any ability to change this.

Following this outcome we have taken the decision - with the support of the DfE - to discontinue the app development. The work to date will be sited with CVAA so that the wider adoption sector has access to it should other agencies seek to progress this work further.

Strand 4 – Improving Permanency Outcomes for Siblings

Sibling relationships are significant in both the general population and the Looked After Children population (Dunn and others have noted that the majority of individuals, around 80% in Europe and the United States) grow up with siblings and for many their relationships with their brothers and sisters are the longest lasting in their lives.

After Adoption recognises that good childcare practice should stem from a 'rights-based approach' for children where their sibling relationships are valued and addressed. Children need to know why certain plans are made and to be sensitively involved in this process in developmentally appropriate way.

The Care Inquiry 2013 highlighted:

Given that sibling relationships are likely to be among the most long lasting and significant relationships in a child's life, siblings should be placed together unless there are strong evidence based reasons for not doing so. In any such case, the future significance of these sibling relationships and their potential positive benefit should be recognised and actively developed.

With regards to adoption placements, in the publication, 'Family finding and matching - a survey of adoption agency practice in England and Wales.' (Feb 2011) summary 4, it was identified that:

The proportion of children placed with a sibling varied across agencies from 14% to 80% of all placed children. While there might have been an impact of small numbers in some authorities, such a spread might indicate different policies on the separation of sibling groups, or the timing of taking children from the same family into care and moving them on to adoption.



After Adoption commissioned expert child-care consultant Shelagh Beckett to work together with us to develop a suite of training materials and tools to support this project's intention to focus on the placement of more hard-to-place children, with an emphasis on sibling groups.

This was achieved through focused consultation with staff at all levels across children's and legal services, and across all four authorities, to ascertain areas of good practice as well as blocks to achieving positive outcomes when planning for permanency for sibling groups. This consultation took place in a face-to-face workshop style setting and also included the use of electronic surveys and telephone interviews.

The training materials and tools produced as a result were bespoke to the expressed needs of practitioners and managers involved in permanency planning for sibling groups currently in local authority care. The materials produced were also well-supported by documented research based evidence, to ensure practitioners came away from the programme with a solid research base to support future assessments and court work.

Training Programme Outline

1. Context

- Core Values and Principles
- Overview of LAC - significant population of children in sibling groups
- Legislation and Guidance
- What do we know about outcomes and how does this 'feed into' early planning
- Early planning - what constitutes good practice?

2. The assessment of sibling relationships and placement options

What goes into and helps develop a coherent assessment?

- Chronologies – planning from the outset: how can workers highlight what's important?
- Impact of parenting
- Perspectives of others
- The individual needs of each child
- Each child's views – what principles govern our work with children and seeking their views?
- Strengths and difficulties in the sibling group
- It will be important to not only identify behavioural issues but also to address them - how is this evidenced?
- Reasons that children may adopt particular roles (e.g. parenting/caring roles) and the impact – including support for carers where necessary
- Potential for further change
- Consideration of the consequences of placement options
- The importance of analysis

3. If children are separated

- Explanations for children
- A clearer focus on peer and sibling relationships – thinking about the implications
- Contact issues and planning
- Life Story/History and memory work

4. Ambition for the future – an enhanced service for siblings

- Key points
- What more can we do together?

Three courses were delivered at geographically convenient locations across the West Mercia region to ensure maximum attendance and impact. Full hard-copy packs were provided to participants to ensure learning opportunities were maximised through the opportunity for further reading and consolidation following the course.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

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