



**Report of the Chief Officer Social Services
Report to Scrutiny Board**

Date: 7/9/06 Session one

Subject: Inquiry into Adoption Services in Leeds

Electoral Wards Affected:

Specific Implications For:

- Ethnic minorities
- Women
- Disabled people
- Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

1. Purpose Of This Report

1.1 This report is to the Scrutiny Board group which is looking at adoption services in Leeds and provides information for session one of the group which meets on 7th September as addressed in the terms of reference (paragraph 5.2) of the Scrutiny Board.

2. Main Issues

The current adoption legislation

2.1.1 During the last few years there has been a great deal of attention given to adoption issues. The National Adoption Standards were first introduced in 2001 which included for the first time qualitative requirements and timescales to be met in individual cases; following this were the government targets that monitor the proportion of children adopted from care; subsequently the National Minimum Standards which were introduced with the Care Standards Act 2000 in April 2003 via the Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations.

These prescribe in detail the way in which the Adoption agency must carry out each aspect its work and Leeds City Council Adoption agency had its first inspection against these standards in March 2005. Lastly is the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which aims to make the process of adoption more efficient and transparent and increases the opportunity for looked after children to be adopted, where appropriate.

2.1.2 It also introduced new arrangements for supporting adopted children and their adoptive families so that at any time after adoption adoptive families can ask for an assessment (including financial assessment) of their support needs. It also allows birth

families to apply for contact or to alter the contact arrangements with the adopted child. We have created a new post adoption support team in Leeds and hope that this will increase the number of people willing to adopt more challenging children.

2.1.3 The Leeds Adoption Agency must belong to a local consortium of Adoption Agencies and we were part of the original group which set this up (addendum 1).

We must also send details of people approved as adopters and children awaiting adoption to the National Adoption Register (addendum 2), so that if there are adopters waiting elsewhere in the country who might match a Leeds child or vice versa a match can be suggested for our consideration. Seven children were placed last year via this route. One adopter received a match in this way.

2.1.4 There are other implications of the Act to do with the court process and updating the law in line with the 1989 Act (addendum 3) but the above provisions are the main issues for us as an Adoption agency but some further provisions of the Act are mentioned below.

3 Role of Social Services as an Adoption agency

3.1 Every local authority must either act as an Adoption agency or make provision for these services to be carried out, usually through a voluntary agency such as Barnardo's or NCH.

This means that the Adoption Agency will recruit, assess and support adoptive parents, accept children as suitable for adoption and approve proposed matches between children and approved adopters.

3.2 The process is detailed below in flow charts attached (addendum 4) but, briefly, the case for children and applications for approval go before an adoption panel who make a recommendation for or against and then these recommendations go to the "Decision maker" (currently the Chief Officer – Children's Services) for ratification or not. Under the new Act the two adoption panels must have independent Chairs. The volume of business makes a third panel necessary and we are in the process of looking at setting this up.

3.3 One of the changes introduced by the new Act was the right of adoptive applicants to be seen by the adoption panel and to be able to refer their application to an independent panel for review if they are turned down. This panel (IRM) can recommend, but not make the Adoption Agency change its decision.

3.4 The local authority Adoption Agency must also have an ASSA (adoption services support adviser) who will keep an eye on adoption support matters within their department and act as a visible person to people outside the department. This person must be a senior manager and is currently the Chief Officer (Children's Services).

3.5 Another thing the local authority must now do is to provide an independent source of advice on adoption to birth parents and we carry out that obligation by an arrangement with After Adoption Yorkshire a voluntary Agency based in Leeds which offer support, counselling and advice independently of the neighbouring local authorities.

4 Stages in the adoption process for both children and adopters.

4.1 The attached flow charts describe the process by which children needing adoption and people wishing to adopt are eventually brought together.(addendum 4)

4.2 All prospective adoptive parents are provided with a written guide to the process at the beginning of their interest in becoming adopters. (addendum 5)

5 Alternatives to adoption.

5.1 The new approach to providing security to children separated from their birth families emphasises permanency rather than any one solution such as adoption.

5.2 This recognizes a range of situations which may require different solutions. In particular the issue of a child's attachment to its birth family is important, and while the child may recognize that it needs a family other than its birth family in which to grow up, it does not want to be adopted and lose its formal connection with the family. In these circumstances a Special Guardianship order will meet the need. It severs the connection with the Social Services but does not amount to full adoption. (addendum 6)

Relatives and current foster carers are the people most likely to choose this route to permanency as an alternative to adoption.

5.3 Another alternative is a Residence Order which again severs the connection with the Social Services and gives some legal parental responsibility to the carer but recognizes perhaps an active connection between the child and its birth family. (addendum 7)

5.4 Lastly the carer and child may wish for the continued involvement of a social worker and the support of the social services. In this case a permanent foster placement is identified where the child can grow up but remain the responsibility of the social Services.

5.5 In all the alternative routes to permanency we try to ensure roughly equal financial provision, where appropriate, so the choice of permanency is not influenced by financial support but is decided by what is best for the child and carer. A foster carer, for example, who wishes to apply for a Special Guardianship or Residence Order, can rely on the same level of financial support as they received as a foster carer.

6 Recommendation

Members of the Scrutiny Board are asked to note the information presented in this report and its appendices to inform the first session of the inquiry.