

Report of Director of Children’s Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: June 2014

Subject: Adoption Agency Annual report



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| Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s): | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| Is the decision eligible for Call-In? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |

Summary of main issues

It is a requirement of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 that the Executive side of the Council receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency every 6 months. The half yearly report is provided to the Corporate Carers group whereas the annual report is presented to the Executive Board. This report provides the annual report of adoption service activity from April 2013 to March 2014, and the outcomes achieved by the service.

Over the last year the Adoption Reform Agenda has continued across the country with the aim to increase the recruitment of adoptive parents to meet the increasing numbers of children waiting for adoption nationally. Leeds has responded well to these challenges and the numbers of adopters approved has steadily increased. In addition, the number of children with a plan for adoption has fallen this year, although the complexity of those children’s needs continues to present the service with challenges in recruitment of adopters to meet those children’s needs.

Recommendations

1. That the Executive Board receive this report and continues to support the work of the adoption team to ensure our adopted children receive the best possible support.

1 Purpose of this report

This report details the work of Leeds City Council Adoption Service from April 2013 to March 2014 inclusive. The purpose of the report is to consider the activity of the service in relation to its compliance with the national minimum standards; the implementation and progression of children's care plans; the service offered to those seeking to adopt and the services offered to those affected by adoption through the provision of adoption support. It is also used to identify any significant trends within adoption and how Leeds can continue to meet the changing demands within the adoption service.

2 Background information

- 2.1 Adoption is one of the most important and significant decisions that can be made for a child. For this reason the Adoption Service must report on an annual basis to the Executive Board.
- 2.2 As part of its wider agenda and ambition to be a Child Friendly City Leeds City Council wants all children and young people in Leeds to grow up in a stable, safe and loving family. For those young children who cannot remain or return safely to their birth families adoption offers them the best opportunity to experience a warm and loving family environment.
- 2.3 The Adoption Service was inspected in December 2010 and was rated as Good overall with Outstanding for 'Enjoy and Achieve'. The new single inspection regime of looked after children and safeguarding services for children that came into force in April 2014 will include the adoption service.

3 Main issues

3.1 National Picture

- 3.1.1 Over the last year the adoption reform agenda has continued to be the focus of the political and media attention. The most significant change for the adoption service was the implementation in July 2013 of the new two stage adopter process. The adoption service has risen to this challenge and the new processes are now embedded within the adoption service.
- 3.1.2 Last summer the government set up a national gateway for potential adopters in enquiring about adoption and First4Adoption. First4Adoption has been an important resource for adoption agencies in publicising the adoption service in the local area.
- 3.1.3 A new national Adoption Leadership Board with a remit to galvanise significant improvements in the performance of the adoption system in England was set up earlier this year and in March 2014 Martin Narey was announced as the Chair of this Board. The Board has been jointly developed by Government, local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies, and one of its key priorities is to tackle the shortfall in adoptive parents. This leadership Board is linking closely with the regional adoption consortiums and Leeds plays an active part in the Yorkshire and

Humber regional adoption consortium, pooling resources with other authorities in address the adoption reform agenda.

- 3.1.4 In addition to these changes there are a number of key legislative changes. The implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 will present further changes in the field of adoption regarding the fostering for adoption arrangements; contact arrangements; adoption support and the piloting of personalised budgets. There is a raft of consultations under consideration regarding care planning, adoption and permanence for children and discussions regarding placing siblings for adoption. There is therefore likely to be further regulatory changes as a result of these consultations over the next year.
- 3.1.5 The number of children approved by courts for adoption has increased significantly in each of the last two years and nationally it is estimated that some 6000 children were waiting to move in with a family at 31 March 2014. This presents a continual challenge for local authorities in ensuring that adoptive parents are able to meet children's needs. One of the key issues that the government is seeking to improve is the timeliness of placing children for adoption. The implementation of fostering for adoption arrangements is a significant change from standard practice in most local authority areas and it is important that the child-centred objectives of the process are properly understood and implemented.
- 3.1.6 In the Yorkshire and Humber adoption consortium early permanence (including fostering for adoption arrangements) is a key area for development. Leeds have taken on the lead role in the consortium in developing this approach and one of our team managers is the project lead for this, in partnership with Barnardos on behalf of the regional consortium.
- 3.1.6 Over the last year , there has been a sustained increase in adoption activity which in part reflects the previous increased numbers of young children in the care system in Leeds. Supporting children to achieve permanence has played an important role in safely and appropriately redressing the number of looked after children. There were 1372 children in care at the end of March 2013. This has reduced to 1363 at the end of March 2014 and continues to fall.

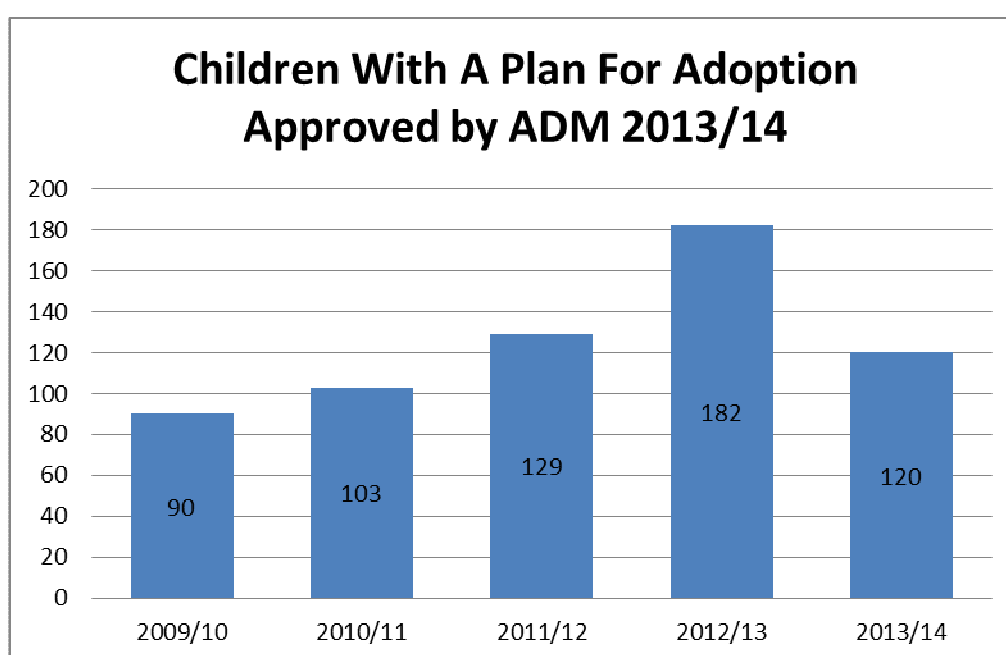
3.2 Adoption Service

- 3.2.1 The Adoption Service continues to retain a stable and experienced management team. There are four team managers who take lead responsibility for different aspects of the work, namely adoption support, family finding, recruitment and advertising and assessment, procedure and process. Due to the changes in the recruitment process in July 2013, the service employed 3 new adoption advisors to take the lead on initial home visits and the first stage of the adoption process. The adoption advisors are not qualified social workers but have relevant experience required for the role.
- 3.2.2 The adoption service is a member of the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium as well as the regional Post Adoption Network. The consortium is driving ahead with developments in providing a regional approach to the recruitment

of adopters and this work will be further developed in 2014/15. One of the Managers represents Leeds and aims to ensure that the service has a voice in influencing policy and practice nationally within one of the subgroups of the National Leadership Board lead by Martin Narev.

- 3.2.3 The team managers play a key role in providing specialist advice to staff within the fieldwork teams in relation to adoption work and provide specialist advice to the adoption panels. They also have an important responsibility in inter agency adoptions from outside the region, ensuring that robust arrangements are in place for supporting children and families and that the transition to the new family is planned to meet the needs of the child.
- 3.2.4 The teams are made up of a number of experienced social workers with one non-social work qualified adoption support worker who is a qualified teacher. The teams provide a duty help line service for prospective adopters, adoptive families, birth parents, social workers and colleagues who require adoption advice and support. Team members take a lead role in providing other services such as inter country adoption, family finding, adoption support work, letterbox contact and intermediary work.
- 3.2.5 Staff within the service provide consultation on all aspects of practice relating to adoption and permanence to the fieldwork social work teams. The service take a lead role in developing policy and practice and ensuring children's social workers are kept up to date on key changes to the legal and regulatory framework, as well as providing updates on aspects of research work in this area. Training events are also provided for children's social workers and managers and in relation to adoption and permanence planning issues, family finding and issues arising through adoption support.

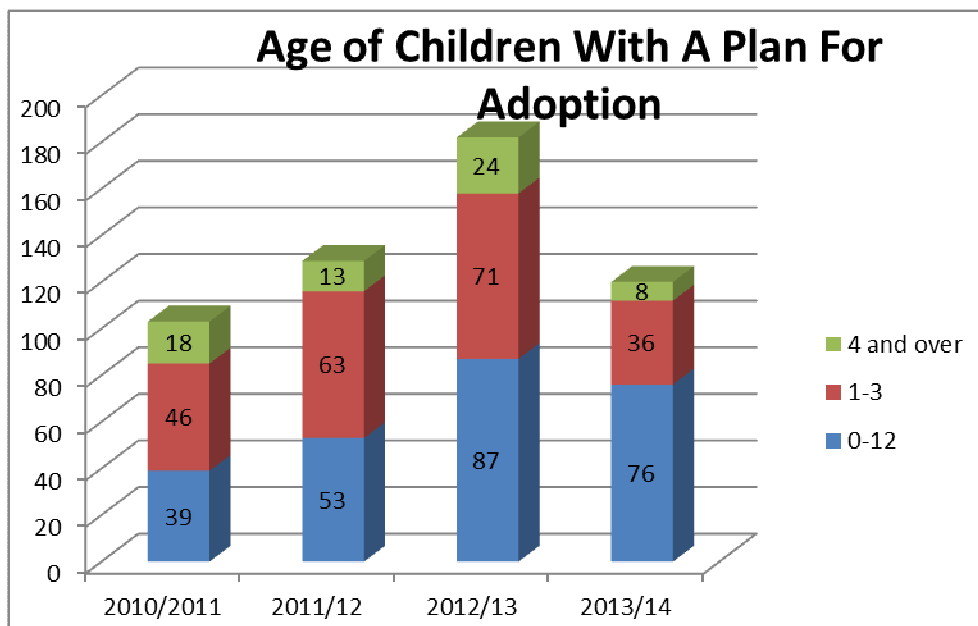
3.3.1 Profile of Children approved in the year with a plan of adoption 2013 to 2014



Between April 2013 and March 2014, 120 children had a plan for adoption ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. Of the 120 children with a plan for adoption, there were 53 female and 67 male children.

In total, this projects a 34% decrease on the last year's full year figure of 182. The reasons for this may reflect the fact a number of young children are being placed with extended family members as a result of increasing work around family group conferencing.

3.3.2 Age profile



There is a slight reduction in the numbers of younger children with a plan for adoption. When there is a relatively high number of very young children traditional adopters have more choice of young children when considering a match, therefore trying to attract adopters for older children and sibling groups remains a challenge and a priority for the service. However, the complexities of some of the young children often bring uncertainties regarding future development and therefore attracting adopters to take on young children with complexities such as foetal alcohol syndrome or with symptoms following drug withdrawal, often mean that these children wait longer in achieving an adoptive placement.

3.3.4 Ethnicity

97 children are White UK

23 children were from Black and Minority ethnic groups (BME)

22% children are from BME groups. This is similar to last years with a background representation from Eastern Europe, plus Black and Asian children. The challenge of recruiting a more diverse range of adopters is addressed further in the report.

3.3 Placement with Siblings

- 3.4.1 As a general principle, siblings will be placed together, however, due to the individual needs of children this cannot always be achieved.
- 3.4.2 The numbers of children requiring adoption in sibling groups is 24 in comparison to 26 children last year.
This year there are:
6 children in sibling groups of 2
18 children in sibling groups of 3
0 children in sibling groups of 4
- 3.4.3 However, when considered as an overall percentage of children whose plan is adoption there has been a 8% decrease this year of sibling groups requiring adoption. The decrease in sibling groups is reflected nationally and is perhaps linked with the lower numbers of adopters prepared to consider sibling groups of children. This year the numbers of adopters considering sibling groups has also slightly decreased in Leeds.

3.5 Children with an adoption plan, currently waiting

- 3.5.1 At the present time there are 97 Leeds children with a plan for adoption not currently placed and requiring adopters. This is a 48% decrease given the same point in time last year when 154 children were waiting for a placement.
- 3.5.2 15 children out of the 97 are 0-1yrs. This age range has seen the smallest cohort in numbers over the last 12 months which is reflected in the number of young children entering care last year reflecting children's plans moving through care proceedings. In 2012/13 we saw 138 0-12 month olds entering the court system and in 2013/14 we saw 127.
- 3.5.3 27 children have potential "matches" identified and 18 of these have a date booked at adoption panel for the match. There are 13 children where their foster carers have expressed an interest in adopting them which is actively being pursued.
- 3.5.4 From the children waiting for a placement there are more boys than girls and 25% are children from BME backgrounds. Out of these children, 25 children have been waiting for more than a year for adoption. The delays in these cases are related primarily to the profile of the children; the need to place siblings together, the age of the children or their particular special needs or complexity. Delays in placing more complex children will affect the performance of the scorecard and clear monitoring and tracking systems need to be in place to understand the range of family finding activity going on for these children.
- 3.5.5 In 2013/14 there were 2943 children referred to the Adoption Register, from England & Wales and 897 adopters, compared with 2736 children & 795 adopters in

2012/13. There are currently 472 children referred to the Regional Consortium, and 43 available adopters.

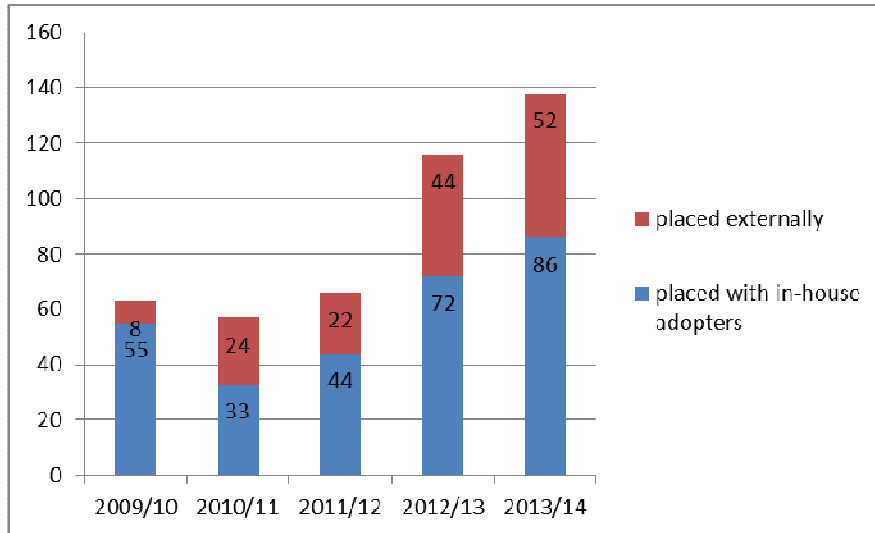
- 3.3.6 The team have managed to successfully place an increasing number of children with adoptive families during 2013/14. This rise is due to an increase in the capacity in the service, increased partnership working and good networks being established and developed with voluntary and other Local Authority adoption services.
- 3.5.7 The search for prospective adopters regularly extends beyond the consortium to other local authorities and agencies and includes profiling children with the National Adoption Register and at National Exchange days across the country. Some children are featured in adoption publications and some children have been referred to the Child Specific model through Families that Last. This work continues to be time consuming and social workers spend time travelling across the country to locate potential families once links have been made.

Once families are linked then considerable work is undertaken when considering a potential match to ensure the prospective family have full information about the child and their background. Adoptive parents meet with key people involved with the child including the medical advisor, carers, teachers and therapists prior to any decision being made to proceed to take the match to panel.

- 3.5.8 There are also a small number of children who because of their age and profile may either have a dual plan for adoption and permanent fostering or may have their plan for adoption changed to permanent fostering as the potential for achieving permanence through fostering becomes more achievable and realistic. These changes are discussed and agreed at the permanence panel that monitors, oversees and ensures that children's plans for permanence are implemented effectively.

3.6 Children matched in the year for adoption

- 3.6.1 Between April 2013 and March 2014, 143 children were matched with families at adoption panels, this is a 19% increase upon last year's figures when 116 children were matched with adoptive parents.
- 3.6.2 During April 2013 and March 2014 25% of the children matched were from black and minority ethnic communities. This is an increase of nearly 10% compared to the previous year, given that the children from BME communities take longer to place for adoption.



86 of these children were matched within Leeds Local Authority

5 of these children were matched through Voluntary Adoption Agencies within the Yorkshire and Humber regional consortium

7 of these children we matched with outside consortium Local Authorities

29 of these children were through outside consortium Voluntary Adoption Agencies

13 of these children were through Voluntary Adoption Agencies inside the consortium

1 child was placed through inter country adoption

3.6.3 The budget expenditure on inter agency adoptions in 2013/14 was £1,068,000. This is a significant increase on previous years due to an increase of £14,000 per placement as from the 1st of April 2013. The costs consist of 2/3rds of the payment due upon the placement and 1/3 paid on the final adoption order, so the large figure accounts for a combined number of children placed for adoption across the last two years. However, providing children with permanence supports better outcomes and is more cost effective over time.

3.6.4 Developments within the regional consortium over the next year aim to see an increase in the number of children being placed within the region, which will reduce the current high number of children placed outside the region.

3.6.5 More children this year have been placed within the surrounding area of Leeds which is encouraging. The need for effective and well co-ordinated support is essential to ensure that the outcomes for children are positive and that disruptions in placement are minimised. Placing children locally affords more support to the adoptive placement from social work staff, as well as adoptive families being able to access the comprehensive adoption support services provided by Leeds.

3.7 Age Range, siblings and foster carer adoptions

- 44 of the children matched were babies and 1 was relinquished for adoption.
- 68 of the children matched were aged four years or older,
- 32 children were placed in sibling groups of 2
- 6 children were placed in with sibling who was already in placement as a fostering to adopt arrangement.

15 children matched with their foster carer which is an increase of 8 from last year. The increase of children over the age of four placed for adoption is significant. Last year there were 16 children over the age of four all placed with in house adopters. This is a significant achievement as the recruitment of adoptive families for older children presents challenges for many agencies and the investment in a good adoption support service is key in supporting these families.

3.8 Disruptions

- 3.8.1 In the last year there have been four matches that have not progressed to placement following a period of introductions and four adoptions have disrupted where children were placed with adoptive families. This is a slight increase on last year figure of three disruptions and is distressing for all concerned. In most of these cases, the complexity of children's needs has played a large part in the placements ceasing with a variety of other factors compounding the issues.

Disruption is a cause for concern and in every case a disruption meeting takes place to ensure that a full understanding of the issues leading to the breakdown are fully understood to inform future planning for the child and the adoptive parents. The service has recently completed a review of the disruptions over the last year to ensure that practice remains child focussed and that any actions required to reduce disruptions are taken forward.

At a national level Leeds has taken part in a study around adoption disruptions. This research has just been published and there are a number of key issues to inform future practice.

3.9 Key Performance Indicators on adoption

- 3.9.1 The number of children adopted or becoming subject to Special Guardianship Order (SGO) during the year as a percentage of the number of children currently looked after for 6 months or longer stood at 11.5% at the end of March 2014 .This is an increase from 10.8 % in 2012/13 and previous increases from 8.2% in 2011/12.
- 3.9.2 108 children were adopted and 61 made subject of an SGO in the financial year 2013/14. This is an increase from 90 in 2012/13 and 65 the previous year. The rise in SGO's this year is significant as an exit from care, compared to 47 last year. 33% of children were placed for adoption within 12 months of a plan for adoption, this is much lower than last year which stood at 67.5% (2012/13) Although this is lower the volume and complexity of children waiting may account in part for the

longer waiting time. Recent case law about adoption has created some delay for children, as courts are robustly ensuring that assessments on family members are fully explored and analysed before a plan for adoption is agreed. In some cases extended family members have come forward late in proceedings and are being assessed following a plan for adoption being made, but prior to the final hearing.

3.9.4 Adoption Scorecard statistics

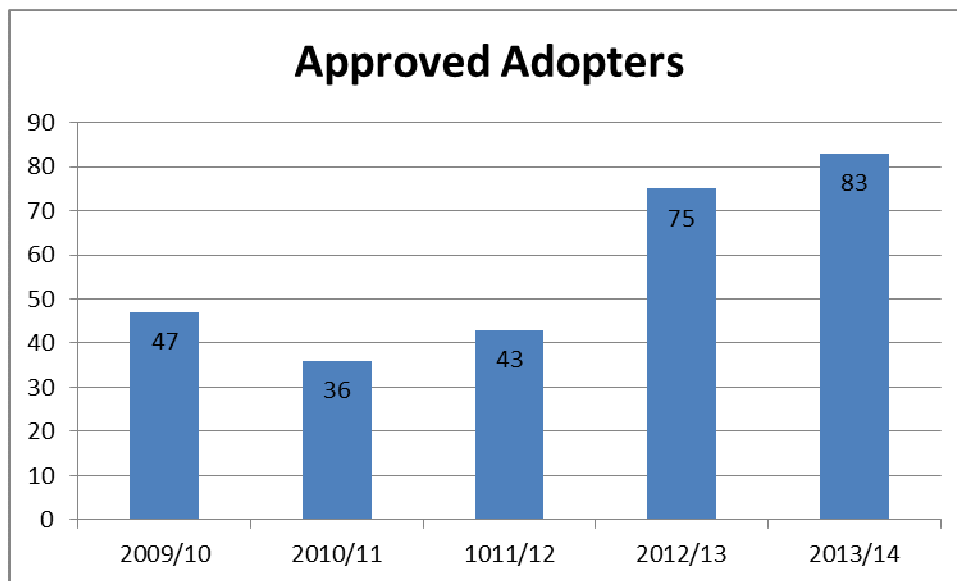
The DfE have produced a range of comparative adoption statistics which have been Used to consider performance activity in Leeds and these show that Leeds performs well above statistical neighbours and core cities and above the national average in adoption.

The adoption scorecard has three indicators. Leeds meets the required threshold set by the government on indicator one, the average time between a child entering care and moving in with the adoptive family, over a 3 year period, 2010-2013. Leeds 599 days – England 647 days

- 3.9.6 Indicator 2. Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days) 2010-13. The average number of days in Leeds is 246 and nationally 210.
- 3.9.7 Leeds has one of the highest numbers of children adopted nationally and the volume of children requiring adoption has been a challenge for the service. There has been investment in the adoption team to keep pace with the demand and many children are placed in timely manner, the adoption team has increased the pool of adopters. Leeds is committed to finding families for children where there is a plan for adoption and goes to great lengths to find the “right” family.
- 3.9.8 In relation to the 2nd indicator there are a number of cases where children have waited long periods of time for adoption placements. The plan for adoption has however been pursued for children who have a range of complexities, making finding the right placement more difficult. The family finding activity on the children’s plans are monitored on a three weekly basis by the adoption team to ensure the plan is progressing and family finding activities are overseen.
- 3.9.9 Indicator three does not have a threshold. As with indicators one and two, Leeds performs better than all comparator groups, although performance was two points higher. In terms of volume, more children wait less than 20 months in the 2010-13 period (295) than in the previous period (2009-12: 255) reflecting the continued increase in adoptions of Leeds children.

3.10 Profile of adopters

3.10.1 Between April 2013 and March 2014, 83 adoptive households were approved, showing a slight increase from the previous year.



3.10.2 65 adopters stated a preference for a child under 4 years of age although 8 of those were approved for a child under the age of 1 year.

10 families were willing to be considered for children over 4 years. This is an 50% increase on last figures where 5 in house adopters approved for children over 5.

65 families wanted one child
9 families wanted 2 children
0 families wanted 3 children
9 families were willing to take 1 or 2 siblings.

3.10.3 There is a slight decrease in from 11 to 9 households willing to take 2 siblings but an increase in those willing to consider 1 or 2 children from 2 to 9 households. This overall increase shows adoptive parents willing to be flexible, given the larger number of siblings requiring placement.

15 applications were in respect of foster carer adoptions, an increase from 3 last year. This overall figure is a 25% increase from the previous year.

3.10.4 17% adopters are from BME backgrounds. This is an increase of 41% from last year but we still need to increase our percentage of BME carers and consideration needs to be given to the specific recruitment of BME adopters. An equality impact assessment was completed in 2012 and is due for review over the next year to ensure that we remain focussed on ensuring we have a diverse range of adopters.,

3.10.5 There are 31 adoptive households approved at the present time. 8 are on hold awaiting match and the other 6 are in the process of considering children. Links are

being explored for the other families with children's social workers and family finders,

- 3.10.6 In July 2013 the assessment process for adopters changed. Following the receipt of an initial enquiry, home visit request form, an adoption advisor will contact the enquiry and discuss their interest in adoption. If appropriate an agreed formal application of interest is made. On receipt of the registration of interest, the adoption service will process statutory checks and arrange medicals for each applicant.

After the registration of interest form is accepted the stage 1 of the assessment will start, this stage should take no longer than two months. During stage 1, the prospective adopter's capacity for adoption will be explored through preparation group training, the completion of statutory checks and the obtaining of references.

Following the completion of stage 1, the decision to proceed to stage 2 of the assessment will be made. A qualified social worker from the adoption service undertakes stage 2 of the assessment and this stage should not take any longer than 4 months. Some adopters may feel they need a break after stage 1 and there is a 6 month period allowed before stage 2 starts. During the stage 2 process, a Prospective Adoption Report is written and presented to the adoption panel. The panel will consider and make a recommendation to the Adoption Agency regarding the suitability of an application to be approved as adoptive parents.

3.11 **Non agency adoptions**

- 3.11.1 The local authority is responsible for assessing adopters who apply to the courts for a non-agency adoption. 26 applications have been made this year relating to Partner adoptions (previously known as step parent adoptions). This work is undertaken by the social work teams in the areas.

3.12 **The Adoption Consortium**

- 3.12.1 Leeds continues to have a high level of involvement in the development of the Yorkshire and Humberside Adoption Consortium and is actively assisting in progressing various projects and initiatives. Leeds Assistant Head of Service for Looked After children is a member of the consortium executive board and is fully involved in overseeing the consortiums development and direction of travel.
- 3.12.2 One of our adoption team managers, in collaboration with Barnardo's North East, is leading the Early Permanence Project on behalf of the consortium. A tool kit is being developed for the use in all consortium authorities to promote early permanency for their looked after children. This toolkit will include practice guidance and materials for recruiting, assessing and preparing families for approval for these looked after children.
- 3.12.3 The service is actively supporting and promoting the Consortiums Being Family recruitment strategy. The consortium is looking to raise the profile of adoption through regional media and Leeds recruitment staff has positively linked in with this

and have included this within the Leeds campaign/marketing strategy to maximise its effectiveness.

3.12.4 The consortium focus is to try and reduce the time children wait for adoption and Leeds continue to be involved in the improvements around Activities Days and placing children with complex needs.

3.13 Recruitment & Preparation

3.13.1 Adoption advertising has been increased during this year using a range of media including radio, TV, bus backs, advertising boards, social media and google adworks. In addition we have run a targeted campaign leading to a city centre drop in event in Leeds Trinity Centre on a busy shopping Saturday at the end of National Adoption Week. The service is currently exploring the use of a shop on a more regular basis in the city centre to promote fostering, adoption and private fostering. We have taken part in work place visits to increase awareness and promote flexible working for adoptive and foster parents. These have been well received by employers and have acted as part of recruitment and Leeds businesses Corporate Social Responsibility.

3.13.2 Analysis of information about the children who have a plan for adoption has been used to inform our recruitment strategy. This strategy aims to develop the capacity to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption locally. Recruitment priorities are regularly reviewed and amended according to the needs of the children coming through the system.

3.13.3 The service continues to provide information meetings and have increased these from monthly to every 3 weeks; these evenings have seen an increase in attendance with 469 potential adopters attending, from 301 the previous year. For the second year Leeds held a targeted event to attract potential adopters from the lesbian and gay communities, 13 people attended this event and the feedback received was very positive. The information meetings are now held in alternating venues in the North and South of the city with the hope of increasing accessibility for prospective adoptive families.

3.13.4 Opportunities to request a home visit are offered at the conclusion of each meeting. The Adoption Service received 128 requests for home visits throughout the year. The increase on last year cannot be measured due to the change in processes from registration of interest to request for home visit as part of the new stage 1 and stage 2 processes. We then received 85 new applications in the year, training 178 adopters in 94 households.

3.13.5 There are always a range of people making initial enquiries to the service; some people are at the very early stage of their thinking about adoption and other people are much further on and clear about their wish to parent through adoption and ready to proceed with the next stage. Consequently, whilst there are high numbers of enquiries, there is also a high dropout rate in relation to people then progressing on to making an application. It is very important that potential applicants have time to

consider all the issues thoroughly and enabled to proceed at a pace which is right for them.

3.13.6 The service set a target of approving 90 households this year and managed to approve 83 households which is an increase of 10% on last year. We are constantly planning allocation and reviewing capacity and as a result of this have been able to allocate assessments of adopters promptly which has avoided any waiting periods or lost time in the process. The implementation of any new process always causes some delay in the first few months and the service is confident on reaching the target of approving 90 adoptive households in 2014/15.

3.14 Inter country adoption

3.14.1 There were 2 requests for an inter country adoption assessment during the period April 2013 to March 2014. One of these has been assessed and approved and the other is in the assessment process.

3.14.2 The service placed a looked after child via the inter-country process with a relative

3.15 Adoption Support Services

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3.15.1 Adoption Support continues to remain an area of considerable growth and considerable need within the service. As more children have been placed for adoption in the past three years, the corresponding need for adoption support services will rise in the future. It is anticipated that earlier intervention to assist families with bonding and attachment will be required as well as ongoing services for life story work, managing challenging behaviour as well as helping children affected by early developmental trauma. Adoption support works closely with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and the need for this close liaison is essential.

3.15.2 The nature of support requested varies considerably, but frequently includes requests from adoptive parents for advice on strategies for integrating children into families, managing challenging behaviour and support with telling difficult life story information as well as requests for professional advice and help for children in school where early developmental trauma has led to attachment difficulties. This adverse start to life can make it hard for children to settle, feel safe and can ultimately be a barrier to learning and the ability to make positive social relationships. There have been 312 new referrals for adoption support into the team this year, 99 from adoptive parents and children. The service has responsibility for providing an assessment of support needs to families living in Leeds, including families whose children were placed by a different agency after the first 3 years post Adoption Order. Additionally, the adoption support service has a responsibility to provide support to families living anywhere else in the UK, whose children were placed by Leeds, for up to three years post adoption order.

3.15.3 The service has contracts with Adoption UK and After Adoption for Family Support Services including professional consultation and peer support and Safe Base training for adoptive parents both pre and post adoption order. These services for adoptive parents of Leeds children are available throughout the country so are extremely helpful services for parents of children placed outside Leeds. There is also a contract with Barnardos Futures to provide supported lodgings for adopted young people who may need support with thinking about independent living. Sometimes during adolescence, adopted young people struggle with their identity and the general adolescent “task” of emotionally and physically detaching themselves from family and home life can cause massive difficulties with relationships. In these circumstances the adoption supported lodgings provides tremendous support for both the young person and the family. There is also a personal advisor (2 days per week) who is currently supporting fourteen adopted young people aged between 13 and 19 years (with additional age flexibility if needed).

3.16 Support groups

3.16.1 There are currently two evening support groups for adoptive parents per month. One is for adoptive parents with children of all ages. The other is run monthly by the adoption support team manager in conjunction with an adult psychotherapist colleague from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. This is a specialist group designed for adopters of adolescents as many of these young adopted people bring additional challenges for their parents during adolescence.

3.16.2 In addition, there are two monthly parent and child stay and play support groups in the East and West of the city. These are especially useful in helping new adoptive families practice their parenting skills in a supportive setting and to offer peer and professional support. An experienced adoptive parent volunteers at each session. These groups can also be a forum to help identify families who may welcome some additional support with becoming a new family unit. Some of these families may be invited to attend a six weekly parent and child play social group, based on Theraplay techniques (which enhance attachment and bonding through play based and sensory activities).

3.16.3 The service has been running a weekly social group for adopted children aged between 12 – 14 years, in partnership with Barnardo’s Futures. This regular session is invaluable in helping this minority group of young people to talk about and understand their own and other people’s experiences in a supportive setting where adoption is the norm. This group have been involved in developing the young people’s guides to adoption support and have made supportive peer relationships over the years. This group is taking a natural break at present and referrals are being taken for the next group which is due to start in September.

3.16.4 The need for an adolescent’s social group has been identified following a suggestion in the recent adoption support newsletter requesting expressions of interest in this idea from adoptive families and young people. Several families have contacted adoption support and a group is actively being planned at present. Additionally, Leeds adoption support staff and young adopted people are taking part

in a regional project to improve the consortium website for adolescents who are adopted. They have met twice with other young representative from the region at Leeds First Direct Arena, which has offered support with providing a venue for this group. Another meeting is imminent with a view to the group being able to produce a website especially for adolescent adopted young people.

3.16.5 A newsletter is produced twice yearly by the adoption support team in conjunction with colleagues in Communications. This publication in Spring and Autumn lists all the groups and development occurring in Leeds adoption support services for adoptive parents, colleagues and partner agencies.

3.17 Training

3.17.1 A rolling programme of training and workshops for adoptive parents is provided including topics such as “Telling Difficult Information”, “Life Story Work” “the Impact of Social Networking Sites” and “Extreme Sibling Rivalry”. A regular workshop is facilitated by an adoption support worker and a colleague from one of the adoption teams on “Related by Adoption”. It is aimed at helping extended family members of adoptive parents understand some of the issues faced by adoptive parents and different ways of supporting them. Training is also provided for social workers on “Managing Contemporary Contact Arrangements and Implications Post Adoption” and “Adoption and the Law”. In conjunction with the Education Co-ordinator for Children Looked After (who is linked to the adoption support team) the team also provides training and support to nurseries and schools. An information e-mail was sent out prior to Christmas advising adoptive parents of the need to request Pupil Premium (additional funding) before the closing date in January 2014; an article was written for the newsletter earlier this year and additionally a workshop on Education and Adoption was delivered for adoptive parents in April 2014.

3.17.2 The adoption service also works in partnership with After Adoption and provides “Safe Base” training for adoptive parents. This is a specialist 4 day training course once children have been placed and is a parenting programme specifically developed for adoptive parenting. The evaluation of the training was extremely positive and so after the initial three year contract, a further contract was agreed to continue to provide this as well some additional one day training events for adoptive families. There is also a regular follow up support group for all attendees. The Leeds adoption support team is currently piloting the national programme being piloted by the Department for Education called “AdOpt”. This first course is due to end in June 2014, with dates for two more already planned.

3.18 Post Adoption Contact

3.18.1 The adoption archivist manages around 1000 ‘letterbox’ contacts where there is an exchange of letters and/or photos between the adoptive family and the birth family. Additionally there are a number of adoptive families where there is some form of face to face contact between the adopted child and their birth relatives. The nature of this contact will vary from an annual meeting to very complex arrangements involving a number of birth family members (siblings, grandparents and parents).

3.18.2 The impact of social networking in adoption is far reaching and is extremely difficult to support. There are safeguarding concerns as young people often do not

recognise the issues that originally necessitated the plan of adoption. It is very hard to intervene when a young person has made unregulated contact with birth family members and this is sometimes impossible for adoptive parents to manage without professional support.

3.18.3 The service has continued to promote the consideration of “Vetos” for young adopted people by writing to adoptive parents in the year that their child is seventeen. This enables young people to discuss with their parents in advance of being an adult whether there are any circumstances in which they would or would not want to consider approaches from all or some members of their birth family. When they are eighteen they can register a veto. Several young people and their adoptive parents have needed to receive support about this in the past year and 1 young person has registered a veto, with several pending.

3.19 Work with birth families

3.19.1 The adoption service has a contract with After Adoption Yorkshire to provide an independent support service to birth parents and support to adopted adults.

3.19.2 A birth parent group is currently being co-led by an After Adoption worker along with a contemporary birth parent. This group has had some very positive feedback from birth parents and is able to offer some helpful advice to social workers in engaging birth parents. The group has been consulted this year in relation to a leaflet created by the adoption support team for practical advice to birth parents on letter writing and contact arrangements. During the past year one of the adoption support social workers has worked with an area advanced practitioner to provide three training sessions to colleagues especially on working with birth parents.

3.20 Birth Records Counselling

3.20.1 The local authority has a legal responsibility to provide a birth record counselling service (known as Schedule II) and this service has continued to receive regular requests for birth records counselling. There are an increasing number of enquiries from younger adopted people, whose histories can be more complex, coming as many do from a background of abuse and neglect. This work is extremely complex, requires skilled adoption social work and can be very time consuming. The service recognises that service users may wish to seek support from an independent organisation and so After Adoption Yorkshire is contracted to supply this too, if required.

3.20.3 There is regular consultation with service users and evaluation forms have been very positive with all saying that they would seek support again and would recommend the service to others.

3.21 Adoption Panel

- 3.21.1 There are 4 adoption panels running each month. Additional support increased last summer as a result of increasing demand, with the appointment of a senior administrator and panel manager to service both fostering and adoption panels. This has enabled the business of the panels to function more effectively and respond more quickly to children's needs for timely decisions.
- 3.21.2 There has also been considerable pressure on the Adoption Medical Advisors and during the last year increased capacity has prevented delay for children by ensuring that the pre adoption medicals can be completed for children prior to the plan being agreed.
- 3.22.3 The adoption panel completes a 6 monthly report to the agency. This is the summary from the adoption panel chairs report completed for this period:

“The quality of adoption work has remained good in Leeds and there has been evidence of excellent practice in a significant number of cases. Both Panel members and the Agency will work together in order to manage continuing changes in practice and expectations on performance. Maintaining quality while working on improving timescales for decision -making and family finding will continue to present challenges in the coming year, not just for the agency but for prospective adopters also. The overall standard of work and commitment to getting things right is evident from the presentations and training provided to panel and members appreciate the work which has been undertaken to continually improve.”

3.23 Quality Assurance

- 3.23.1 The adoption service has a clear quality assurance framework. This includes service user feedback; feedback from the adoption panel and case file audits. Case file audits have been carried out regularly in 2013/14 and the quality of work undertaken is consistently very good. The feedback from adoption panels on the quality of reports being presented is generally of a high quality. 100% of prospective adopters reports presented were excellent, very good or good in the last 6 months. 71 % of Child permanence reports were excellent, very good or good and 26 % were satisfactory. A significant effort goes into the feedback to workers in order to maintain and raise standards in a clear and supportive manner and the last six months do represent an improvement in standards in Child permanence reports as a result of the direct support given by the panel manager.

With regard to feedback from service users at adoption panel, the majority of adopters indicated a high level of overall satisfaction with the agency following their attendance at panel, with only one instance of a low level of satisfaction, which has initiated a complaint and subsequent investigation. The main areas for improvement are issues regarding delays at the actual panel and getting written confirmation of the decision letters from panel. These are currently being addressed.

There were 2 complaints made regarding the Adoption Service during the year. The Service Manager maintains an oversight of all complaints and disseminates any learning to the team as appropriate.

3.24 Strategic issues and forward plans

3.24.1 The Adoption Service has continued to be affected by the significant number of children requiring adoption with complex needs.

3.24.2 There are competing priorities in allocating family finding work within the team and ensuring that this work is given priority alongside the need to ensure recruitment and assessment work is maintained.

3.24.3 It is positive that the Service has continued to maximise the opportunity for children with plans for adoption to be placed in a timely way with a further increase in the number of children matched with adopters in 2013/14.

3.24.4 Life story work is a vital area for all adopted children. This work provides children with an understandable way of talking about themselves and their life history and this capacity is clearly associated with better functioning and better outcomes in adult life in part because it assists in resolving trauma. This is an area of work we will continue to develop linking into the family finding team and the experience of the therapeutic social work team, enabling area based social workers to undertake direct work with children.

3.24.5 The adoption reform agenda brought challenges to the service, with the aim of improving outcomes for children in making speedier adoption placements and recruiting adopters in a timelier manner. The improvements made over this last year have provided evidence that the strategy is correct in addressing the challenge. We have seen reductions in the number of 0-1 year olds being received into care this year and an increase in the number of children matched for adoption. The challenge is to continue with the improvements to the Adoption Service and more importantly to improve the outcomes for children.

4 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

4.1.1 The adoption service has well established mechanisms in place to consult and engage with adoptive and prospective adoptive parents. These include the use of feedback forms and regular meetings with adoptive parents. The service also has good regional and national links which supports it in obtaining feedback on issues for adopters. The content of the report takes into account of these local and national issues.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

4.2.1 This is discussed throughout the report. The number of children from a Black and Minority Ethnic Group is 22%, nationally these children tend to wait longer for a

placement due to a shortage of adoptive parents to meet their needs. The challenge is to recruit a more diverse range of adoptive families from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities. This is reflected in our recruitment strategy, following action plan presented to the Children's Services Diversity and Equalities Board in February 2013.

4.3 Council Policies and City Priorities

4.3.1 The Children and Young Peoples Plan identifies Looked after Children as one of the three priority 'Obsessions'. The adoption service is integral to our plan to safely and appropriately reduce the numbers of Looked after Children through ensuring all our children are placed in a permanent family outside the care system as soon as possible.

4.4 Resources and Value for Money

4.4.1 None identified in this report

4.5 Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

4.5.1 This report is subject to Call In.

4.6 Risk Management

4.6.1 It is a regulatory requirement on the Local Authority that this report is prepared and presented to the Executive Board of the Council.

5 Conclusions

5.1 In conclusion, the number of children requiring adoption is reducing, emphasising the need for an effective and responsive recruitment strategy to meet their diverse needs. There has been a rise in the number of children aged 3-5 with complex needs, which means that family finding activities to locate the right family is essential. The need to continue to improve the number and range of adopters recruited and approved is critical in addressing these needs.

6 Recommendations

6.1 That the Executive Board receives this report and continues to support the work of the Adoption Team to ensure our adopted children receive the best possible support.

7 Background documents

7.1 None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.