

Evaluation of the partnership arrangement between
Nottinghamshire County Council and Faith in Families

By Jatinder Sandhu and Jo Ward

Nottingham Trent University

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1. Introduction

This report details the context, approach and findings from a research study evaluating a partnership arrangement between Nottinghamshire County Council and Faith in Families regarding the planned pre-purchased block placement of 20 children for adoption initiated in 2013. Nottinghamshire County Council had an existing relationship with Faith in Families through the placement of individual children for adoption during the year 2012 -13. This existing relationship is reminiscent of the relationships many voluntary adoption agencies have with local authorities, who place their children with the voluntary adoption agencies on the agreement that the local authority pays a fee to agency for the placement. The partnership agreement between Nottinghamshire County Council and Faith in Families, in regards to the placement of twenty children is thought to be unique for two reasons (i) Faith in Families would become the preferred provider of families for children who were in need of placement (ii) Nottinghamshire County Council would make payment for the 20 placements upfront.

This research was commissioned to understand and evaluate the partnership agreement, both in terms of the number of children placed and the developing working relationship but also to capture and document some of the unintended outcomes. This report details the national context behind the partnership and the methodology employed to investigate the objectives detailed above. Based on the main themes emerging from the data, findings are then presented in regards to the following areas: (i) background context to the partnership; (ii) formalising the partnership; (iii) placements and developing policies and practices; (iv) monitoring procedures; (v) unintended outcomes of the partnership; (vi) key components of a successful partnership (barriers and enablers) and (vii) development of the partnership in the future. The report concludes by presenting some conclusions and detailed recommendations for the future delivery of the partnership.

2. Context

During 2012 -13 the government's adoption agenda moved forward to increase pressure on local authorities to place children for adoption more quickly (this pressure was implemented through "Adoption Score Cards" which judged local authorities' performance). In January 2013 the Government announced the development and implementation of an ambitious reform programme to ensure that more children, for whom adoption is the best option, can be placed more quickly with permanent families to ensure they have the best possible chances in life. Under the Adoption Improvement Grant, the Government provided an additional £8 million funding to help local authorities to implement the reform programme to improve adoption practice and adoption services in their areas. In particular, the funding was available for activities to reduce the time it takes between children first entering care and being placed for adoption – seeing children moving into stable homes as early as possible; to improve the quality of associated decision making; and to increase the numbers of adopters being recruited and approved (including the impact of effective adoption support). There was also an agenda that local authorities would have their adoption functions taken away from them if they didn't reform adequately.

3. Objectives of research

The objective of this project was to evaluate how successful was the partnership between Nottinghamshire County Council and Faith in Families during the year 2013 -14 in terms of:

- The number of children placed;
- The working relationship between the local authority (LA) and the voluntary adoption agency (VAA), including the un-intended outcomes
- Developing practice and indicators for future developments

4. Methodology

This project was based on an empirical practice methodology that emphasises evaluation activities based on outcomes and concentrates on the effects of practice as defined in terms of measurable outcomes (Kazi, 2003). Both quantitative (semi-structured interviews) and qualitative methods (documentary analysis) were used to investigate the objectives stated above. Further details of approach, sampling and analysis methods are provided in the sub-sections below.

4.1. Interviews

Semi structured interviews were used to capture data about from key personnel in Nottinghamshire County Council and Faith in Families. The objectives of interviews were to investigate:

- How the partnership came about.
- How and by whom the project was planned by.
- Monitoring procedures put in place and who was responsible for these.
- Details of how the target number of placements was set and whether the target number of placements was reached.
- Details of the procedures put in place to select children for placement children, how effective these were and details of how procedures could be improved.
- The unintended outcomes of the partnership.
- Key enablers and barriers to partnership working.

Two members of Faith in Families personnel and three members of Nottinghamshire County Council personnel were interviewed. All members of staff had direct involvement with the work being done under the partnership agreement. In order to gather 'rich' qualitative data, all participants were probed on each of the questions until they had no further responses to add and the researchers perceived that 'theoretical saturation' (Lewis-Beck et al, 2004) had been achieved. Interviews lasted between 45 - 75 minutes were conducted during June 2014.

All interview data were recorded on to a Dictaphone and recordings were then transcribed verbatim. Data from interview scripts were then input to an Excel spreadsheet. Inductive coding methods and thematic analysis of interviews and transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998) helped identify key themes. In thematic analysis the task of the researcher is to identify a limited number of themes which adequately reflect textual data. As such, it was possible to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary of findings. This was a useful way of organising the data as it allowed themes relating to each of the research objectives to be identified and for a coding framework to be

developed. Therefore, the nature of the coding was inductive and was developed by directly examining the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Silverman, 2005).

4.2. Documentary analysis

Documentary data were also collected from Faith in Families and Nottinghamshire County Council records. Data were collected on the following the number of children referred and placed with Faith in Families adopters from 2012 -14. Documentary sources were analysed to ascertain details of the children placed through the partnership.

4.3. Ethics

The research was subject to the approval of Nottingham Trent University's ethics committee. In order to encourage honest reflection during the interview process, anonymity was of paramount importance. Accordingly personal information, names and identities are not included in this research report. Instead, all participants have been ascribed pseudonyms (e.g. participant 1, participant 2 etc). Steps were also taken to ensure that all personal data, stored both manually or electronically, were kept securely and could not be accessed by unauthorised persons. The team also worked within the confines of current law over such matters as copyright, confidentiality and data protection.

Participant information sheets, tailored appropriately for each group of participants were prepared by the researchers. These were designed in clear, jargon-free language, with a clear articulation of the purpose, aim and objectives of the research and the nature of participant involvement, together with details of how participants' anonymity and confidentiality would be secured. Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the research at any time or refuse to answer questions that would cause them discomfort. Participants were also required to sign a consent form prior to data collection activities commencing. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview began.

5. Findings

This section will address findings derived from analysis of interviews and documentary analysis. Specifically this section will discuss findings in the context of the main themes emerging from the data, namely:

- Background context to the partnership.
- Formalising the partnership.
- Placements, developing policies and practices.
- Monitoring procedures.
- Unintended outcomes of the partnership.
- Key components of a successful partnership (barriers and enablers).
- Development of the partnership in the future.

The data relating to each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

5.1. Background context to the partnership

Some participants made reference to the existing informal working arrangement between Faith in Families (FIF) and Nottinghamshire County Council's Adoption Service (NCCAS), prior to the formal partnership regarding the placement of 20 children being agreed. One participant stated:

We (NCCAS) have a long standing relationship with FIF. We have done a lot of things with them in the past.....we worked on a concurrent planning project together and some years back we did some collaborative research together on behalf of the Department of Education.
(Participant 5, NCCAS)

Another participant, when speaking about the relationship between FIF and NCCAS made reference to the competition that has historically existed between voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities.

There has always been a working relationship there. However it was a loose one, nothing set in stone. It's no secret that voluntary adoption agencies have always operated at a distance from their local authorities, which I suppose is the result of being in competition with each other. (Participant 3, FIF)

Although participants from NCCAS and FIF both made reference to their past relationship, it seems that these collaborative efforts were based on opportunities available at the time, rather than a strategically thought out and sustained partnership. It wasn't until 2011 that the seeds for development of a sustained partnership were planted. As can be seen from the extract below, the impetus for the development of an informal partnership came from NCCAS new appointment of a Homefinder worker. At a time when there were a significant number of children coming forward for adoption/ waiting for adoption placements, NCCAS employed a Homefinder worker. This was in part a response to finding families for the large numbers of children who were waiting to be placed and couldn't be resourced from NCCAS own pool of adopters. Initially, the resource was used on strategic level to improve NCCAS working relationships with voluntary adoption agencies in Nottinghamshire. The Homefinder worker played an instrumental role in developing the working relationship with FIF.

So really, with FIF, it began as a very informal relationship. They identified things we could do. So the Homefinder worker would regularly share profiles of our children. He also started going to FIF Thursday Open Evening to talk about Nottinghamshire children who were waiting for adoption. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

The Homefinder worker also spoke of his early experiences of being in post and as can be seen from the extract below, FIF were especially receptive to working together.

I began with the Head of Professional Services at FIF and had a series of regular meetings to discuss which families they had and which children we had, with the aim of making sure that any families they had would be considered for our children and any children we had would be brought to their attention. There was a longer term aim which was to match up children who didn't yet have a placement order with families who yet didn't have an adoption approval – so we would minimise the waiting time for children waiting to be placed for adoption.
(Participant 2, NCCAS)

It is worth briefly discussing the local context during 2011-13. In terms of the children waiting to be placed, there were an unusually high number of babies with adoption placement plans. Additionally, the number of people applying to be adopters was gradually declining. One participant noted that the recession would have impacted on people deciding to come forward to adopt (Participant 1, NCCAS). It can be argued that these factors were also an impetus for the development of a closer working relationship between NCCAS and FIF.

5.2. Formalising the partnership

The stimulus for formalising the partnership in respect to the placement of twenty children came from the Adoption Improvement Grant. As noted earlier, in 2013 the Government provided additional funding to help local authorities to implement the reform programme to improve adoption practice and adoption services in their areas. In particular, the funding was available for activities to reduce the time it takes between children first entering care and being placed for adoption – seeing children moving into stable homes as early as possible; to improve the quality of associated decision making; and to increase the numbers of adopters being recruited and approved (including the impact of effective adoption support). The government determined the level of grant each local authority would receive and NCCAS received £540k.

NCCAS were mindful that they had a number of interagency placements which they believed to pose a higher risk, however when working with a local agency there was less risk, time and money involved (i.e. time spent by the social worker travelling, money in terms of putting up adopters in accommodation and services that had to be bought from other local authorities).

Also at the time we had interagency matches up and down the country and we still do to some extent there are huge benefits to keeping the children within the midlands both from the services that they access but also to save on social worker time and travel time – it's not just the social worker but the IRO that has to travel – it is everybody – so they could see those benefits.
(Participant 1, NCCAS)

Thus it made sense to work in collaboration with a local voluntary adoption agency. As can be seen from the extract below, it was proposed by one of the NCCAS participant's to give the money upfront to FIF for the placement of a number of children.

When we got the adoption grant, which was quite a lot of money for us and I said to my manager that I wanted to be able to give some of that money to FIF up front before we had the placements, so that they would prioritise their families for our children. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

When participants from NCCAS were probed as to why they chose to formalise the partnership with FIF and not with other active agencies in the area, several reasons transpired. Firstly, NCCAS had a proven record with working with FIF. FIF had provided families for children when they were working informally with NCCAS. Furthermore, despite efforts from NCCAS to develop partnerships with the other agency in the area, they had not seen the level of commitment from the other agency to working in partnership as had been demonstrated by FIF.

The reason why FIF was chosen for a partnership was because we were already working in an informal partnership. We would go to them first about children we couldn't place and it wasn't

that we didn't go to the other local voluntary adoption agency, but the others hadn't provided a placement for us. Despite trying, there wasn't a history of achieving placements with them. So to us it was obvious to build upon that relationship with FIF. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

The other participant interviewed from NCCAS also made similar comments.

Years ago we used to grant aid another voluntary adoption agency. So you'd assume we would have had a good working relationship with them. At some point the grant aid stopped. And about 10- 12 years ago we placed three sets of children with their adopters in one year. At the time it felt like the beginning of something but nothing materialised. With FIF, they had already shown that commitment to partnership working. We knew they were committed to working together and were working to deliver results. That's what we needed. It also made sense to consolidate the relationship we had been developing in the previous years. (Participant 5, NCCAS)

The Family Finder worker noted:

FIF were at that time were much more responsive to working in closer partnership and holding regular meetings with me so they had knowledge of which children we had and we had knowledge of families they had been approved or were in the process of being approved. (Participant 2, NCCAS)

In terms of FIF, the stimulus for them to be involved in the partnership was a strategic decision. FIF was committed to a strategy which ensured that there was growth in the agency and there was a greater level of partnership working.

When I first came here, I was tasked with developing the forward strategy. It was clear that we had four options. (i) You either work alone – if so you may as well start making plans for an exit strategy; (ii) you grow, (iii) you merge (iv) or you work in partnership and through collaboration. In terms of our strategy we decided to work in partnership and grow. Partnership working and growing were the triggers for us to be as innovative and creative as we could be in terms of diversification. So we were developing new services. Alongside that was ensuring that adoption and adoption support could equally grow and the quality of our work would not be diluted or compromised and we would continue to keep children at the heart of our decision making. And that was really the trigger for us to think OK which agencies could we partner up with. We also approached other local authorities and local voluntary adoption agencies. (Participant 3, FIF)

From explorations as to which agencies FIF would benefit from being partners with, the CEO of FIF felt they had done well to develop a trusting relationship with NCCAS over the previous 18 months and in a sense had proved themselves to be committed to developing the working relationship.

We wanted to be the 'agency of choice'. You can't be that unless you develop a strong trusting relationship. This partnership was over a handshake and that trust took time to develop. It took 18 months and what I wanted to do was to gain that title of 'agency of choice'. We had to show why we are the best, why we are better than our competitors and why we can be trusted to deliver a service. Normally you are OFSTED inspected once every three years, however we were inspected twice in 5 years. Each time we were awarded an outstanding - once with no recommendations which is like your Michelin star....We were intelligent and proactive enough to know that when NCCAS received the Adoption Improvement Grant monies, we could call in

our 18 months of partnership building to develop the current partnership deal. (Participant 3, FIF)

Under the conditions of the grant, the money had to be spent by NCCAS in the financial year (i.e. before March 2014), with the remainder returned to the Department for Education. Thus for NCCAS it made sense to pay the money upfront to FIF. This type of arrangement was unusual, especially as NCCAS would not immediately receive the services it had paid for. However this type of arrangement was not without its challenges, especially in terms of procurement law. The success of being able to pay the lump sum to FIF in advance was felt to be down to a thorough investigation by Nottinghamshire County Council Procurement team to ensure that the agreement would be on the right side of the law.

XXXXX did the negotiations around the procurement side of it and discussed with them the agreements we could have. I think people were on board once they could see what we were trying to do and this was ring-fenced adoption money so if we didn't spend it then it went back. We wanted to spend it so we could place more of our children. During the year of the grant, the monies were paid to FIF in three instalments. We spent the money back in 2013 but are still benefiting from it now. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

I think our procurement people were really supportive to ensure that we could all be on the right side of the regulations and the law. But worked quickly and fairly. (Participant 5, NCCAS)

Once FIF received the monies it was put in to a separate account – and only once a placement had been made was the fee deducted from the lump sum amount.

The money upfront served a purpose to them as they were able to spend all the money within the year. For us it didn't really help cash flow immediately as we put the money in a separate holding account – and we only access it only once we place a child(ren). (Participant 3, FIF)

In May 2013 the partnership agreement made between FIF and NCCAS was that for the monies received by FIF the agency would provide 20 placements for NCCAS children by March 2014. As can be seen from the quotes below, although twenty placements were seen as ambitious, the challenge was gladly received by FIF.

What we agreed was that we would anticipate having 20 placements from FIF. The year before, when informally working, we had aimed to get 10 placements but I don't think we quite managed it. Trying to get 20 in a year was very ambitious – but it was not strictly tied in. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

Through a series of meetings what was put on the table was that the NCCAS would block purchase 20 placements from us and pay for them up front. (Participant 3, FIF)

We decided on 20 families. Originally we were going to go for 10. But when we met we mutually thought we'll go for 20. And FIF were up for it, they were up for being pushed for it. And they knew at the time that the government were going to push them to work in partnership anyway. (Participant 5, NCCAS)

Since May 2013, the partnership agreement has evolved and the unspent monies from 2013/14 have been rolled over in to 2014/15. It is important to note earlier discussions. When the partnership was first formed there was a need for FIF to provide families for not just what is traditionally known as 'hard to place children', but for the large number of babies and young children who required placement. Now this immediate demand for the placement of the large number of young children available for adoption has passed, the monies are being utilised to meet more immediate demands – this being the need to focus on finding families for older children and sibling groups. To meet these immediate demands, NCCAS and FIF agreed that FIF should recruit a link worker, who would be responsible for recruiting and matching families for these children. Additionally, as can be seen from the quotes below, there is also agreement from both parties to spend some of the money on joint branded advertising to help recruit families for older and sibling groups.

Well we did say 20 and now we are thinking of changing bits of the service we are getting from FIF. Some of the monies left over will be spent on specific advertising for families who will take older children sibling children. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

So it went from a very rigid 20 children for £540k to now NCCAS saying that you spend some of that money on partnership working, partnership advertising and on a link worker. There has been a match funding thing for the link worker (based at FIF) – who we pay half of the salary for and the half they do. So they (NCCAS) understood that to make the 20 placements more achievable there needed to be other investment. We equally believe that. (Participant 3, FIF)

5.3. Placements, developing policies and practices

From the period March 2012 – June 2014 (i.e. the period of the informal and formal partnership), fourteen children have been placed for adoption with nine adoptive families. Of those fourteen children, nine were females and five were males. Five of those placements have been sibling group placements. Four of the fourteen children were aged two, three were aged three, two were aged four, three were aged five and two were aged six. In addition to these placements twelve families have explored links with thirty children with twenty of these children being siblings. These links did not progress for various reasons. However, it is important to note that in addition to the number of placements, these numbers suggest that during the duration of the informal and formal partnership, FIF has 'potentially' linked forty-four children with twenty-one families. Focussing on just the period of the formal partnership (May 2013 – June 2014) four children have been matched for adoption, of which two have been a sibling group. In addition to the four placements stated above, four matches are still active and may result in placements.

As noted above, the target of twenty placements was seen to be ambitious. However participants also noted that there were other factors at play which would have impacted on the target twenty placements not being achieved. Firstly, NCCAS in-house adopter recruitment has increased. For instance, for the year 2013/14 approximately 60 families have been recruited, increasing from 45 families during 2012/13 and 31 families during 2011/12. This has resulted in a greater choice of adoptive families for children requiring placement, which may have led to NCCAS looking elsewhere for suitable matches. Secondly, a reason related to the first – NCCAS adopters are more likely to look for NCCAS to provide a match for them; whereas adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency would look in lots of places for a suitable match i.e. Be my Parent, Children Who Wait etc. Thus 'in-

house' adopters are suitably matched for children with adoption plans. Finally, after the big peak of children with adoption plans during 2012 – 2013, the numbers of new adoption plans on children have decreased in Nottinghamshire. These factors have cumulatively resulted in a situation where there are a larger number of adopters than children available for adoption.

When participants were asked about the policies and procedures for selecting suitable families for children, it became evident that these have evolved over the duration of the partnership. In terms of FIF, social workers would explore with the adopters how many children they would like to adopt and the types of children they wish to adopt. For instance, if they would they would be willing to take a child with a disability or if they were open to adopting a child who had history of drugs or alcohol in their background. The social worker would also explore the types of abuse (in the child's background) the adopters think they could manage and could emotionally cope with. This information would be taken to the NCCAS Homefinder monthly meeting. At the outset of the partnership, it was agreed that a member of the FIF team would attend this meeting. The Homefinder meeting is attended by managers from the permanence team (children's team), managers from the adoption service, the Homefinder workers and the Recruitment and Publicity Officer. In this meeting, all children who have adoption plans are discussed – right through from those who may be at the point of having an agency decision through to those who have had an agreed match at panel. It was agreed that for those children who had no active links, the Homefinder worker would consult with FIF to see if they had any suitable families.

We moved to a point where we invited FIF to be at those meetings and they moved to having a Homefinder post in their agency so that when we talk about children we can say 'who have we got' and if we had in house adopters we would consider those first and if not then we would go to FIF with the profiles of the children who we didn't have a match for. (Participant 1, NCASS)

Attendance by a member of FIF staff at the monthly Homefinder meetings was seen to be important by both NCCAS and FIF interviewees, so FIF were aware of children who were available for placement and so NCCAS was aware of potential FIF adopters who could be linked to those children. Additionally, attendance of a member of FIF personnel was seen to be important as to remind NCCAS personnel about the partnership and that FIF adoptive families should also be considered alongside suitable families from NCCAS. Furthermore, these meetings were seen to be important in overcoming the preference for in-house adopters.

We've made it a priority that someone from the agency has to attend because it's not just about us listening to which children are available but the local authority having us in mind, constantly remembering that the partnership exists and they should be considering adopters from our agency as well. It's ensuring that we are not out of sight out of mind. (Participant 4, FIF)

This happens every month. FIF sent a representative to this meeting so that they would know early on, get an early insight. Also inviting a member of the FIF team engaged the managers from the permanence team, to let them know that we have partnership deal going on. (Participant 2, NCCAS)

Participants were probed as to the policies and procedures related to the selection of adoptive families for children. To encourage the equal selection of FIF families alongside NCCAS families, a '10 day rule' was developed. Further explanation of the policy is provided below.

At the monthly Homefinder meeting we would identify potential links. If we identified any in-house potential links, the social worker for the family and the child's social worker would have a fortnight to get back to me to say yes we are going to pursue that link or not. Then the next fortnight would be FIF turn – they would have a fortnights notice to think, look and discuss provisionally. (Participant 2, NCCAS)

This policy was felt to work relatively well. However, in practice several issues were identified which hindered the effectiveness of the rule (e.g. what if two families from FIF were interested in the child – would they both get 10 days each?). To overcome issues such as these and to also meet the Government's agenda in achieving relatively quick placements the policy was refined to a five day period for each family to consider and register their interest in a child.

The new rule which was the 5/10 rule has now changed to the 5/5 rule. It's another way of going faster and asking people to consider potential matches and links quicker. In-house and external families have 5 working days to come back to us (i.e. in-house family first 5 days, external family second five days) that that child is one they'd like to go with. (Participant 2, NCCAS)

Refining policies so there was quicker decision making in regards to the placement of children seemed to be an important driver for both agencies in the development of appropriate policies.

We are constantly trying to find new and better and reliable ways of working better and faster. And trying to get everyone involved (managers and social workers in permanence team and adoption teams) and the changes are being driven by the Home Finding team. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

Originally the 10 day rule was felt to be working fine, but NCCAS felt that they wanted not to delay decisions. So if our adopters said no, they would pursue their internal adopters sooner rather than later. Otherwise if we had 10 days and they had 10 then that's almost a month gone. So it's about trying to speed up the process. (Participant 4, FIF)

Participants were also probed as to what would happen in the instance and what procedures were in place if two families, one from each of the agencies expressed an interest in the same child at one of the events open to adopters from both agencies. In such cases, a policy was developed whereby interested parties would be made aware that there were other adopters interested too. Each of the families would then be examined for their suitability to meet the child's needs at a 'matrix matching meeting'. In this meeting the social workers would go through the strengths and weaknesses of each of the families (in respect to meeting the child's needs) and a decision would be made as to which family was a more suitable match.

We hit a problem after an event where there was a local authority family pursuing a child as well as one of our own families, so I spoke to the manager in NCCAS and we agreed, going forward at any event we would have to keep everyone aware who was showing an interest in children. If two families were interested in the same child at the same event then then there would be a matching matrix meeting – so that would be looking at both families equally and then working out who would best meet the needs of the child in the best way. (Participant 4, FIF)

The matrix is a series of questions - what the family has to offer and what this family wants in respect to various different things. Then the Home Finding social worker will look and gather that

information, present it to the child's social worker who in conjunction with her manager makes a decision about which family to proceed with. (Participant 2, NCCAS)

Participants were asked how policies and procedures could be improved and all participants agreed that there were no immediate issues in regards to the improvement of policies and practices. Participants from both agencies noted that when issues did arise, because an open and honest relationship existed between both agencies, issues were dealt with quickly and appropriately. Several participants noted that throughout the partnership policies and procedures had been refined in light of issues that arose.

We test things out and see if they work, is it going to make things easier for families? We've filtered out as many things as we can such as safeguards to make things work. But generally speaking we just have a conversation about things. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

An example of the continued refinement of policies and practices is provided by one participant. This participant noted that sometimes, there was a delay in information filtering through from FIF to NCCAS. Resulting from this recognition was the implementation of a weekly telephone call to allow for information to be shared promptly.

We've decided to implement a weekly telephone call where I will ring the relevant worker at FIF and we will talk through every link that is current and make sure things are happening properly. For example, to make sure if they've got a worker who has meant to have discussed a child of ours with a family, that those discussions have taken place and they have come back with an accurate answer and equally we will give our information to them – what is going on with our adopters. (Participant 2, NCCAS)

One participant noted that the development and refinement of policies and practices was an iterative process and this seemed to be a unique aspect of the partnership.

It's an iterative process, seeing what works, what doesn't and then changing policies and procedures in light of the issues. This aspect of the partnership has deliberately been kept fluid and open so there was a chance for these to develop naturally. If we'd gone thru a formal process I don't think it would have been so innovative and creative. (Participant 4, FIF)

Another participant noted that both partners were solution focussed rather than blame focused and also recognised the need for policies and procedures to be driven by what is in the best interests of the child.

Hiccups require goodwill on all sides, what you need is a solution led culture and not a blame led culture. That's what makes this partnership work. The other thing we need to be driven by is that we need to be child led. Being child focussed is in the law and that should be in good practice. The service has to be child need led. (Participant 2, NCCAS).

It was also apparent that the partnership had forced NCCAS internal policies and procedures to change, especially the preference for the placement of children with internal adopters. This change was not only bought about by working closely with FIF, but also because of the emphasis placed by the Government on ensuring that decisions are made quicker and children are placed in to suitable families in a timely manner.

We used to have a sequential process. There is a long history that in Nottinghamshire we first look in-house and then we go elsewhere for suitable families. Even if we have no families for a child then we would say well we will look in house for three months and then we would look for a family elsewhere. But then we had all the measurements about placing children quickly so you can't do things sequentially. So during this period of working together with FIF so many things around the way of working in adoption have changed, but partly that is one of things that have evolved because different pressures have come in to play. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

5.4. Monitoring procedures

Although there were no formal mechanisms for monitoring the partnership, several informal mechanisms were in place. For instance, management staff from both agencies met on a quarterly basis. The CEO and the Head of Professional Services from FIF meet with the Service Manager and the Access to Resources Group Manager from the NCCAS. The purpose of these meetings are so senior members from both agencies are able to discuss the partnership on a strategic level. The Heads of Services from each of the agencies meet more regularly, every few months or so or as and when required. The purpose of these meetings is to review and monitor methods, policies and procedures of working together and to discuss and resolve any issues that arise.

The operational managers from both agencies meet every four – six months. These meetings are attended by the Adoption Services manager, the Children's Services manager and the Adoption Support manager from NCCAS along with operational staff from FIF, including the Adoption Registered Manager, the Adoption Practice manager and the senior practitioner - who heads up family finding for FIF. The purpose of these meetings is to tackle any operational and practical matters. One participant noted that in this meeting, *"we look at the changing needs for adopters because the landscape changes quite rapidly and we try to respond to that"* (Participant 3, FIF).

Meeting across the three tiers is found to be useful by all participants interviewed as they not only encouraged more "joined-up working" (Participant 5, NCCAS) but also stimulated "fertilisation of ideas at all tiers" (Participant 3, FIF). Furthermore meetings across the three tiers of personnel ensure that there are several channels to resolve any issues or problems that arise.

When asked if the partnership would benefit from more formal mechanisms for monitoring the partnership, many of the participants felt that the existing mechanisms were sufficient enough. However, one participant could see the benefit of documenting all meetings and milestones achieved in the partnership – to help with understanding how the partnership evolved over time and the actions agreed by each of the agencies.

5.5. Unintended outcomes of the partnership

It was clear from interviews with participants that there were several unintended outcomes of the partnership. Bearing in mind the partnership was developed for the specific placement of children with FIF adopters, participants identified a number of ways in which the partnership has evolved from the original agreement. Further details of each of the unintended outcomes are provided below.

Sharing of staff training – both FIF and NCCAS has opened up their training to members of staff or a representative from the other agency. For instance, NCCAS invited Julie Selwyn to an event where she

spoke about her adoption disruption study and members of the FIF team were invited to attend. Likewise, FIF offered places to NCCAS staff on their level one *Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy* training and safeguarding training. Both partners also offer joint panel and team training to members of staff from both agencies.

NCCAS adopter event – three times a year NCCAS invite a well-known speaker to events specifically for their adopter families. These events have been opened up to FIF adopters who either have a Nottinghamshire child or live in Nottinghamshire. The thinking behind this was that three years post order, regardless of which agency placed the child, NCCAS will have responsibility for the child. In this context it is important for adopters to get an early awareness of NCCAS and the services they offer and such events would help them to become familiar with NCCAS services.

Adoption support – NCCAS and FIF has recently decided to further develop their partnership in the area of adoption support services. Although in the early days, it has been agreed that FIF adopters will attend NCCAS adopter training events (as above) and that NCCAS adopters will attend FIF adopter regional support groups. Additionally, NCCAS host a group for adoptive parents who have children under the age of 5 placed with them – to help adopters to meet and socialise with others. However the group has been poorly attended. As such NCCAS and FIF are jointly looking at whether FIF have any adopters who would be suitable to attend. Further, currently in discussions is the possibility of NCCAS children attending FIF Children’s Groups and NCCAS male adopters attending the FIF group for male adopters.

Sharing of profile evenings - NCCAS invite FIF adopters to their profile evenings which allows FIF adopters to see all the children which are available for adoption.

Adoption panels – there is a reciprocal arrangement between the two agencies that a member of each of the teams sits on the other agency’s adoption panel. This allows for a better understanding of how each of the agency’s adoption panel functions.

National Adoption Register/ Adoption Link - NCCAS and FIF have agreed to share National Adoption Register and Adoption Link resources with their partner agency. For instance, FIF have agreed to be part of the part of the pilot for the National Adoption Register and as part of that they will be able to upload information about their adopters to the register and the adopters would be able to access info about available children straightaway online. NCCAS have also signed up for Adoption Link where they will have to pay £6000 a year to access information on children and adopters. Although each agency is doing these things separately, they aim to discuss which seems to be working more efficiently.

Guidance and advice – it is evident that there is a closer working relationship between FIF and NCCAS staff. At the beginning of the partnership a launch event was held for both agencies’ adoption teams. This event was found to be fruitful in not only developing ideas about policies, procedures and practices, but also for each of the teams to listen to and understand what it is like to work in a different sector and about the resources that are available to them. Now it is not uncommon that personnel from NCCAS may ask FIF personnel about interpreting regulations and guidance and vice versa. Participants report that they will be organising a similar launch event for the Adoption Support Services staff to mark the beginning of both agencies working in partnership on delivering adoption support services.

FIF approving NCCAS referrals for adoptive families – because of the Governments request for all adoption agencies to increase their pool of adopters by 20%, NCCAS now have a large number of approved adopters. However these adopters are not essentially suitable to be matched with children who are currently awaiting placements. This has resulted in NCCAS ‘closing their doors’ and not approving any more adopters until their current pool of adopter’s decreases. NCCAS recently agreed to refer anyone interested in becoming adopters to their partners – FIF, who will assess and undertake the process to approve them as adopters. This includes assessing and approving foster carers who would like to adopt a child who is currently in their care.

5.6. Benefits of working in partnership

Participants identified several benefits to sharing resources and working in partnership. Firstly, both agencies’ have developed a closer and more trusting working relationship and that has been found to aid better working practices across all levels, e.g. frontline staff to senior management level. Secondly, when offering a specialist service such as adoption, developing communications and partnerships with other agencies provides opportunities for new and progressive ways of working and for the sharing of information. This is especially important in a context where agencies are seen to be competing against one another. Thirdly, the partnership is meeting the government agenda, which is focussed strongly on working closely across the sector. Fourthly, the partnership has given both agencies a model to base further partnership development with other voluntary/local authority agencies. Fourthly, most participants recognised that working in partnership has considerable benefits for children and families. For instance, in speeding up the process and time it takes for placements, having a larger pool of adopters to place children with and in the development of a range of adoption support services etc. The quotation below contextualises this point further with a recent example where FIF received an adoptive family referral from NCCAS.

We’ve just taken a family who we traditionally would have not said yes to because they have a child about 18-20 months old. We say there should be a 2 year gap between child and birth child. And of course we don’t have access to babies so we would have said no to this couple. But because it was the local authority they went to originally and not us, FIF have agreed that we will assess and approve them and NCCAS will make sure one of the babies they have available will go to this particular family once they’ve been approved. (Participant 4, FIF)

Finally, although hard to measure, one participant noted that there would probably be a lack of spending (as oppose to cost savings) from working in partnership. For example, in terms of the original partnership agreement which was based on the placement of NCCAS children with FIF adopters, then for NCCAS it is less expensive to place with FIF adopters than adopters who may be based nationwide, say in Dorset. NCCAS would save on things such as buying in additional services such as therapeutic input, whereas if the child is placed in Nottinghamshire, then NCCAS would be able to access the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. There would also be a lack of spending on catering for the accommodation needs of the foster carers and adopters, which in some cases can be up to £2500.

5.7. Key components of a successful partnership (barriers and enablers)

Participants were asked about the barriers and enablers of a successful partnership arrangement. In terms of barriers, the most common one stated by all participants were ones related to a culture

change brought about by the partnership and lack of 'buy-in' from personnel. It was widely recognised that personnel from both agencies will have their own established ways of working and this may pose barriers to the partnership working successfully.

There is a shift in culture that is needed and that takes longer but you need to keep working at that, testing it and seeing where you think staff are, because that is where you hit the barriers. (Participant 4, FIF)

To illustrate this point further, some participants spoke about the preference for 'in-house' adopters over adopters from a voluntary adoption agency and offered explanations for why this may be the case. Firstly, the cost of placement with in-house adopters is lower than placing with adopters from a voluntary adoption agency. However this was less likely to be a factor in the case of this partnership as monies were paid up front for a block number of placements. Secondly, personnel may feel more comfortable placing a child with in-house adopters because the adopters have been through the approval process and stringent checks of that particular agency. However, this issue can be overcome through providing opportunities for personnel to develop confidence and trust in the professionalism of personnel of the respective agency (e.g. through joint staff events where personnel from each of the agencies shares details of their approval process). Thirdly, staff may prefer placing children with in-house adopters simply because doing so is an established way of practice for the individual. This requires a deeper culture change and a greater recognition of the benefits of working in partnership. Fourthly, one participant noted that people develop insecurities about their positions when working across the local authority and voluntary adoption agency sector. This requires reassurance and recognition of individual contributions to making the partnership work and flourish. Finally, personnel may have political views about working across the local authority and voluntary adoption agency sector and simply believe that it is not an effective way to work. Again, this requires a more deep rooted culture change.

In terms of overcoming the barriers to partnership working that personnel may pose, positive leadership was seen to be important, both on a strategic and operational level. For instance, participants from both agencies spoke about the importance of managers working at a strategic level being innovative and creative about developing the partnership and then being able to negotiate the internal barriers (e.g. procurement issues). Additionally, it was felt to be important to give operational managers the space and direction to think through the changes, to help change their mind-set so they are able to lead their team so they are working in partnership and to help achieve 'buy-in' at all levels.

If leadership is clear and positive then that filters through supervision and management meetings and also being very specific that we need to put energy in to it to make it happen and what the benefits are. You need to just keep doing that and refining it. And if there's a specific incident, then visiting it and thinking how do we do it differently. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

Equally openness was also felt to be an important aspect of partnership working, especially in tackling issues which were preventing the partnership from working.

It is just about getting things on the table, saying these are the issues, what are we going to do about it? It is about honesty and openness and working out a way forward really. Not shying away from the issues and tackling them. (Participant 3, FIF)

Developing a solid and trusting relationship with the partner agency was seen to be an important enabler for a successful and flourishing partnership. Additionally, being prepared to invest time and effort in developing and nurturing the relationship was seen to be essential. One participant felt it was important to develop a trusting relationship before discussing any types of partnership agreements, especially in getting to know the way the prospective partner agency works, its aims and objectives for current and future development as well as the characters and personalities that exist within the agency. Developing a trusting relationship was also seen to go hand in hand with the development of mutual respect and loyalty towards the partnering agency.

If you are working with a local authority – as their chosen provider you need to show loyalty. There needs to be a mutual respect between our and their staff teams, that we can call on each other for any assistance. So there has to be a certain shift by each of the partners. We have secured a slot at the House of Commons as a profile raising event - Have asked the NCCAS to stand in the podium and talk with us. So there is a clear message to everyone that we are partners. (Participant 3, FIF)

It takes time, investment in communication around it. Some of which my operational staff may think it's a higher price than I think it is....but doing so is evidenced in the success of the partnership and in the way in which we have worked together and been committed to overcoming any problems and issues we may encounter. (Participant 1)

Others noted it to be vital that any partnership agreement is developed off the back of addressing local needs and in all cases ensuring that the needs of children and adopters are being met. For instance, the partnership agreement between FIF and NCCAS was developed off the back of NCCAS needing to place children quicker than they were able to do so at that time. The partnership has since developed and these developments have been based on adapting to changing local needs. For instance, FIF are now being asked to find families for children who are 'hard to place' i.e. older children and sibling groups. The 'block placement' agreement between FIF and NCCAS was a solid testing ground for how well the two agencies can work together. Thus in the first instance it was seen important that partnering agencies focused on one particular area and once that has proven to be successful, then further 'shared' ways of working are developed.

Our partnership agreement suited the local conditions at the time really. It is about assessing what the local needs are. That will determine the success of the partnership - whether it is meeting the needs of those involved. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

Developing plans for a sustainable partnership was also identified as being important by some participants. In terms of this partnership agreement, both agencies have developed and nurtured their relationship and are now planning to work together on other projects – such as the shared delivery of adoption support services. Being open to new ways of working, seeking new opportunities and sharing resources, as evidenced in the unintended outcomes discussed earlier was seen to be an essential part of planning for a sustainable relationship.

Some of the voluntary adoption agencies are in a time warp, some are trying to grow but are unable to grow and make partnerships that are sustainable rather than one off. If we had approached this agreement as a one off one then all the additional partnership working protocols we have developed aside from the block placement agreement would

have been a lost opportunity. And we are constantly doing that – looking for new opportunities where we can share resources and deliver quality services. (Participant 3, FIF)

In planning for a sustainable partnership, another participant noted the need to think through the implications of changes within the adoption arena for each of the agencies and also for the partnership. It was also felt to be important to pre-empt the direction in which adoption priorities will move in and plan ahead to respond to these changes.

We have to look at things together, so with adoption because things change so quickly so when changes come we have to look at it, two agencies together, albeit, one voluntary adoption agency and one local authority – we have to share the implications for each of us and what are the implications for the partnership so we do that every time. Pre-empting which direction the partnership should next take a step in is also important as is making judgements about when is the right time to do that. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

Another barrier to a successful partnership identified by some participants was the different policies and practices of both agencies. However many recognised that this barrier can be overcome as demonstrated in this partnership. Although each of the agencies had their own policies and practices, they have developed policies and practices that are specific to the partnership. For instance, the 5/10 rule discussed on page 12. Additionally, as noted under the sub section of *Policies and Practices*, policies and practices have been adapted based on the success of them working and in light of issues arising. Thus, participants noted that to overcome the barrier of agencies differing policies and practices, both agencies had to be open to thinking innovatively and being solution focussed rather than blame focussed.

5.8. Future development of the partnership

Participants were asked about the how they see the partnership developing in the future and also recommendations to improve current working practices. In terms of working practices, all participants stated that they could not think of any ways in which the current partnership agreement could be improved and felt that the partnership was meeting its original aims and more, in terms of the unintended consequences. Furthermore as noted earlier, working practices have improved throughout the duration of the partnership.

I suppose for me – the partnership is meeting its original aims, that we are placing children with FIF. I feel confident that they want to take our children to place with them. (Participant 1, NCCAS)

It's so solution focussed that when someone thinks that can't possibly work – we are asking ourselves why can't it? What's stopping us? What's the worst that can happen? So I think it's that way of working that works. The practitioner staff have done very well in implementing the partnership – we are very proud of them. (Participant 3, FIF)

For the moment, I am happy with it developing as we go. Its success has been because it has been iterative and because we have developed things that have come from practice. (Participant 5, NCCAS)

It is clear from the interviews that participants attributed the development and success of the partnership to it being an iterative process, open to discussion and negotiation. Additionally, both partners recognised that they had been flexible and adaptive both in the case of any hiccups, problems or issues and in responding to the changing climate and service user needs.

We have to look at things together, so with adoption - because things change so quickly so when changes come we have to look at it, two agencies together, albeit one voluntary adoption agency and one local authority – we have to share the implications for each of us and think through the implications for the partnership. And we need to do that every time. It is important to pre-empt the direction which the partnership should next take a step in. Also making judgements and when is the right time to do that, because there are lots of been pots of money around, but requires lots of thinking about. (Participant 5 NCCAS)

Participants agreed that the partnership should be developed and built upon. Participants from both agencies spoke about their agency's commitment to develop the partnership in the future.

We will be submitting a joint bid with NCCAS to the DFE. If we don't get the money then the partnership won't be at jeopardy or put at risk. It will mean that we get money to deliver the innovative ideas that we have wanted to develop. I think we will jointly deliver those ideas anyway but the grant will enable us to achieve so much more in respect to outcomes for the most vulnerable children. It may take us longer, but I believe all those initiatives are sound and will strengthen both of the agencies, but the financial assistance from the DFE will mean that we get to do them sooner rather than later. (Participant 3, FIF)

Another participant suggested that that the next step would be to develop a wider partnership agreement with other agencies in the area. Moving in this direction was seen important based on the current Governments agenda – to see greater joined-up working between the voluntary and local authority sectors. In this context, interviews with personnel from both agencies showed that the partnership agreement between FIF and NCCAS was a good testing ground for developing future partnerships with other agencies in the future.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This section details conclusions and recommendations from the research. This research was commissioned to understand and evaluate the partnership agreement between FIF and NCCAS, in terms of the number of children placed, the developing working relationship, the unintended outcomes as well as recommendations for further development of the partnership. The main findings from the research are detailed below.

6.1. Conclusions

The research found that the partnership agreement between FIF and NCCAS is an innovative one, not just because NCCAS paid a large sum of money to FIF for a number of block placements, but because of the ways in which the partners have developed ways of working together and have nurtured their relationship so they are able to plan for sustained partnership working in the future.

The relationship NCCAS developed with FIF prior to the agreement for the placement of twenty children being formalised was found to be an important pre-cursor for developing the partnership agreement. This informal relationship was the beginning of more joined-up approach to adoption work across the local authority and voluntary sector. It also provides an important example of how local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies can begin to work in partnership in more of an informal way.

The stimulus for formalising the partnership came from two factors (i) responding to local conditions at the time and (ii) the availability and securing of monies from the Adoption Improvement Grant. During 2011-13, local conditions prevailed where there were an unusually high number of children with adoption placement plans. Additionally, the number of people applying to be adopters was gradually declining. Thus children were waiting for a long period of time before being placed in to permanent placements. Under the partnership agreement FIF received a lump sum of £540k for the placement of twenty children as block placement purchase agreement. Under this partnership agreement, Nottinghamshire County Council paid the monies for the block purchase agreement upfront and Faith in Families became the preferred provider of families for children who were in need of placement.

From the period March 2012 – June 2014, fourteen children have been placed for adoption with nine adoptive families. In addition to these placements twelve families have explored links with thirty children with twenty of these children being siblings. These links did not progress for various reasons. During the duration of the informal and formal partnership, FIF has ‘potentially’ linked forty-four children with twenty-one families. Focussing on just the period of the formal partnership (May 2013 – June 2014) four children have been matched for adoption, of which two children have been a sibling group. In addition to the four placements stated above, four matches are still active and may result in placements.

Since May 2013, the partnership agreement has evolved and the unspent monies from 2013/14 have been rolled over in to 2014/15. When the partnership was first formed there was a need for FIF to provide families for not just what is traditionally known as ‘hard to place children’, but for the large number of babies and young children who required placement. Now this immediate demand for the placement for these children has passed, the monies are being utilised to meet more immediate demands – this being the need to focus on finding families for older children and sibling groups. There is also agreement from both parties to spend some of the money on joint branded advertising to help recruit families for older and sibling groups.

The policies and procedures regarding the selection of children for families are found to have evolved and have been refined in the light of problems and issues during the duration of the partnership. This iterative and flexible approach has benefited the partnership in terms of ensuring that delays were not caused in placing children in to suitable families.

No formal mechanisms for monitoring the partnership were found. However several informal mechanisms to monitor the progress of the partnership and to resolve any issues or problems were found both at the strategic and operational levels. Both partners were found to have an open and honest relationship with one another which helps to ensure that problems and issues are dealt with efficiently and quickly, so they do not hinder or stall the progress of the partnership.

It was clear that there were several unintended outcomes of the partnership. Participants identified a number of ways in which the partnership has evolved from the original agreement including sharing of staff training and other events such as adopter events and profile evenings. Other unintended outcomes include drawing on each other's expertise for guidance and advice both informally and through partner attendance at adoption panels. Further both agencies are now planning to work together to deliver adoption support services jointly and FIF is now taking adoptive family referrals from NCCAS with a view of approving them for adoption.

A number of benefits from working in partnership are identified, providing opportunities for new and progressive ways of working including sharing of information, resources and skills, aiding better working practices across the voluntary and local authority sectors as well as benefits for families and children waiting for adoption (i.e. through speeding up the process and time it takes for placements, having a larger pool of adopters to place children with and in the development of a range of adoption support services).

A number of key components for a successful partnership were identified. The main barriers identified were ones related to a culture change bought about by the partnership, lack of 'buy-in' from personnel and differing policies and practices of partner agencies. Enablers for a successful partnership included positive leadership, openness and development of a solid and trusting relationship. Other enablers included ensuring that any partnership agreement is developed off the back of addressing local needs and in all cases ensuring that the needs of children and adopters are being met. Developing plans for a sustainable partnership was also identified as being important.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the research a number of recommendations can be made for the future development of the partnership. These are detailed below.

Once the monies received as part of the partnership agreement have been spent and placements have been made, it is important for partners to continue with the quarterly and bi-monthly meetings conducted at strategic and operational levels. The focus of these meetings, especially at the strategic level should be on sharing of information and planning for the further development of the partnership in terms of sharing resources, planning the delivery of joint services and future projects and pre-empting and planning responses to changing local conditions and the changing Government agenda. In terms of operational meetings, these should continue to focus on planning for the implementation of services and joined-up working between both agencies. It would also be important to assess how the placements made through the partnership are going and supporting these.

In regards to the placement of children, the partners have developed a viable system for ensuring that there is a greater choice of adopters for children with adoption plans and have a system in place to ensure that children are placed with suitable families as quickly as possible. It will be important to review the effectiveness of these policies and practices at regular intervals, to ensure placements without unnecessary delays are still being achieved.

In terms of planning for a sustainable partnership, it is important for the partnership to adapt to changing climates and to predict future priorities in the adoption arena, utilising contacts and

networks to gather intelligence and sharing that information with one another. It is also important for partners to discuss implications of developments and changing adoption priorities for each of the agencies as well for the partnership and also to plan responses and opportunities for new and progressive ways of working. It is equally important that the partnership continues to respond to changing local needs and develops joint responses to these.

As part of sustaining the partnership between Faith in Families and Nottinghamshire and to build on the successes, an innovative new partnership development post could be developed within Faith in Families and potentially be funded by a joint application to the DFE grant. This post will specifically focus on linking activities within the partnership and also use this effective model with other county council partners. It is important that this role will ensure that an increasing number of the 'harder to place' children are placed with Faith in Families adoptive families. The post will also focus on partnership activities which respond to the changing climate of adoption.

Mechanisms for continued and regular engagement with frontline staff is required at regular intervals, to help identify issues and better working practices and to provide an environment where staff feel encouraged and are given the opportunity to develop and nurture ideas in a supportive environment. These opportunities will also assist with helping staff adapt to the culture change of working in partnership and also provide staff with a sense of ownership. Further it is important to incentivise staff so when the initial agreement of twenty placements is reached, staff continue to want to work together.

It is important for monitoring and evaluation purposes for partners to begin to document how their partnership has evolved, both in terms of joint delivery of services and policies and practices. It is important to document changes in policies and practices to map how and why they have evolved, also to ensure that the working document is accessible by staff from both agencies. Documentation of service level agreements will provide a strong evidence base regarding the outcomes of the partnership and evidence the joined up working between the two agencies.

In order to evaluate the progress of the partnership model a second stage of the research is planned between the partners, which will document progress and collate data over a longer period of time. It would also be important for this research to consider the elements of the working model which could be instrumental in cascading this template for partnership working to other agencies and county councils, in existing forums and networks and to the adoption sector as a whole.

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