

## Report of Director of Children's Services

### Report to Executive Board

**Date: 24<sup>th</sup> June 2105**

**Subject: Adoption Agency Annual Report**



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

1. 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 2014 to March 2015, and the outcomes achieved by the service.
2. This report has been written soon after the Ofsted single inspection of all children's services in Leeds City Council in which adoption practice was fully scrutinised and reported upon. Ofsted judged our adoption service to be Good. This report will be referred to throughout but will seek not to repeat the information you have already received and considered in recent months.
3. Leeds adoption practice continues to develop in order to deliver the extensive change agenda as presented in various Government papers Adoption an Action Plan for Tackling Delay, March 2012 and Further Action on Adoption-Finding More Loving Families, January 2013. Many of the propositions in these papers have gone on to become embedded in new Law, regulation and statutory guidance since this time, Care Planning, Case review and fostering services (England) regulations 2013, Children and Families Act 2014 and most recently the March 2015 statutory guidance for local authorities

regarding permanence, long term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child.

**Recommendations**

4. 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 2014 to March 2015 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. 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 throughout life.
- 2.2 The adoption service was inspected by Ofsted as part of the single inspection of Children Social Work Services between 20<sup>th</sup> January 2015 and the 11<sup>th</sup> February 2015; the report was published on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015. Adoption services were subjected to robust scrutiny which resulted in some very positive and helpful feedback.

## **3 Main issues**

### **National Picture**

Political interest in adoption has continued during 2014/15 with the National Leadership Board monitoring and appraising the performance of adoption services and their delivery of the substantial reform agenda. The focus has moved on from speeding up adopter recruitment and assessment to eradicating delays in the matching process. The Board has led a number of Adoption Roundtable Events with senior leaders from adoption to share a vision of a more efficient matching process. Leeds managers were present at one of these events and are therefore clear of the possible impact of this agenda on our services. We are currently reviewing some of our matching arrangements in light of these discussions to ensure quality placements are achieved in a timely way.

- 3.1.1 Adoption Support is another area of key national development; the Leadership Board have focused on this over the last year and as part of this the 1st May 2015 saw the new Adoption Support Fund go live to all adoption agencies. Leeds have undertaken and actioned a service readiness plan and is now looking to make good use of the 19.3 million

being made available by central government for adoptive families in need of support nationally.

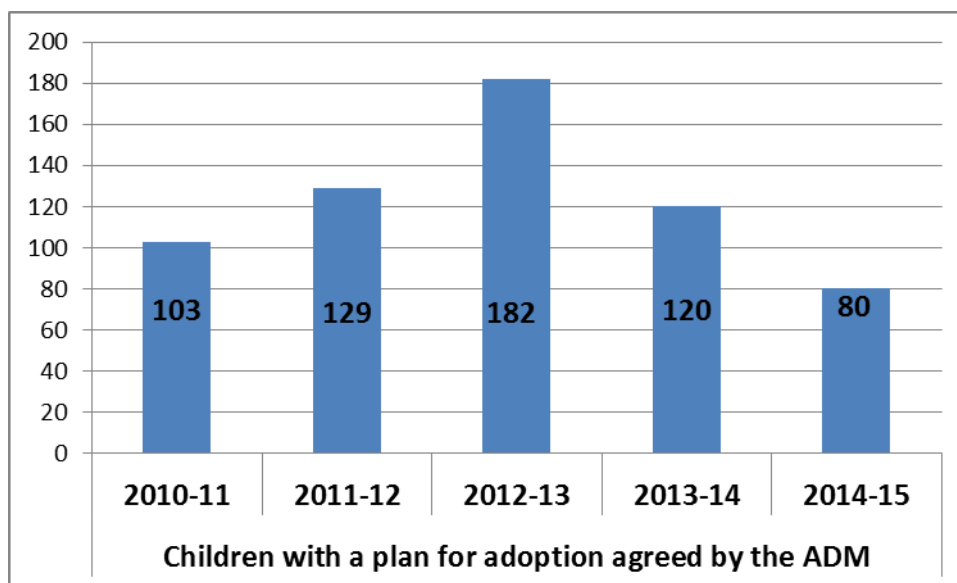
- 3.1.2 Leeds has continued to work with the National Adoption Gateway, with management representation on this group and in March 2015 we provided direct assistance to the first4adoption recruitment team in the production of adopters talking film footage, a mutually beneficial arrangement.
- 3.1.3 Law relating to Fostering for adoption and concurrency arrangements came into being as part of the children and Families Act 2014 which amended the Children Act to include a new duty upon local authorities to consider placing the child with local authority foster carers who are also approved prospective adopters when they are considering adoption for a child. This year has seen much focus on this by the National Leadership board and within inspections across the country.
- 3.1.4 Leeds have managed and developed a Consortium model of Early Permanence Placements which includes both Fostering for Adoption and Concurrency. This is being implemented by all the 17 Local Authority Adoption Agencies in the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium, has been very well received and is already making a difference to many children's lives.
- 3.1.5 Leeds has successfully embedding this model of practice which is underpinned by restorative principles into its overall adoption service delivery and as a result received positive feedback regarding this as part of the 2015 Ofsted inspection.
- 3.1.6 The adoption landscape saw a significant shift in 2014 as a result of some very influential case law, re B (June 2013) and B-S (Sept 2013) which directly challenged the robust nature of adoption plans and decision making for children by the courts and all involved professionals. The Law was not changed as a result of the case law but the way in which evidence was to be presented and judgments formulated did change and resulted in a significant reduction in the numbers of plans for adoption being presented to the court and the number of placement orders made during 2014 and 2015.
- 3.1.7 The reduction of placement and adoption orders made nationally has been so dramatic that the President of the family Division Mr. Justice Munby redressed the balance by adding a statement to recent case law stating the importance of adoption for children Re CW (Nov2014) and Re R ( Dec 2014). We have already seen some early signs of an increase in adoption plans being presented to the court and anticipate that in 2015- 2016 the numbers of children requiring adoption will increase overall but it is thought that the numbers will not return to the extremely high numbers experienced in 2012 and 2013.
- 3.1.8 The adoption service in Leeds has been required to respond to these changes very quickly and so changed the emphasis of our adopter recruitment from the need to recruit as many adoptive households as

possible of all types and skills to targeting our adopter recruitment to meet the very specific needs of the fewer numbers of children coming forward with a plan for adoption and to those households who could meet the needs of the children who have been waiting longer for adoption due to their older age and complex needs. This change can be seen reflected in our figures as you progress through this report.

### **3.2 Adoption Service**

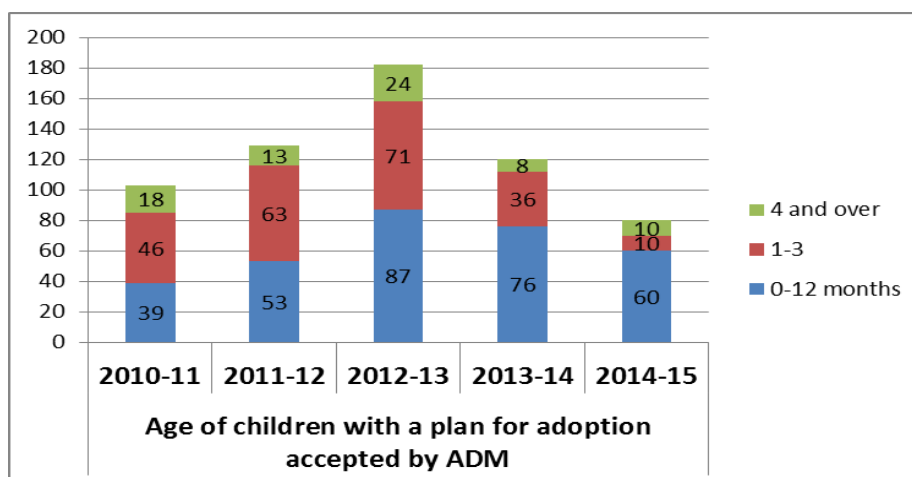
- 3.2.1 The Adoption Service has seen some changes in its management team including the reduction of management hours and social workers to reflect the reduction of children requiring adoption, these changes have been well managed to ensure it continues to have an experienced and knowledgeable group of managers. There are four team managers (3.5 full time equivalents) who take lead responsibility for different aspects of the work, namely adoption support, family finding, recruitment and advertising and assessment, procedure and process.
- 3.2.2 The adoption service is a member of the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium as well as the regional Post Adoption Network. Leeds has an important role within the Consortium, having a senior manager on the Consortium Executive board, adoption managers leading projects and having strategic roles on various steering groups and a team manager with a key role at the Regional Managers Group. In addition the service has a manager representing Leeds and ensuring that the service has a voice in influencing policy and practice nationally within one of the subgroups of the National Leadership Board led by Martin Narey.
- 3.2.3 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 and 3 adoption adviser posts (unqualified staff). The teams provide a duty help line service for prospective adopters, adoptive families, birth parent, 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.
- 3.2.4 Staff within the service provides 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 including Early Permanency Planning 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 in relation to adoption and permanence planning issues, family finding and issues arising through adoption support.

### 3.3 Profile of Children approved in the year with a plan of adoption 2014 to 2015



- 3.3.1 Between April 2014 and March 2015, 80 children had a plan for adoption ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. Of the 80 children with a plan for adoption, there were 40 female and 40 male children.
- 3.3.2 In total, this projects a 37 % decrease on the last year's full year figure of 120. This is our lowest number of adoption plans made for children since before 2008 and can be attributed to the impact of the case law described above which started to have an effect during the latter part of 2013. In addition Leeds has increased the number of young children who are being placed with extended family members as a result of its commitment to restorative work with families and family group conferencing.
- 3.3.3 This decrease has been replicated nationally; the Adoption Register for England reported a significant decrease in the number of children referred over the last 12 months showing a similar pattern to that seen in Leeds. June/Sept 2013 being the peak in the numbers of children referred to the adoption register in need of an adoption placement at 904, which reduced to 135 in January 2015.
- 3.3.4 We are likely to see a rise in the numbers of children with a plan for adoption over the next 12 months but it likely that numbers will level out to about those of 2010/2011 or possibly slightly higher. This is only a best guess but we have already seen some indication that slight rise will occur.

### 3.3.5 Age profile



3.3.5 The figures show the percentage number of children in each age range has not changed much from last year's figures. We have a high number of adopters who wish to adopt very young children who have little risk in terms of their future development both within Leeds and nationally. All adoption agencies still struggle to recruit adopters who can adopt older children and sibling groups this is a priority for the service. 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 results in these children waiting longer in achieving permanence through adoption. This is another area of particular challenge for our adopter recruitment.

### 3.3.6 Ethnicity

64 children are White UK

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

25% 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.

## 3.4 Placement with Siblings

As a general principle, siblings will be placed together; however, due to the individual needs of children this cannot always be achieved.

3.4.1 The numbers of children requiring adoption in sibling groups is 11 in comparison to 24 children last year.

3.4.2 This year there are:

8 children in sibling groups of 2

3 children in sibling groups of 3

- 3.4.3 The decrease in sibling groups is reflected nationally and is linked with the lower number of children requiring adoption.

### **3.5 Children with an adoption plan, currently waiting**

- 3.5.1 At the present time there are 53 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 97 children were waiting for a placement.
- 3.5.2 25 children out of the 53 are 0-1yrs. 20 children have potential “matches” identified and 15 of these have a date booked at adoption panel for the match. There are 7 children where their foster carers have expressed an interest in adopting them which is actively being pursued.
- 3.5.3 From the children waiting for a placement there are more boys than girls and 13% are children from BME backgrounds. Out of these children, 18 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 are in place to understand the range of family finding activity going on for these children.
- 3.5.4 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.
- 3.5.5 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.

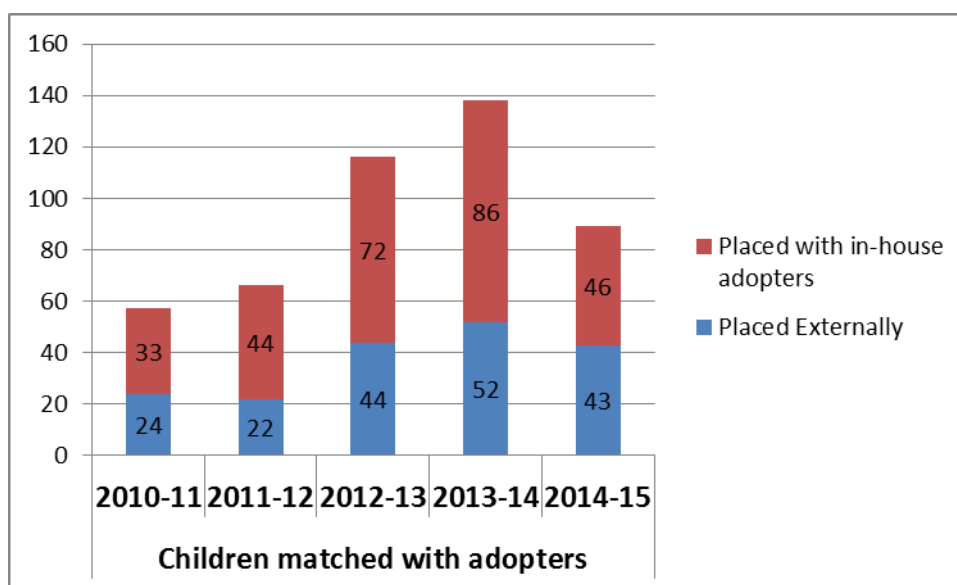
### **3.6 Children matched in the year for adoption**

- 3.6.1 Between April 2014 and March 2015, 89 children were matched with families at adoption panels; this is a 36% decrease upon last year's figures when 143 children were matched with adoptive parents. Given the reduction in children with a plan for adoption the decrease in matching activity is expected. However it is positive that we are still actively matching a higher number of



children for adoption than are coming into the service with a new plan for adoption.

- 3.6.2 During April 2014 and March 2015 20% of the children matched were from black and minority ethnic communities. Leeds continue to do very well nationally in this area of adoption practice, this has been referred to on occasion by the National Leadership Board. This is positive as children from BME communities often take longer to place for adoption.



46 of these children were matched within Leeds Local Authority  
 3 of these children were matched through local authority Adoption Agencies within the Yorkshire and Humber regional consortium.  
 13 of these children were through Voluntary Adoption Agencies inside the consortium  
 9 of these children we matched with outside consortium Local Authorities  
 18 of these children were through outside consortium Voluntary Adoption Agencies

- 3.6.3 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, Early Permanency Placements and foster carer adoptions

- 34 of the children matched were babies and 1 was relinquished for adoption.

- 43 children were of pre school age
- 10 of the children matched were aged four years or older,
- 16 children were placed in sibling groups
- 7 children were placed in an early permanency placement arrangement.
- 12 children matched with their foster carer.

3.7.1 The recent inspection report commented on the service's ability to find appropriate matches for children stating that there is significant focus on recruiting adopters for sibling groups between the ages of 3 – 6 years, and children over the age of 2 years who show signs of developmental delay or whose future development is uncertain and Early Permanency Carers. They went to state that children do not experience multiple moves, and therefore are provided with stability whilst a suitable match is being identified.

### **3.8 Disruptions**

3.8.1 In the last year there have been two adoptions that have disrupted where children were placed with adoptive families. This affected 3 children with two of these being siblings who were placed together. This is a decrease on last year but any disruption is distressing for all concerned. In both of these cases, the complexity of children's needs played a large part in the placements ceasing with many other factors compounding the issues.

3.8.2 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.

3.8.3 The recent Ofsted inspection commented positively about the low number of disruptions and stated that the agency seeks to undertake clear analysis and learning in relation to all disruptions which are shared with all adoption staff and panel members.

### **3.9 Adoption Scorecard statistics and Key Performance Indicators.**

3.9.1 The DFE have produced a range of comparative adoption statistics which are analysed for the purposes of scrutiny with regard the adoption performance in all adoption agencies across England. These show that Leeds performs well compared to statistical neighbours and core cities and is above the national average in adoption.

3.9.2 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, 2011-2014. Leeds 564 days – England 628 days this is 64 days fewer than the England 3 year average and better than statistical neighbours.

3.9.3 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) 2011-14. The average number of days in Leeds is 239 days and in

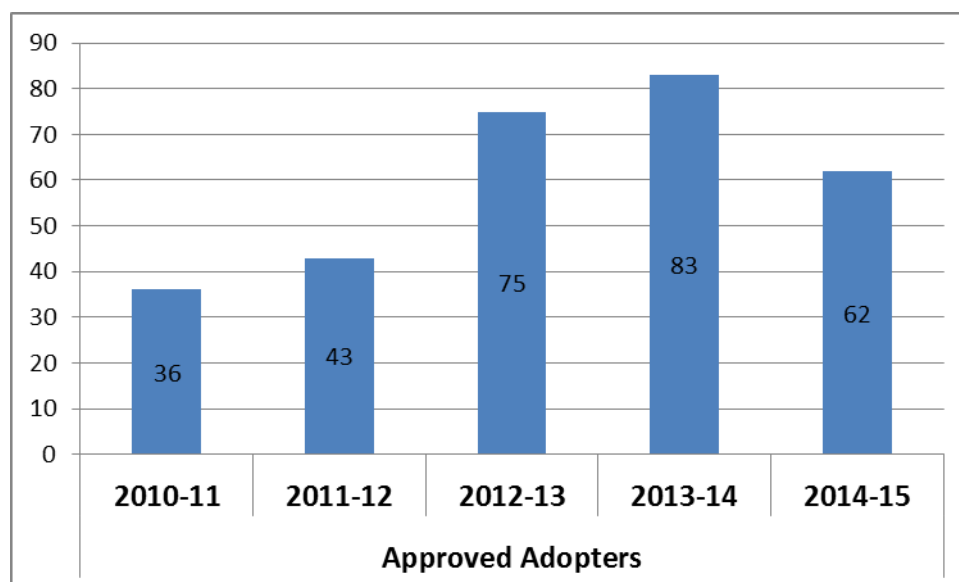
England it is 217 days this is 22 days longer than the England 3 year average, but better than statistical neighbours.

- 3.9.4 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, with 118 children adopted in 2014/2015. The Ofsted report pointed out that “Leeds is ranked equal 16<sup>th</sup> of all authorities for the percentage of children adopted, and had more children from Black and minority backgrounds adopted (11%) than the National average (8%).” (Leeds single inspection report Ofsted 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015).
- 3.9.5 In relation to the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.
- 3.9.6 This was commented upon in the inspector’s report which stated “inspectors saw robust management of cases and tenacity in adoption plans being pursued, which in one case included a child who experienced an adoption disruption. Children do not experience unnecessary delay.”
- 3.9.7 Indicator three does not have a threshold. As with indicators one and two, Leeds performs well in relation to all comparator groups, with Leeds hitting the same percentage of children who wait less than 18 months from entering care and moving in with their adoptive family than the national average. In terms of volume, more children wait less than 20 months in the 2011-14 period (295) than in the previous period (2009-12: 255) reflecting the continued increase in adoptions of Leeds children.
- 3.9.8 118 children were adopted this equates to 10.4% of children adopted in the financial year 2014/15 as a percentage of the children currently looked after for 6 months or longer. 72 children made subject of an SGO in the financial year 2014/15 this equates to 4.9% of children becoming subject of an SGO as a percentage of the children currently looked after for 6 months or longer. This is a slightly higher number of adoption orders from last year’s 111 but the rise in SGO’s this year is significant as an exit from care, compared to 61 last year.

### **3.10 Profile of adopters**

- 3.10.1 Between April 2014 and March 2015, 62 adoptive households were approved. This represents a 25% decrease on the previous year which was 83.
- 3.10.2 Due to the reduction of children with a plan for adoption over the last two years Leeds were developing a waiting list of approved adopters, consisting mostly of adopters wanting to adopt children under the age of 2 years. This was also the case in all the agencies in the consortium region and nationally,

the decision was therefore taken to change our recruitment strategy to focus on the families for our harder to place children and not to recruit adopters for children for whom nationally approved adopters are waiting. This strategy was a move away from approving as many adopters as possible with the focus being to deliberately target adopters for specific children and sibling groups, this started in September 2014 and has clearly impacted upon approvals as envisaged.



3.10.3 29 adopters stated a preference for a child under 2 years of age with only 2 expressing a desire to adopt a child under 1. These figures represent a significant fall from last year, with a higher percentage of adopters stating a willingness to adopt children over the age of 2 years, this accounts for 30 of the approved adopters. 3 households were approved for inter-country adoption.

3.10.4 The percentages show a slight decrease in the numbers of adopters able to consider the adoption of a child over 4 years of age, with only 3 adopters expressing an ability to do this. However we have adopters currently in assessment who want to adopt children over 4.

3.10.5 Of the 29 adopters who were approved for children under the age of 2 years 3 were able to consider an Early Permanence Placement, which is a very important addition to our adopter recruitment in Leeds. We hope to see this figure increase next year.

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

- 3.10.6 There was an overall decrease in the number of adopters wanting to adopt siblings groups but this was matched by the decrease in the numbers of sibling groups requiring placement. However we hope this will improve next year with our greater focus on recruiting adopters for sibling groups. A key area for improvement would be to recruit some families who could adopt 3 children.

6 applications were in respect of foster carer adoptions, although this is a decrease from the 15 that were approved last year.

- 3.10.7 10% adopters are from BME backgrounds. We need to monitor our percentage of BME carers and keep a focus on ensuring that we approve a full range of adoptive families to meet the range of children requiring placement, while at the same time not relying on matching children with regard to ethnic identity as an overriding factor. An updated equality impact assessment is near completion and recommendations will be made in relation to ensuring we have a diverse range of adopters.
- 3.10.8 There are 34 adoptive households approved at the present time. 4 are on hold awaiting match at panel, 7 are in the process of considering children. Links are being explored for the other families with children's social workers and family finders, and the others are all referred to the adoption register.
- 3.10.9 The stage 1 and stage 2 adoption assessment process is now fully embedded into our practice in Leeds we have very good systems around this both in terms of administration and social work processes. During the Ofsted single inspection in February 2015 the inspectors had a very thorough look at our assessment work and stated:-

"Timescales for completing assessments of prospective adopters has recently improved; 72% of the last 33 households to be assessed were completed within stage1 and stage2 timescales. Where assessments were delayed there is good reason, for example potential adopters not ready to proceed to the next stage and the service prioritising assessments where children are waiting to be matched."

### **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. 45 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.

### **3.13 Recruitment & Preparation**

- 3.13.1 Adoption advertising has continued at a high level for most of this year using a range of media including radio, bus backs, advertising boards, social media and google ad-works. 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. Leeds website, advertising and adopter recruitment received positive comment in the recent Ofsted inspection being referred to as effective, innovative and broad in scope.

- 3.13.2 We continue to take part in work place visits to increase awareness of adoption and promote flexible working for adoptive and foster parents. These have been well received by employers and have formed part of recruitment and Leeds businesses Corporate Social Responsibility.
- 3.13.3 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 hence the significant change in recruitment which was brought into action in September 2014.
- 3.13.4 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 462 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, 16 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.
- 3.13.5 Opportunities to request a home visit are offered at the conclusion of each meeting. The Adoption Service received 127 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 88 new applications in the year, training 131 adopters in 97 households.
- 3.13.6 The service has set a target of approving 65 adopters during 2015/16 but with the aim of increasing the number of adopters approved for EPP, sibling groups and children aged between 3-5 years.

### **3.14 Inter country adoption**

- 3.14.1 There were 3 requests for an inter country adoption assessment during the period April 2014 to March 2015. All of these has been assessed and approved; all 3 are at different stages in the matching process.
- 3.14.2 The consortium has now agreed a value for money contract on behalf of the whole region with The Yorkshire Adoption Agency who will provide expert inter-country services to all adopters on behalf of the local Authority consortium agencies. This will save Leeds time and money as inter-country work is very specialist, complex and time consuming.

### **3.15 Adoption Support Services**

- 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.
- 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 232 new referrals for adoption support into the team this year.
- 3.15.3 The service has contracts with Adoption UK and After Adoption for Family Support Services including professional consultation and peer support.

### **3.16 Support groups**

- 3.16.1 There are currently one evening support groups for adoptive parents per month. One is for adoptive parents with children of all ages. 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).
- 3.16.2 An adolescent's social group known as the "cooking crew" has been running successfully for the last year and one of Leeds adoption support staff continues to have a role in facilitating the regional young person's support group and had a role in developing the young person's consortium website. Leeds remain committed to supporting this programme of work.
- 3.16.3 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. We continue to inform adoptive parents of the need to request the Pupil Premium to assist children in school.

- 3.17.2 Safe Base training for adoptive parents both pre and post adoption order. The team have been piloting a new evidence based parenting programme, ADOPT, funded by the DFE. The outcomes from this are extremely positive to date.

### **Adoption Support Fund**

- 3.17.3 The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) opened for business nationally on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2015 with 19.3 million available for agencies to apply for on behalf of their adoptive families. The fund has been set up to reduce the gap between adoptive children needing therapeutic services and receiving them (ultimately to improve outcomes for young people and families). It aims to;

- Improve the core offer that LAs and VAAs provide
- Improve assessments of need for adoption support
- Build the evidence base for interventions
- Changing behaviour in LAs
- LAs remain responsible for core support and assessments of need.

- 3.17.4 Local Authorities are required to maintain and provide an adoption support service. Applications to the Adoption Support Fund will need to demonstrate how the proposed services will address the outcomes identified in the child’s support assessment. Local authorities will need to make bids to the fund that address how the services will support or dovetail with other aspects of the assessment or plan to support the family and should include an estimated timescale, review, evaluation process and desired outcomes.

- 3.17.5 Applications can be made from the 1<sup>st</sup> May and we anticipate that it will be important to get as many bids in as early as possible to ensure good use and pay out from the fund.

- 3.17.6 A programme of change and preparation has been taking place in Leeds adoption support team in readiness for making the most of the fund and making successful applications.



### **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.

### **3.19 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.
- 3.20.2 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. Some thought has been given to reducing the number of panels to 3 per month but panel bookings dictate the need to continue with 4 panels in order to avoid any delays in children's cases caused by overbooked panels. This is regularly monitored basis and where appropriate the panels will reduce.
- 3.21.2 The adoption panel manager role across fostering and adoption continues to work really well with positive feedback received regarding this by both adoption independent panel chairs, who in a recent panel report to the agency stated "the role of Panel Manager continues to provide a central contact point for queries and is proving beneficial in co-ordinating information and assisting with the smooth running of panel business. Panel advisors assist the panel chair on practice issues. All are experienced and knowledgeable in their field of work. " .
- 3.21.3 The quality of adoption work remains good in Leeds and there has been evidence of excellent practice in a number of cases. Panel members and the Agency continue to work together in order to manage the ongoing changes and improvements in practice and expectations on performance. Quality Assurance is taken seriously and the current feedback forms have just been revised.
- 3.21.4 The previously mentioned panel chairs report stated "A commitment to getting things right is evident from the presentations and training provided to panel. Panel members appreciate the work which has been undertaken to continually improve outcomes for children and for adopters. "
- 3.21.5 The Ofsted inspectors commented that that the independent panel chairs in Leeds" are effectively fulfilling their role". They also reported that "minutes are of a good standard, with the vast majority clearly stating reasons for recommendations made. Six monthly meetings are held with the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to reflect on performance regarding the quality of reports and operational issues relating to panel matters, and panel chairs feel empowered to raise issues outside this meeting should the need arise. "

### **3.22 Quality Assurance**

- 3.22.1 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 2014/15 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. 92% of prospective adopters reports presented were excellent, very good or good in the last 6 months. 74 % of Child permanence reports were excellent, very good or good and 18 % 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.

3.22.2 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.

3.22.3 There were 7 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.

### **3.23 Strategic issues and forward plans**

3.23.1 It is our overarching objective to deliver good outcomes for children this means ensuring that children join their permanent family without delay and the first choice is always birth family but if this cannot be achieved then for very young children the next best alternative is adoption. This is born out in research on a regular basis .To this end the adoption service must ensure that it works very closely with all parts of children's social work services in order to improve and promote very early permanency planning for children.

3.23.2 The service already offers good support to the children's social work teams with regard early adoption planning and advice. However it is hoped that this can be further enhanced this year with more links with children's social workers during the pre-birth assessment and intervention processes in order to ensure that we are able to recommend Early Permanency Placements for children when this is the most appropriate plan for the child. Improved early planning for children is essential if we are to continue to improve on our timescales for children from entering care to adoption order.

3.23.3 Leeds Adoption Service will need to continue with its targeted adopter recruitment strategy and will aim to recruit fewer adopters (65) but more adopters who can parent the more challenging harder to place children. This will be a considerable challenge as past history has shown that this is very difficult to achieve as the majority of adopters want to adopt children under 2 years of age who do not have any additional needs or risks in relation to their future development.

3.23.4 It is a key priority to recruit more adopters who are able to adopt a child through the Early Permanency route to adoption which is legally a more risky route to adoption that can result in the child being returned to birth family rather than being adopted. Recruiting and supporting these potential adopters is challenging and time consuming but the rewards and benefits for the child are significant. This strategy links strongly to the departments overall restorative agenda as the EPP model is based firmly on the notion of fair

process for birth families and children, but encourages high support and high challenge when required.

3.23.5 We are focused on providing as many Leeds children as possible with Leeds approved and supported families as we know the quality of Leeds adopter's preparation and assessment and the support we provide is not replicated to quite the same standard elsewhere. In addition we believe that we offer this quality service at less than the cost of interagency placements with a decreased risk of disruption. This represents good value for money and links the council's overall agenda of spending money wisely.

3.23.6 It is essential that Leeds delivers with regard to the implementation of the Adoption Support Fund and that we are in the best possible position to make the most of the money currently being made available by the DFE on behalf of our adoptive families. In order to do this some changes have been recommended regarding our adoption support assessments these are being piloted currently as this is an area in need of improvement. All adoption support cases will now start with an outcomes based adoption support assessment.

## **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 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 and specific statements in relation to this can be seen on our adoption recruitment website and in our statement of purpose.

### **4.3 Council policies and Best Council Plan**

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.

4.3.2 This directly links to the first two points above under Strategic Issues and Forward Planning.

#### **4.4 Resources and value for money**

- 4.4.1 The changes in the demand for adoptive placements has reduced this year and consequently the resources have been reduced to ensure the service is value for money. Some of the staffing in adoption has moved over to the kinship service where there has been an increasing demand placed upon this area of work.

#### **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 The landscape in adoption has changed rapidly and the need to respond to these changes equally as quickly has been an ongoing challenge over the last few years from an unprecedented increase in children with a plan for adoption during 2012-2013, to an equally as dramatic decrease during 2014/15. This has been underlined by an uncompromising reform agenda culminating in changes in regulations and Law.
- 5.2 Leeds adoption service has stood up to this challenge and the robust scrutiny of the Ofsted inspection along with the rest of children's services. It is essential that the service is open to ongoing change and reform and remains in a very strong position to meet the needs of Leeds children who cannot live with their birth families. "The local authority demonstrates a sense of urgency and care in all adoption work" Ofsted single inspection report of Leeds Children's services March 2015.

### **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<sup>1</sup>**

- 7.1 None

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<sup>1</sup> 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.