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## Report of the Chief Officer Social Services

### *Scrutiny Board (Children's Services)*

Date: 16 November 2006

Subject: Adoption in Leeds: Session 3

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**Electoral Wards Affected:**

**Specific Implications For:**

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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## Executive Summary

### 1.0 Purpose of This Report

1.1 This report is to provide information on the role of an adoption panel for the third session of the board's inquiry into adoption in Leeds. Attached to this report are appendices relating to the structure and function of adoption panels, adoption agency policy and the annual report on adoption panel activity 2005-2006. In addition the report provides a summary of the early responses of adoptive applicants to their attendance at adoption panel.

### 2.0 Background Information

2.1 The Scrutiny Board members have already received general background information on current legislation relating to adoption, the role of social services and the stages involved for applicants and children. The first two sessions took place on 7 September 2006. The first of these focused on providing a general context to the adoption service and the second on information relating to services in Leeds and the region.

### 3.0 Main Issues

3.1 Leeds currently has two adoption panels meeting monthly. Discussions are taking place about establishing a third panel due to the volume of business and increased time demands. Each panel has been chaired by an independent person since July

this year. The panel includes a medical, legal and professional advisor with specific duties.

- 3.2 The panel is quorate when at least five members, including the chair or deputy, social worker and an independent member are present.
- 3.3 Recruitment of panel members should be gender balanced and representative of the community. All members are subject to a CRB check and signatory to the panel protocol including confidentiality.
- 3.4 The functions of the panel are prescribed by regulation and include consideration of adoption support, contact and the delegation of parental responsibility.
- 3.5 The panel can only make a recommendation to the agency and it is the nominated agency decision maker, currently the Chief Officer, Children, who makes the decision. The recommendations made by panel include:
  - a) whether adoption is in the best interest of the child, including advice about contact issues and whether an application should be made for a Placement Order
  - b) whether a prospective adopter is suitable to be an adoptive parent
  - c) whether a prospective adopter would be a suitable parent for a particular child
- 3.6 Panel members are provided with a combination of reports on the child, prospective adopters and proposed placement. Minutes are completed and provided for the agency decision maker within seven working days. Prospective adopters should be informed orally within two days and in writing within five working days. If the agency decision maker is minded not to approve an application this is conveyed in writing with reasons and applicants then have forty days to consider whether they wish to apply to the independent review mechanism.
- 3.7 The panel also review disruption reports, which are prepared when an adoptive placement breaks down and does not proceed to an application to court, to identify learning points. On occasions panel will request follow up reports on specific matches.
- 3.8 An annual report is prepared and shared with the Executive Board, panel members and staff (copy for 2005 – 2006 attached). This period covers the full implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 which has impacted on the work of the panel, and appropriate training for members has been provided.
- 3.9 Prospective adopters began attending panel in January 2006. Early evaluation has been positive with applicants feeling that attendance gave them the opportunity to feel fully involved in the adoption process, give the panel more insight into them and ensure accuracy of information. One couple felt it would be important to be able to tell their children about the experience in the future. All the applicants felt the process was explained clearly and agreed that they were supported by their adoption officer. They were able to meet the chair before the panel so that any further explanations could be given if necessary, including the role of the decision maker. All agreed that they were given the opportunity to express their views within the panel and were clear about the recommendations. Overall they rated the experience at an average of 8.5 on a scale of 0 - 10.

- 3.10 Adopters do not currently attend panel when the placement of a child/children with them is discussed but this is under consideration. When asked about this in the evaluation, opinions of adopters were more mixed. This was at least partly because they felt all possible information would be included in reports and have been discussed at the earlier stage.
- 3.11 The attendance of applicants at panel has increased the time for each approval to 50 minutes to allow the panel to determine the questions and the chair to meet with the applicants before and after the discussions and recommendations. However panel members are also positive about the attendance of applicants and feel this contributes to the decision making process.
- 3.12 The amount of pre reading for panel members has also increased with the introduction of new paperwork e.g. a child permanence report can be up to 100 pages long. The average number of agenda items has been 11 covering acceptance of children for adoption, approving adopters and agreeing matches.
- 3.13 Of the 84 children presented to the panels between April 2005 and March 2006, 67 were requiring adoptive placements by the end of court proceedings. 66 children were matched with families, an increase of 3 from the previous year. 25 of these were babies and a further 30 of pre school age. 14 children were placed in sibling groups of 2.
- 3.14 In the same period 56 families were approved to adopt, an increase of 4, with 56 couples and 3 single adopters.

#### **4.0 Recommendations**

- 4.1 The Board is asked to note the information presented in this report and the attached appendices.