

# **Annual Panel Report of the London Borough of Enfield Adoption Service March 2017 – April 2018**

## **Report from Agency Decision Maker – Anne Stoker, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care**

It is my pleasure to introduce the annual report of Enfield Adoption Service.

Securing permanence for children who are unable to live with their birth parents has remained high on the political agenda at both local and national level, and the task of ensuring positive outcomes for society's most vulnerable children is challenging for all concerned.

The requirement for all local authorities to progress plans for regionalisation of adoption services has meant considerable co working across London authorities. At the time of writing this report, the six boroughs of the North London Adoption Consortium are working closely together, at senior management, middle management and social worker level to progress the plans for a Regional Adoption Agency. The timescale for the completion of this work is now going to be circa April 2019.

It has been a productive year for Enfield Adoption Service with new adoptive families having been assessed and children matched in a timely manner. There were 2 additional adoption orders made this year than the last financial year, with 12 adoption orders having been granted. The system relating to the Agency Decision Maker decisions regarding adoption plans for children continues to work well and where necessary, the flexible approach used to achieve timely decision-making has been very beneficial for children in care proceedings and at matching stage. Children who are relinquished continue to be presented by their allocated social worker to the Adoption Panel for approval.

Significant national changes have occurred over the last 12 months. 2017-18 has seen a slight increase in the number of placement orders granted by the courts in

preference to special guardianships arrangements. In 2016-17, Enfield obtained 32 Special Guardianship orders for children that were previously Looked After. However, in 2017-18 this number had reduced to 19 Special Guardianship Orders being made of Looked After Children, with a total number of Special Guardianship Orders made equalling 32 orders. It is also pertinent that for those children who are subject to placement orders and need adoptive families, they continue to be children who are the most vulnerable and come from abusive and challenging backgrounds.

Because of national changes, there are a greater number of adoptive families available than children waiting for adoption. However, there are still children with such complex issues that finding the right family to offer the skilled parenting required can take a considerable length of time. Furthermore, across the Consortium, around 75% of approved adopters are white, while around 75% of the children still awaiting placements are from a BME background.

Since November 2014, the six boroughs that deliver the Stage 1 process in the recruitment of prospective adopters have been split into two teams to cover the north and south of the Consortium – Enfield, Barnet and Haringey cover the north of the Consortium and Camden, Islington and Hackney the south. This has resulted in more families receiving an improved service from each of the recruitment teams. Changes to the way in which Enfield Adoption Service manages the recruitment process were necessitated by the designated recruitment Social worker leaving Enfield in December 2016. As a result, there is now a whole duty team approach to managing recruitment referrals and this is working well.

The recruitment of adopters is undergoing a fundamental transformation with the development of a Regional Adoption Agency. This will change the way in which adopters are recruited. There remains a mis-match between the numbers of adopters waiting for a placement and the type of child they are seeking and the types of children requiring an adoptive family. I am mindful that in 2017-18 there were 30 sets of adopters approved across the six boroughs of the North London Adoption Consortium. This equates to 6 sets of adoptive families being approved on average across North London. More adoptive families are therefore required for the cohort of children

requiring adoption. It is nevertheless pleasing to note that in Enfield, 11 sets of adopters were approved in the last 12 months; this is a significant increase on 2016-17 when there were only 4 approvals.

I would like to thank all the professionals and Panel Members, who, under the able leadership of Yvonne Metcalf, the Panel Chair, provide a committed and conscientious approach to their work. Special thanks are also due to Debbie Michael - Service Manager for the Fostering and Adoption Service, Morris Linton, the Panel Advisor, who has provided sound advice and to Lynne Warner, the Panel Co-ordinator who provides an excellent service in ensuring the smooth running of each Panel meeting.

My thanks to all the staff and Panel members involved in this crucial work and the difference you are making to the lives of vulnerable children.

## **The Adoption Panel**

### **Panel Meetings**

The Adoption Panel continues to meet monthly; in line with legislation, the Panel gives recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker about prospective adopters' suitability to adopt and matching for children with adoptive families. Reasons for the recommendation are given to enable the Agency Decision Maker to make a robust decision about each case presented. During the year, the Agency Decision Maker was able to agree all recommendations made by the Adoption Panel. The Adoption Panel is also able to give advice about age ranges and any other matters the Panel sees as being appropriate, again to aid the Agency Decision Maker in her deliberations.

Some Panel meetings have been only half a day, as the number of children coming through for adoption and hence both approvals and matches have been fewer than previous years. Where there are 3 or less Panel cases to be heard, Panel members are only paid for half a panel, in line with Enfield's need to ensure that the Panel is cost-effective. Panel members take it in turns also to attend Panel, thereby ensuring that quoracy is maintained, whilst at the same time keeping the number of Panel members

to a minimum. Feedback from adoptive families has been positive in terms of them reporting feeling less overwhelmed by the number of panel members in the meeting.

The process for care planning decisions about children, which has lain with the Agency Decision Maker now for over three years, continues to work well. Panel members are helped at the matching stage by having clear decision making and any issues identified in the care planning process, to ensure that they have sufficient information on which to base their recommendations.

The Adoption Panel continues to welcome observers, often either newly qualified social workers/newly appointed social workers, student social workers or medical practitioners. Feedback from observers continues to be very positive and, given that adoption cases may be a small part of any social worker's caseload, it is helpful for them to understand the gravity of the decisions made about children's long-term welfare.

Foster for Adopt is a relatively new concept to the borough and presents some challenges in the matching process as the children may have been in placement for some months prior to being matched formally under the adoption regulations. Enfield is keen to ensure that there is a larger pool of adopters to approach when Foster to Adopt Placements are required. This will necessitate increased input from the adoption team and the adoption panel at the 'suitability' stage to ensure that prospective adopters have a full understanding of the implications of such placements. In 2018-19, both the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser are considering more effective ways of ensuring that the Adoption Panel approves more Foster for Adopt carers, using effective protocols. It is also recognised that all the Consortium boroughs have struggled to attract Foster to Adopt carers, not just Enfield.

#### **Conduct of Panel meetings**

To aid transparency of decision making, social workers and prospective adopters are invited in together once Panel members have had an initial discussion about the case being presented. In general, the only time this would not be available to prospective adopters is if there was third party information which may affect the outcome of the case. The Agency has made a decision that prospective adopters should attend all of the meeting after the initial discussion, even in the case of a negative recommendation, to enable them to understand how the recommendation is arrived at. That said, the Chair reserves her right to ask prospective adopters to leave the meeting should this be necessary.

Feedback from both staff and adopters has been positive and Panel members have developed their confidence in this way of working.

#### **Panel Membership and staff issues**

The Panel has had a consistent panel membership over the preceeding 12 months. However, Jim Wallis – who is an experienced foster carer and adopter from another London Borough, has since left the Panel. Two Vice Chairs have now been appointed to chair the meeting if the Chair is unavailable. Jenny Belsham is a registered social worker and has considerable professional experience in adoption as well as being an adoptive parents herself. Deborah Persighetti is an adoptive parent and has experience of recruiting adopters in a neighbouring local authority. One or other attends every panel.

There is a requirement that Panel members have an annual appraisal, conducted by the Panel Chair and the professional adviser to the Panel. The outcome of these appraisals is then taken forward into the Chair's appraisal, which is conducted by the Agency Decision Maker.

Dr Oyetoro Enaigbe, a consultant paediatrician based within Enfield is now into her second full year as Medical Adviser to the Adoption Panel. Dr Enaigbe has direct experience of the children being presented to Panel and regularly meets with the child's social worker as well as prospective adopters to discuss the health-related issues of children requiring adoptive placements. Dr. Enaigbe's regular presence at

Triangle House has proved very effective in enabling social workers and prospective adopters to meet with her in advance of the Adoption Panel to discussed children's health related needs.

### **Training**

Both the Panel Chair and Panel Adviser have noted the variance in quality of Child Permanence Reports from cases being presented. This has identified the need for raising awareness towards the LAC social workers of ensuring that good quality CPRs are maintained. To this end, a meeting took place with a large group of LAC social workers in early 2018 to discuss methods of improving the quality of the PAR's. This training was well received by the LAC social workers.

The Adoption Panel members did not undergo formal Panel training in the last 12 months, although opportunities were given to panel members to attend training offered across the council and through the North London Adoption Consortium.

### **Quality assurance**

Part of the Panel remit is to monitor the Agency's performance in terms of timescales for the assessment and approval of prospective adopters. This is now being formally recorded in panel minutes as part of the panel's quality assurance role.

The quality of the paperwork in relation to prospective adopters' reports is generally good. Child permanence reports are perhaps more variable in their overall quality but generally are able to give the Agency and prospective adopters a good understanding of the children's needs.

### **User feedback**

The Panel is now receiving more formal evaluation sheets from attendees at Panel. This is vital to ensure that Panel members can reflect on their performance. Panel attendees are encouraged to complete the evaluation forms on their panel experience prior to leaving the building following their panel attendance and these are used as a source of learning for panel members and to improve in the delivery and performance of the Panel.

### **Future Developments**

It is unclear what the role of the Adoption Panel will be in the new world of regionalisation and there may be a number of statutory changes which will affect the conduct and remit of the Panel in the future. However, in the short term, there are a number of goals pertinent to the Panel:

- To ensure there is statistically significant user feedback, to monitor the performance of the Panel. This will be achieved by continuing more robust requests to attendees during the Panel meetings.
- To ensure members' appraisals are current. This will be achieved by conducting appraisals on all members as soon as possible, and then having a regular appraisal period each year.
- To identify internally commissioned training for Panel members, in conjunction with the Adoption Team and the Fostering Panel.
- To work with the adoption team in ensuring that the concept and the processes for Foster to Adopt are understood by all concerned.

### **Statistics and Progress of Cases Presented to Panel**

Panel Business Meetings continue to be held every six months and these are chaired by the LAC Head of Service. The Professional Adviser continues to present information in relation to the progress of children's care plans and adoptive families approved at Panel.

### **During 2017-18:**

11 sets of adoptive families have been approved. This is considerably more than in the previous year (2016-17) when only 4 families were approved. This is despite the backdrop of continued reform in the recruitment and assessment process necessitating changes in processes within the Consortium boroughs. Enfield is maintaining a more targeted approach in ensuring that recruitment matches as closely as possible to the types of children requiring adoption as their care plan, considering their range and level of needs. Equally, there is a need to also have a small pool of Enfield approved adopters that are regularly being approved for children with less

complex needs, to ensure that some of these Enfield children have the potential for an in-house placement, if appropriate. In comparison to its Consortium counterparts, Enfield has done well with 11 approvals: Barnet approved 8 families, Camden (3), Hackney (4), Haringey (3) and Islington (2).

12 Enfield children have been adopted in 2017-18. This is an increase to last year (2016-17) when 10 children were adopted. This year's figure needs to take into account the fact that nationally, there are fewer children with a plan of adoption as a result of a decrease in the number of Placement Orders granted by the judiciary. At the start of 2018-19, there were 14 children in adoptive placements and it is therefore highly likely that there will be an increase in the number of adoption orders made during this new financial year. In comparison to its Consortium counterparts, Barnet achieved 13 adoption orders, Camden (4), Hackney (12), Haringey (11) and Islington (8).

#### **Adoption Support Service:**

The complexity of the needs of adopted children and their families highlights the need for robust support packages, some of which may be ongoing for a considerable period of time and others intermittent. Increased understanding of the issues by both professionals and adoptive families alike has reinforced the need for detailed adoption support plans which deal with not only the initial stages of a placement but consider issues well into the future. The Panel Chair ensures that presenting social workers to Panel are reminded that the Adoption Support Plan is a living document that remains active during the child's adoption placement and can be subject to review and amendment at any time.

- 40 families are currently in receipt of adoption support packages.
- 12 adopted adults are currently receiving an access to records service.
- 25 adopted adults and birth relatives received support and guidance with regards to searching for extended birth family members separated by adoption. 15 are currently still receiving this service.



- To date, there are 74 (74 in 2016-17) adoption allowances and 187 Special Guardianship Allowances being paid (157 in 2016-17). There has been no change in the number of adoption allowances being paid but a continued significant increase in the number of SG allowances being paid.

### **Staffing and Accommodation**

The day to day management of the Adoption Service continues to remain the responsibility of the Adoption Team Manager who was appointed in February 2016 and, in his absence, the Service Manager for Fostering and Adoption and the Deputy Team Manager, who was successfully recruited to during 2016-17. The Head of Service has overall responsibility for the Service and is also the designated Adoption Support Advisor (ASSA), a required role under the Adoption Regulations. The Service is staffed with experienced managers and social workers. Two new social worker positions were successfully recruited to in late 2016 and early 2017 to replace positions that were vacated due to established social workers leaving the department. In early 2018, the one vacant social work post was also successfully recruited to and it is pleasing to note that the Adoption Service is now fully staffed again.

The areas of specialism within the team are 3-fold: family finding for children where adoption is the agreed plan; assessments of prospective adopters; and adoption support services to all affected by adoption and special guardianship. Since October 2016, the Adoption Service has also taken over the commissioning of special guardianship assessments; this includes a considerable increase in the number of special guardianship assessments being carried out by social workers within the Adoption Service. This is aiding social workers with developing new assessment skills in undertaking special guardianship work. The Adoption Team's proximity to the looked after children teams continues to be helpful in promoting timely care planning for

permanency. The Adoption Team continues to deliver an exemplary service with its wealth of experience and knowledge.

Team members have managed well with the adjustments being necessitated to the Stage 1 and Stage 2 processes in relation to the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. A whole team approach from Enfield's Adoption Team has now been implemented as part of the Tri-Borough project with Haringey and Barnet in delivering the Stage 1 recruitment and assessment process (including information sessions and foundation training). Each of the tri-borough authorities continues to undertake duty on a rolling three-monthly rota which has helped to improve the quality of the recruitment of adopters. Designated social workers are assigned to assess prospective adopters from the onset of Stage one and through stage two, thereby offering continuity of worker throughout the assessment process.

### **Training**

Staff training and development needs are met both through the Consortium and Enfield's Training and Development Service which offers a comprehensive programme. Team members are expected to attend training to ensure their ongoing development needs are met, as well as maintaining their social work HCPC registrations. In December 2017, social work professionals throughout the Council attended a Conference where several impressive guest speakers attended and gave presentations. As well as training courses, annual development days are held covering different topics and attended by social workers, education and health professionals, as well as foster carers.

### **The North London Adoption Consortium**

- The Consortium (Barnet, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Camden and Islington) continues to grow from strength to strength with initiatives to benefit children and their families across all six boroughs, for example:
- The joint Stage 1 recruitment and assessment process with Enfield, Barnet and Haringey serving families from the north of the Consortium boroughs and Camden, Islington and Hackney serving families from the south of the boroughs.

- The Consortium family finders working group has worked well together in looking at the available families as potential matches for children within the Consortium where adoption has been agreed.
- The matching service, Adoption Link Maker, is being used by all the Consortium boroughs and has resulted in some successful links and matches being made. Enfield has found that this has been a particularly effective means of identifying suitable families for its most difficult to place children.
- Following the termination of Norwood's inter-country contract with the Consortium in 2014, the Inter-Country Adoption Centre has now established the contract and is working well with the Consortium boroughs. The Inter Country Adoption Centre offers valuable advice and guidance on all inter country matters, as well as undertaking assessments and approvals of Enfield families wishing to adopt inter country. Enfield only has around one set of adopted families per year who require welfare supervision once the child is in the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. Enfield uses the services of an independent social worker with expertise in inter country adoption matters, rather than someone from the Inter Country Adoption Centre, as this is more cost effective.
- The Consortium contract with The Post Adoption Centre is proving to be a more cost-effective way of providing a range of services to all people affected by adoption. This contract enables the referral of families with complex adoption support needs for assessment and treatment. This service is available to all Enfield residents affected by adoption, as well as those affected by other forms of permanency such as special guardianship or long term fostering. The Post Adoption Centre provides outreach support to families across the Consortium boroughs, including a monthly surgery in Enfield, which can also be accessed by professionals involved in making plans for children. In 2017-18, Enfield has seen an increase in the numbers of families affected by adoption taking up the offers of six sessions of free counselling. More adoptive families are also being referred to the Post adoption centre for comprehensive counselling and therapy.

- The Adoption Support Fund was introduced in May 2015 and over the last two years; Enfield has made 74 applications on behalf of adoptive families and adopted children requiring intensive therapy which have all been successful. In 2017-18, this equates to 30 applications, totalling £60,631. This is an increase of 6 applications from the preceding 12 months when 24 applications were made. At the end of 2017-18, the fund has paid out £251,331 to Enfield Council so that these adoptive families can receive relevant therapy in accordance with their needs. The fund has now been extended to adopted adults up until they reach 22 years and 25 years if the adopted adult has special educational needs. The fund has also been extended to inter country adopters and children who are under a special guardianship order, where the child was previously looked after by the Local Authority.
- Regular training courses are held throughout the year for adoptive families as well as groups for families and their adopted children. Training is delivered via specialised trainers or through the Consortium's pool of leaders from each of the Consortium teams.

Enfield had been running a well-attended support group for its adoptive families for over 13 years. However, the group was predominantly made up of an established membership of adoptive parents who had adopted some years ago. For newer approved adopters, they are more likely to access support groups in their area run by an independent group of adopters called We Are Family (WAF). As a result, the Enfield Adoption Support Group was disbanded and all adopters now have access to the WAF support groups running across North London. During 2017-18, WAF provided the Consortium Heads of Service with extensive details on the range of services they provide with the Heads of Service agreeing to provide a financial contribution towards the WAF services offered to adopters across North London.

- The North London Adoption Consortium Support Group for adopted adults continues to run on a bi-monthly basis. This group is now well established.

### **Adoption Support**

- Enfield is committed to offering adoption support packages to local families that need additional help, following an adoption support assessment. Enfield continues to have a low placement breakdown rate; in 2015-16 there were three adoptive placements which disrupted prior to the adoption orders being granted. In 2016 – 17 there were no adoption disruptions and in 2017-18 there were no disruptions. Two separate sets of adopted children came into care in 2017-18 but these were children who were not previously Enfield looked after children; extensive support from the Adoption Support Service had been put in place beforehand to attempt to stabilise each placement. The low breakdown rates are due to the robust support packages being flexible to meet the demands of the placements and includes easier access to therapeutic services which are tailored to the needs of the specific placement. This was aided somewhat by a working group comprising the Service Manager and Team Manager – Adoption Service, together with a LAC Team Manager and a Senior Practitioner who undertook a placement disruption analysis of the causes of these breakdowns. An analysis report was completed by the Service Manager for Adoption & Fostering and the findings were shared with all Panel members and the Head of Service at an Adoption Panel Business Meeting in June 2016.
- The service continues to offer a range of support services to adults affected by adoption, including guidance, advice and support with accessing records as well as the provision of intermediary advice and support where adopted adults are wishing to seek reunification with members of their birth family.
- It has been acknowledged that there is a growing need for support to Special Guardians (SG); work around this is being developed and is ongoing, to ensure the needs of SG carers and the children placed with these families are being adequately supported. Support for SG carers is managed and delivered within Enfield's Adoption Service.
- A Child Psychotherapist from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service continues to attend the adoption team meetings on a regular basis which team members found useful, giving them the opportunity to engage in reflective group supervision. This also enables team members to analyse the problems more clearly

and consider the issues from varying perspectives, resulting in better support strategies being put into place.

- Recruitment initiatives to meet the needs of our children continues to be a priority. In October 2017, during National Adoption Week, the consortium boroughs facilitated a large event in Hackney, also a part of Black History month, to raise awareness and the profile of adoption with the aim of attracting potential applicants for our black and dual heritage children in need of adoption. A further targeted recruitment event in March 2018 in Wood Green was also well attended.

### **Recent Developments**

- Plans are now well underway for the government to regionalise adoption by proposing a move to develop regional adoption agencies. This is with the intention of speeding up the matching process, improving adopter recruitment and adoption support, reduce costs, and improve the life chances of London's most vulnerable children. The London Adoption Board submitted an expression of interest and was assigned the role of scoping and defining the future regionalisation model. This is now in the planning and implementation stage and there have been many meetings and conferences which have been attended by various members of senior management, including adoption managers. A new lead professional – Julie Lewis has been commissioned as the Project Manager North London Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) to steer Enfield and the 5 other North London Consortium boroughs through these changes. As well as meeting with Directors and Assistant Directors / senior managers, further implementation groups are underway with the Legal Dept., Human Resources and Commissioning Services. Importantly, the "Task and Finish" groups are now underway and include managers and social workers in adoption teams to progress planning and implementation of the family finding, recruitment of adopters and adoption support. These changes will be implemented in circa April 2019.
- The North London Adoption Consortium has been exploring a potential proposal to make an application to the Adoption Support Fund for a bespoke therapeutic service

for adoptive families being provided by Adoption Plus. Funding was approved by the Adoption Support Fund in 2016, together with government funding for Adoption Plus to establish a bespoke therapeutic service for adoptive families connected to the North London Adoption Consortium. This new service, based in Crouch End began taking referrals in the spring of 2017. To date, two Enfield families have accessed the service.

- Enfield, together with Haringey, Barnet, Islington and Camden are linking up with Hackney CAMHS Team who are developing a clinical hub of therapeutic expertise to offer a CAMHS adoption-focused therapeutic service to adoptive families. This was due to commence in the summer of 2017 but was delayed and put on hold, pending the completion of the regionalisation implementation programme.
- Several babies in Enfield's care are unlikely to return home due to their parents' inability to provide the security and care that is needed for their child. Concurrent planning and foster to adopt placements provide potential permanency for babies at an early stage and avoid the need for further moves.

In 2017-18, assessments of adopters automatically consider their suitability to become Foster to Adopt carers, to ensure there is a bigger pool of in house adopters to approach when the need for a Foster to Adopt Placement becomes necessary.

- Enfield Adoption Team continues to work closely with an Enfield CAMHS psychotherapist to offer direct consultation, advice and strategies specifically to adopters with children placed in their care, where there is a need for direct therapeutic support.
- In the Children's Social Care electronic case management system ( called Liquid Logic ICS) pathways were developed and refined during 2017-18 in the areas of adoption support, special guardianship assessments and special guardianship support. This will lead to better transparency and clarity of work being undertaken in these areas and improvements in the way these social work tasks are carried out.

- During 2017-18, the Consortium commenced the review of allowances paid to adopters across the six NLAC boroughs. This is continuing and is being aligned with the current regionalization procedural changes being undertaken.
- Closer links are being created with the new Virtual Head for Enfield to offer advice and guidance for social workers about ensuring services for adopted and children under a special guardianship order who were previously in care are met by the schools.
- There is now a London run support group 'for adopters who wait' which has proved very popular and further meetings are planned. All the London consortia are assisting with planning and running these events.
- The Great Behaviour Breakdown (GBB) is an extensive training programme aimed at adopters who are in crisis. Enfield has referred several adoptive families to this training, using the Adoption Support Fund to ensure this is accessed by as many adopters who require it as possible.
- An initiative between the Consortium boroughs and a therapeutic service called Body and Soul has been set up and successfully established following a successful bid to the Adoption Support Fund in 2015-16. The partnership project between Body and Soul and the North London Adoption Consortium offers an 8-week programme for 8-12year olds (Young Explorers) and 13-16year olds (Teen Spirit) to enable adopted children to come together with others who have also been adopted and to provide a safe, emotional space for them to work on their feelings and emotions associated with having an adopted status. Enfield has referred several of our adopted children to this project using funds agreed by the Adoption Support Fund
- The North London Adoption Consortium Adopters' Forum has provided the opportunity for adoptive families to give their views on adoption support needs. The aim of this group is to enable "the voice of the adopter" and identify gaps in service provision. These meetings were chaired throughout 2017-18 by Enfield's Adoption Team Manager.



- Enfield, as part of the North London (SG) Consortium now routinely offers special guardianship training to those special guardians who are either in assessment or recently approved. This training is facilitated by both Enfield special guardianship support social workers and assessing social workers, together with an experienced special guardian.
- A special guardianship support group for Enfield and Haringey guardians was established in 2015-16 and this continues to be well attended, with guest speakers coming along. This group is held on a bi monthly basis.
- The Marketing, Communications and Recruitment Team launched a digital adoption campaign via CAN in 2017/18 to target prospective adopters, who are able to consider older children, sibling groups and children with complex needs.
- A collaborative approach to producing a best practice model on transitions from fostering into adoption was led by John Simmonds OBE, Head of Policy and Research at BAAF with social work staff from adoption and fostering teams in the consortium in June 2017.
- A highly rated course, "Going Back to Go Forwards" run by Louis Sydney, a psychotherapist with lengthy experience of working in adoption and Zach Gomm, has been set up for access under the ASF as a rolling arrangement. Newly approved adopters are encouraged to attend this training which runs throughout the year.

#### **User Feedback**

- Evaluations following adoption preparation training groups and post-Panel attendance indicate positive feedback. However, it is acknowledged that the numbers of feedback reports need to increase. This will be addressed through ensuring that all adopters and social workers coming to Panel will be asked to complete their feedback reports immediately following their attendance at Panel.

- The adopter preparation training is reviewed after every session and comments from participants noted and acted upon. The training provides a wide range of speakers such as adopters, foster carers, professionals from CAMHS and the designated nurse for Looked after Children.
- In line with the ethos of the Consortium, the team has been able to accommodate adoptive families from Consortium boroughs on Enfield's preparation training programme. The feedback from these adoptive families has been positive.
- Feedback from adoptive families is also received via letters and cards praising the social workers that have assessed, approved and supported them throughout the process.
- The Adopters Forum (made up of families across the Consortium boroughs) is an excellent way in which to obtain feedback. This forum is adopter led and gives families the opportunity to voice their views and suggest ways in which to improve services where there are gaps.
- A Helpline number is now available to adoptive families experiencing problems with their children in the school setting; this is a service provided by the Post Adoption Centre.

#### **Report from Panel Chairperson**

Adoption remains high on the political agenda although the landscape for adoption agencies remains uncertain. This includes more uncertainty in the court arena, and social workers and adopters alike have to manage those uncertainties in terms of, for instance, appeals by birth parents. There is rightly continued pressure to ensure that planning for children happens in a timely manner and that prospective adoptive parents are given appropriate information, take the lead in the initial processes and are assessed in a fair way which takes account of their strengths as parents for the most vulnerable children in our society. Expectations of any adoption agency are therefore high and the Panel's contribution to the overall success of the agency is

crucial. Against this is a reduction in the number of young children being available for adoption and the challenge for any agency is the placing of the children with more complex needs, particular ethnic, cultural and religious needs, and sibling groups. All the children requiring adoption have had an uncertain start in life and a major task for the agency is to ensure that prospective adopters have a full understanding of the lifelong challenges that many adopted children and hence their families face.

Enfield continues to attract a diverse range of prospective adoptive parents, most of whom have thoroughly researched their chosen agency prior to making a commitment.

The role of the adoption panel in relation to matching children with adoptive families has been an item for discussion in many quarters, especially as regionalisation, with the major changes to process it will bring, moves on. There have been many changes in practice with adopters having much more contact with children and their carers prior to being presented for the formal match, as well as the concept of children being placed prior to the match under Foster to Adopt. Enfield remains committed to ensuring that the adoption panel brings a level of scrutiny and quality assurance to matches to ensure that they are as 'safe' as can be.

In the main, matches are well researched and prospective adopters come to Panel with the requisite information about a child which will enable them to understand the challenges ahead. Panel members are always mindful of the lessons learnt from disruptions and from their own experiences. This is helpful in considering not only the viability of the match but the adoption support plan, both now and in the long term, which panel members consider to be vital to the successful outcome of any match.

As ever, the quality of the discussion and the issues raised throughout the Panel meetings evidence that all members take their responsibilities very seriously and papers are thoroughly read. I would like to thank them all for their commitment to the task.

I have continued to meet with Linda Hughes, Head of Service, and Debbie Michael outside of Panel meetings and it has been helpful to understand the overall context of the work within the department as well as deal with any Panel issues which have arisen. My relationship with Morris Linton as team manager for the adoption service and panel adviser is well established and mutually supportive.

The thoroughness of the decision making in regard to plans for children is evidence of a thoughtful and robust approach to ensuring that all aspects of a child's journey are considered prior to a match being made.

I would like to thank Dr Oyetora Enaigbe, our medical adviser, who continues to help us to understand some of the very complex medical issues which come before Panel, and I know her contribution to adoption in Enfield is valued by Panel members, social work staff and adopters alike. I would also like to thank Linda Hughes, Debbie Michael and Morris Linton for their support to me personally as Panel chair and also to the agency in general. Last but certainly not least, I would also like to thank Lynne Warner, the Panel coordinator, whose commitment to the smooth running of the Panel is ever present. The administrative staff within the borough have continued to adapt to new ways of working in this last year, and it is to Lynn's credit that she has continued to ensure Panel meetings are so well organised.

The regionalisation agenda will continue to gather momentum during this next year and as a resolution of the issues comes near, there will undoubtedly be discussions about the general operation of the panel system including the membership, the adviser, Chair and in Enfield's case the position of the elected members. In the immediate future, the major tasks for the panel are to ensure a good understanding of changes in working practices, especially in relation to Foster to Adopt, to ensure panel members are included in information about any future changes, and to ensure that the robustness of their quality assurance role is incorporated into the agency as a whole.

Report compiled by:





Yvonne Metcalf

Independent Adoption Panel Chair

Morris Linton

Adoption Team Manager

