

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND TACKLING INEQUALITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 8
6 JANUARY 2014	Public Report

Report of the Executive Director of Children's Services

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ADOPTION REFORM AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

1. PURPOSE

1.1 The Government priority is to increase the numbers of adopters available for children and to reduce the length of time children wait for adoption. This requires:

- Structural reform of our adoption recruitment, assessment and support processes in order to increase the supply of adopters.
- Additional support to ensure the sustainability of those adoptive placements by developing needs led, evidence based post adoption support services.
- Development of skills and capacity within the workforce to ensure they are supported in the essential reform process; including the training and remodelling of teams as well as bringing in the required expertise.
- Ensuring children who are at risk of suffering harm are identified earlier, and clear pathways towards permanence implemented.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Members are invited to note this report and identify any additional information they would like to receive.

Annex A: Adoption action plan.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

3.1 To provide quality adoption placements for children with special/health needs.

4. BACKGROUND

4.1 The main objective for Peterborough Adoption Service will be to provide a high quality and comprehensive range of adoption and adoption support services that meet the needs of children, birth families and other relatives, foster carers, prospective adopters, adoptive families, adopted adults and all affected by the adoption process.

Adoption is a rapidly changing Government priority, with unprecedented changes in statutory requirements and expectations in a very short period of time. An 'Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' was developed, which highlighted concerns about delays in the Adoption system and its impact on children. It recognised that this is not just an issue for local authorities but it is a whole systems issue, involving all agencies in the Adoption system including the Family Justice system.

There were a number of issues identified as contributing factors in the delays:

- Delay in decision making
- Delay in court process
- Delay in searching for adoptive family and then matching child and family
- Too few prospective adopters willing or able to adopt children with complex needs
- Bureaucratic training and assessment process for adopters
- Variable post adoption support.

The Government have made swift legislative amendments followed by guidance to direct Local Authorities to change their adoption practice and whilst recognising that there are a range of permanent care options for children, including Special Guardianship and Residence Orders, it stressed that adoption is the best option for many more children than are currently benefiting from it nationally. The number of children adopted from care had been going down in recent years.

On 1 July 2013 new guidance was introduced which changed the adoption assessment process significantly. It was designed to speed up the time it takes for adopters to become approved, through a two stage process which is designed to take two months for stage 1 and four months for stage two. The two stage process has been fully implemented and the first applicants under the new system will be presented to panel in January/February 2014.

A new Prospective Adopters report was also introduced and has been used since July. Staff members have adapted to the changes well, and have been fully involved in developing the service to comply with the new regulations. Several adopters have been approved who are interested in Fostering for Adoption, whereby children are placed with approved adopters under temporary fostering regulations before the Court process has been completed.

Families are being put on the National Adoption register if there is not a match for them in house after three months. Six families approved by PCC have been matched with children from other local authorities through the adoption register and other sources. This attracts payment of the interagency fee to PCC.

All local authorities have been given a grant (The Adoption Reform Grant) to attract new adopters and make structural change to reduce delay and increase the use of adoption for more children. Peterborough will need to compete with neighbouring authorities in order to continue to attract and support adopters and maintain the services current positive reputation.

The Adoption Reform Grant has been awarded to all local authorities for the financial year of 2013–2014 in two parts. Part A: non ring-fenced funding and Part B: ring-fenced funding.

The Governments direction for how the grant should be spent:

- Structural reform of adopter recruitment to increase the supply of adopters.
- Reducing the backlog of children waiting for adoption, particularly by developing innovative ways of finding adoptive families for children who traditionally wait longer than average to be adopted.

Actions to-date

In order to meet the challenges and requirements of the Adoption Reform Programme to reduce the length of time children wait for adoption and increase the supply of adopters the following changes have already been made to the Adoption Panel functions.

The Adoption Panel no longer consider the *proposed* Adoption Plan for children who are looked after; they are submitted directly to the Agency Decision Maker, thus streamlining the process. The Adoption Panel now only considers the applications of those wishing to become adopters and the linking of children (for whom adoption is the plan) with prospective families.

Following analysis of the reasons for delay, we have strengthened the tracking of children with a plan for adoption. The early indication is that this is already having an impact on tighter more cohesive planning. However it has highlighted the need for systemic change in order to improve our adoption process from start to end. See Annex A: adoption action plan.

5. KEY ISSUES

5.1 Adoption orders

There have been 21 adoption orders granted since April 2013. This compares to a total of 19 in the year 2012/13. Of these the majority were placed on their own, a smaller number were placed as part of a sibling group.

5.2 Numbers of children matched

20 children have been matched with adopters. There were five sibling groups of two amongst these and 10 single children. Two single children joined their siblings in their adoptive homes to make two families of three children. Four of the families were fostering the children before they applied to adopt them. There were 10 girls and 10 boys. The youngest was 10 weeks old and the oldest was 10 years old. Nine of the children are from black and minority ethnic heritage, with six having African Caribbean heritage and three having Eastern European heritage.

Approvals of adopters

5.3

21 adoptive families have been approved. This compares with a total of 22 for 2012/13. This makes up a combination of single applicants, couples and those is heterosexual and same sex couples. Two of the couples have previously adopted. All of the families are white and with the exception of two adopters, are British.

Service development

5.4

BAAF Adoption Activity Days (adoption parties).

These are opportunities for adopters and children needing adoptive homes to meet in an informal and natural setting.

They are intended for those children who are harder to place. PCC was part of the two year pilot project as a member of the East Midlands Adoption Consortium. This came to an end in April 2013 after 5 Activity Days had taken place with a 19% rate of matching children and adopters. PCC entered into a partnership arrangement with EMAC to commission further AAD's and three have occurred since April. 11 children have attended from PCC but despite interest shown in some of the children on the days, these have not progressed to matches.

Two of our adoptive families have found children at activity days however – a sibling group of two and a single child. PCC feature in the TV documentary which is to be aired in January on Channel 4.

Adoption Support services

5.5

The adoption service has maintained its links with Cambridgeshire County Council to offer adoption support groups on a monthly basis to adopters. Social opportunities for children and adoptive families have taken place in September (adoption picnic) and December (the Christmas party). In excess of 50 people attended the Christmas party where Father Christmas and Peppa Pig made appearances.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The increased number of Adoption Orders made this year to-date (2nd December 2013) demonstrates improved and effective care planning by the service as a whole compared to where we were last year.

There is an increasing culture of proactively planning for permanency for children who are unable to live with their parents.

It has been recognised that there have been some historical challenges around consistency in this area, which are now being systematically addressed with vigour, pace and organisational determination. Strategically, the department is currently well placed to address areas of (self-identified) development, and clear progress has been made. This has been assisted by strong performance management reporting arrangement and strongly embedded quality assurance processes.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 N/A

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 Development of skills and capacity within the workforce to ensure they are supported in the essential transformation practice process; including the training and remodelling teams as well as bringing in the required expertise.

Ensuring children who are at risk of suffering harm are identified earlier, and clear pathways towards permanence implemented.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- 9.1 N/A

10. APPENDICES

- 10.1 Annex A – Adoption Action Plan