

## Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) Inquiry

### Adoption in Leeds

#### Terms of reference

#### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Through its routine performance monitoring activity, the Scrutiny Board (Children and Young People) identified rates of adoption as an issue of concern in February 2006. As a result the board suggested that adoption in Leeds should be a topic for scrutiny in 2006/07; this was agreed at the first meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2006. Adoption has also been highlighted as an area for improvement in the Annual Performance Assessment process.
- 1.2 In order to decide on an appropriate and manageable focus for the inquiry, the board commissioned a small working group from amongst its membership to scope the inquiry. The working group met with a senior officer from Social Services on 30<sup>th</sup> June.
- 1.3 The working group discussed adoption as one of a range of options for achieving permanence and stability for children who are not able to remain with their birth parents. Members recognised the immense value of other outcomes including fostering, special guardianship and residence orders in achieving this.
- 1.4 However, in order to provide a clear focus, the working group decided to recommend that the inquiry concentrate on looking at possible ways of increasing adoption rates, reflecting the view that a secure permanent parental relationship is the ideal outcome for our children.
- 1.5 Members were concerned to examine the causes of any delays in the systems for approving adopters, identifying children as available for adoption and subsequently matching children with adoptive parents. They were also concerned to look at strategies to increase the pool of people prepared to adopt children who were considered harder to place for whatever reason, for example older children, sibling groups, children with developmental difficulties and children of African, Caribbean or mixed heritage.
- 1.6 The board hopes that this inquiry will assist the council in securing better outcomes for children and young people in relation to the 'staying safe' theme of Every Child Matters and the Children and Young People's Plan.

## **2.0 Scope of the inquiry**

- 2.1 The purpose of the inquiry is to make an assessment of, and where appropriate make recommendations on, the following areas:
- The 'supply and demand' aspects of identifying and matching children and adoptive parents
  - Funding and capacity issues, and other potential causes of any delays or tensions in the adoption processes
  - The role of regional co-operation and work with voluntary agencies.

## **3.0 Comments of the relevant director and executive member**

- 3.1 In line with scrutiny board procedure rule 11.4 the views of the relevant director and executive member have been sought and have been incorporated where appropriate into these terms of reference. Full details are available on request from the scrutiny support unit.

## **4.0 Timetable for the inquiry**

- 4.1 It is envisaged that the inquiry will take place over four sessions. The inquiry will conclude with the publication of a formal report setting out the board's conclusions and recommendations.
- 4.2 It is planned that the inquiry will include a visit to another authority and the opportunity to meet more informally with people who have direct experience of adoption.
- 4.3 The length of the inquiry is subject to change in the light of emerging evidence.

## **5.0 Submission of evidence**

### **5.1 Session One – 7<sup>th</sup> September 2006**

To consider general background information on:

- The current legislation in relation to adoption
- The role of Social Services as an adoption agency
- The various stages in accepting a child for adoption
- The various stages in approving adopters
- The various stages in matching children with adopters
- Alternatives to adoption, including special guardianship and residence orders

5.2 **Session Two – 7<sup>th</sup> September 2006**

To consider information specific to Leeds:

- Analysis of the profile of prospective adopters and adoptees in Leeds
- Funding for the adoption service
- Underlying reasons for current performance and measures being taken to improve
- Recruitment and training of potential adopters
- The work of the regional consortium
- The work of the post adoption support service

5.3 **Working Group activities**

It is hoped to arrange for board members to meet with adoptive parents, people waiting to adopt and adopted children.

It is also hoped to arrange a visit to another authority to see what lessons can be learned (using comparator information to identify a higher performing authority of a comparable size).

5.4 **Session Three – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2006**

To consider information on other agencies involved in the adoption process:

- The role of the courts
- The role of the adoption panels
- The role of voluntary and community sector agencies

To consider national research on good practice

5.5 **Session Four – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2006**

To consider members' findings from the working group activities

To discuss the issues arising from the working group activities with officers from Social Services

To consider the board's emerging conclusions and recommendations

**6.0 Witnesses**

6.1 The following witnesses have been identified as possible contributors to the Inquiry:

- Social Services staff involved in adoption and post adoption support
- Representation from the regional consortium
- Court services
- CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service)
- Representation from an Adoption Panel
- Representatives of voluntary and community organisations involved in adoption
- A local authority with good performance
- Adopted children
- Adoptive parents
- Prospective adopters