
Report of Director of Children's Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: 10th February 2012

**Subject: Half yearly adoption agency Report
November 2011**

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 six months. This report provides an overview of adoption service activity from April 2011 to September 2011, and the outcomes achieved for children by the adoption service.

The Adoption Service has been strengthened in recent years and this has enabled the service to meet the needs of those children requiring an adoptive placement. However, there are indications that further support may be required

The Adoption Service was inspected in in December 2010 and was rated as Good overall with Outstanding for 'Enjoy and Achieve'.

Recommendations

1. That this report is received and noted

1 Purpose of this report

This report details the work of Leeds City Council Adoption Service from April 2011 to September 2011 inclusive. The purpose of the report is to consider the activity of the service in relation to 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 to identify any significant trends within adoption and how Leeds can continue to meet the changing demands within adoption.

2 Background information

- 2.1 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.

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 a six month basis to the Executive Board.

- 2.2 The Adoption service was inspected in December 2010 and was rated as Good overall with Outstanding for 'Enjoy and Achieve'. On the current inspection framework, a further inspection will be expected in December 2013.

3 Main issues

3.1 Strategic and staff changes

Between April and September 2011 there were no changes in the staffing of the adoption service. Within the last two years the adoption service was expanded and re-structured, from two to three teams with the development of a city wide adoption support team. The service has been fully staffed over this period and is working at capacity. However, with the increase in children requiring adoption it is likely that further developments will be required over the next year to address the increasing demands and a full review of the service is underway highlighting the areas of development required. This review will be reported to the Executive Board in the annual adoption report in July 2012.

3.2 Adoption Panel Membership

Leeds operates three established adoption panels with two independent panel chairs. New appointments to the chairs were made over this period of time. Due to an increase in the work coming to the panels additional sittings have been required to meet demand. The introduction of the new regulations in April 2011 has meant some changes to the adoption panel with the introduction of a "central list". This has provided a little more flexibility in ensuring panels are quorate and has enabled the service to operate additional panels to reduce delay for children. However, the frequency and length of panels remains of concern to the service. The whole of the adoption panel process and staffing arrangements are currently under review to

ensure that the service can ensure that children's plans are progressed without delay. Whilst we are able to meet short term demands at present the longer term situation will need to be addressed following the review and implementation plan.

Panel members bring a wealth of experience from a wide diversity of backgrounds and demonstrate considerable skill and commitment in their roles. Panel members have been flexible in being available for additional panels, often at short notice.

3.3 Adoption Panel Activity

3.3.1 Information regarding children with a plan for adoption

Between April and September 2011, 70 children's plans were considered at panel with a plan for adoption (30 female and 40 male). This projects a 36% increase on the last years full year figure of 103 children.

The ethnicity of the children accepted in 2010/11 was as follows:

White UK	62
White and Asian	2
Any other White background	2
Any other mixed background	2
Black Caribbean	1
Any other ethnic group	1

The overall percentage of minority ethnic (BME) children with a plan for adoption (12%) has significantly reduced this half year from an average of 20% in the last 2 years.

3.3.2 Religion

The children's religious needs were -

No specified religion	62
Christian	4
Catholic	2
Muslim	2

This has remained similar to last year but with an increase in the number of children with no specified religion. The service is working with the social work teams to understand this increase.

3.3.3 Care Status

There were 4 babies relinquished between April and September 2011. Permission for an application for a Placement Order was granted for the remaining 66 children.

3.3.4 Age

31 children (44 %) were in the 0-12 months age range compared with 50% in 2009/10. 34 children (48%) were pre school children is a slight increase, and 5 children (7%) over the age of 4 were made subject to an adoption plan.

The percentage reduction of children under 1 coming to the adoption panel with a plan for adoption may be a reflection of the time taken to move children's plans through the courts. This is discussed further in 4.9.

3.3.5 Placement with Siblings

There were 12 children in sibling groups of 2 and there were 9 children in sibling groups of 3 half way through the year. The number of sibling groups remains high compared to previous years particularly for sibling groups of three.

The increase in sibling groups contrasts markedly with the drop in numbers of adopters prepared to consider sibling groups of children in Leeds – from 13 in 2008/09, to 8 in 2009/10 and a slight growth this last year to 10 in 2010/11 and 1 to date this year. This creates the need to access external placements for siblings and therefore further funding has been required in order to place children externally for adoption. This ensures that children do not remain in care and that placements can be found for them in timely manner.

The number of adopters for sibling groups nationally and regionally has also fallen and this is being addressed in the advertising and recruitment material ensuring that prospective adopters keep an open mind with regard to taking on a sibling group.

3.3.6 Disabilities

None of the children accepted for adoption were categorised as children with a learning or physical disability in the 6 months. However an increasing number of children are recognised as having delayed development, attachment difficulties, have family members who are learning disabled or face difficulties resulting from parental substance or alcohol misuse. This is not always easily captured in the statistics and further work will take place to develop knowledge in this area.

3.3.7 Timescales

Only 4 children (5% - compared to 36% in the 2009-10) of children's cases were presented at the panel within the adoption national standard timescales. This is generally due to care proceedings taking longer over the last year to move through the courts. Delay occurs as a result of the lack of availability of Children's Guardians and the availability of expert witnesses and psychologists as well as the need to ensure that all options have been addressed before considering a plan for adoption. This is creating delay for children requiring adoption and may well reflect the slight decrease in babies under 1 coming to the adoption panel with a plan for adoption prior to their first birthday. This is being addressed nationally through the Family Law Review and recent discussions have taken place with the courts in West Yorkshire to work in partnership to address this issue.

3.4 Adopters

3.4.1 Approval of adopters

Between April and September 2011, 19 adoptive households have been presented to panel for approval.

1 application was in respect of foster carer adoption and 3 for specific children. All of the applications were recommended by the panel. 1 application was deferred by the agency decision maker for further work for a period of 6 months.

This overall figure is a slight increase from the previous year at the half year mark but remains low compared to historical figures. Of the 19 prospective adopters approved this year, 16 were married, 1 heterosexual couple cohabiting and 2 were single female adopters.

The approval of adopters remains an issues for the service and the reduction in the approval figures relate to the increasing need for adoption officers to spend time family finding for children as well as being the case holders for relinquished babies.

It is anticipated that the relinquished baby work will move to the Looked After children's teams under the restructure and additional resources have been put into family finding.

Agreement has been given to use sessional workers to undertake adoption assessments to ensure that we do not have any adopters waiting for allocation and consequently improve the numbers of adopters becoming approved. The service is also reviewing the assessment process with a view to ensuring that this is summarised with more emphasis on evidence base and analysis rather than a descriptive approach. This work is also being undertaken on a national basis with colleagues in the field. The issue of the recruitment of adopters is addressed in more depth at 4.4.6.

3.4.2 Ethnicity

17 adopters had White British ethnicity, and 2 were of black or minority ethnicity – this represents 12% and is lower than usual with a general aim for 20%. However, this does reflect the number of BME children with a plan for adoption made this half year.

3.4.3 Age and Number of Children

7 adopters stated a preference for a child under 3 years of age. 6 were approved for children aged 0-5 years. 3 adopters were approved between the age range of 2-4 years. There are no adopters approved for children over 5. This is again a decrease on last years total where there were 2 in total.

Of the 19 families approved to adopt in the half year, 18 wanted one child and 1 couple were willing to take 2 siblings. This is a decrease on previous years and reflects the national picture.

3.4.4 Gender of Children

14 adopters would consider a child of either gender . Interestingly there were 3 families approved for a boy and 1 for a girl. This pattern is different to previous years and it is too early to demonstrate any statistical significance. In previous years there has been a noted preference for girls, this pattern is perhaps more encouraging as there are generally more boys than girls with a plan for adoption.

3.4.5 Adoption Minimum Standards Monitoring

42% of adopters were approved within the prescribed timescales of 8 months from receipt of application to approval. It was hoped that the timescales for adoption in Leeds would improve significantly in this year. However, the increase in family finding activities and the increased regulation about adoption assessments nationally has led to delays in approval in a more timely manner. The service has not had a waiting list for adopters assessments in the last year however this is changing. We are now seeing an increase in prospective adopters applying to the local Authority for consideration and currently staff have to manage a number of tasks with competing demands: managing being case holders for relinquished baby cases, family finding and assessing adopters. As stated above the service is currently reviewing capacity in order to ensure that the progression of assessments and family finding for the children can be effectively and efficiently progressed.

3.4.6 Advertising and marketing

Leeds has a plan for the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption locally and the analysis of information about the children needing adoption is used to inform the recruitment strategy. Recruitment priorities are regularly reviewed and amended according to the needs of the children coming through the system.

Given the smaller number of approvals of carers this year the recruitment strategy for adopters has been reviewed . As most enquiries are received via the website a new website has been commissioned. Further advertising is planned for the coming year to promote adoption with the area and there is an event in February to target lesbian and gay adopters. The service has also commissioned the making of a DVD of adopters speaking to use on the website and to share with prospective adopters at the Information evening. The geographical area has been extended to take up applications from adopters who live within approximately 25- 30 miles of Leeds . An effective advertising strategy in fostering is the use of 'Google' to promote the Leeds website and we will be extending this approach to include the website for adoption.

The adoption service continues to provide monthly information meetings for enquirers in line with National Minimum Standards. Opportunities to register an interest in adoption are offered at the conclusion of each meeting and information meetings have been well attended, on average 30 people per meeting.

The adoption service applies a rigorous and thorough assessment of adopters in order to safeguard and promote children's welfare. We have taken on a small number of qualified and experienced sessional workers to complete assessments. This means that there is no waiting list of adopters waiting to be assessed. All adopters are allocated a worker to ensure that this is undertaken in a timely way as possible with preparation training being provided every month (with the exception of the holiday periods of August and December). Priorities are set to ensure that the service recruits adopters for the types of children needing placements locally. We also consider adopters who offer a specialised resource for harder to place children across the region via the regional adoption consortium. There is a desire nationally to reduce the length of time taken to assess adopters and Leeds is an active member of the national adoption stakeholders group looking at this issue. Whilst this is to be encouraged adoption is a life long commitment and the importance of a good quality assessment and preparation is key in achieving the best outcomes for children.

3.5 Children Matched with Adoptive Families

When a child's plan for adoption has been approved, the adoption service will respond promptly to identify adopters for them. Although we cannot start formally matching children with prospective adopters until a Placement Order has been granted, we consider whether any adopters are likely to be suitable prior to granting of the order to ensure as little delay as possible.

In the first half of this year 54 children were presented at the panel for matching with an adoptive family. Last year the total yearly figure was 57 children. This represents a projected full year increase of 89% in the first half of this year which reflects the increase in children with a plan for adoption from the previous year and the amount of family finding that has been successfully undertaken.

1 match was deferred and not subsequently progressed by the agency.

30 children (56%) were placed with in house adopters.

5 children were placed (9%) with other local authorities within the consortium (1 did not progress); 6 children were placed with other Local Authorities outside the consortium and 3 children were placed with other voluntary adoption agencies outside the consortium making a total of 35% of children were matched with children outside of the region.

Due to the increasing need of access external resources there has been an increase in the budgetary provision for inter-agency placements to ensure that children are not waiting unnecessarily for adoptive placements. Family Finding is essential to progress children's plans and with more children waiting for adoption this provision is currently under review to ensure that we can sustain this important

activity. A segmentation analysis summary has been undertaken to give an overview of the current range of family finding activity.

The cost of an inter agency adoption placement at its maximum is £27,000 for one child. This is cost effective compared to the cost of a child remaining in care with an Independent Fostering agency at a cost of an average of £800 per week.

3.5.1 Ethnicity and Religion

46 children were white British

14% of the children matched were from black and minority ethnic communities.

52 children had no specified religion and 2 children's religion were stated to be Christian. Both children were matched with Christian families.

3.5.2 Age Range

3 of the children matched were babies under the age of 1. A total of 11 of the children matched were aged four years or older, 38 were pre-school children aged 1- 4 years. Out of the children matched 8 were placed in sibling groups of 2.

3.5.3 Disability

None of the children matched were recorded as having a disability (see 4.7 above)

3.5.4 Foster Carer Placements

During the first half of the year there were 2 children matched with their foster carer for adoption.

3.5.5 Adoption Minimum Standards Monitoring

37% were matched within timescale

63% were not matched within timescale.

The timescales on children not matched within timescale has increased from the previous year. This reflects a national picture where adopters available have reduced and the number of young children with a plan for adoption has grown. This means that family finding is taking longer as there is a smaller pool of adopters available.

The need to recruit more adopters and effectively family find for these children is increasingly important to ensure that children are placed in a timely a way as possible. Within the adoption process there are points when delay can occur and we are actively addressing how we can reduce delay at all points in the process and ensuring that the process is effective and efficient.

3.6 Key performance Indicators:

The number of children adopted or becoming subject to Special Guardianship Order during the year as a percentage of the number of children currently looked after for 6 months or longer stood at 8.7 % at the end of October 2011. This is an increase from 6.8 % in 2009/10 and 7.8 % in 2010/11.

With regard to the timeliness of placement for adoption the figure is 70.4%. This is higher than last years figure at 65.4% but lower than the previous year 2009/10 at 88.3%. The timeliness issue is of concern and reductions in delay through the courts as previously stated may assist in ensuring that adoption occurs in a timely manner.

3.7 Adoption Support

We are very fortunate in Leeds to have an established, skilled and experienced adoption support service. This was recognised by Ofsted in the adoption inspection in December 2010.

Schedule II, tracing enquiries and access to adoption records received this year has remained high and a waiting list is in operation due to the demands on this service.

Requests for services and information from Adoption Support from professionals and adoptive parents form another area of growth. This includes support for social workers in making plans for children to be adopted, or assisting colleagues in other organisations who are working with adoptive families, e.g CAMHS service and Adoption Clinic. The growth of the information exchange scheme has put additional pressure on the adoption archivist.

The service has put in place some temporary measures to address the issues raised and longer term solutions have been proposed. These issues were raised in the Ofsted inspection and further staffing is currently under consideration.

4 Corporate Considerations

Consultation and Engagement

None specifically for this report

Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

As in body of the report

Council Policies and City Priorities

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 reduce numbers of Looked after Children.

Resources and Value for Money

None identified in this report

Legal Implications, Access to Information and Call In

This report is subject to Call In.

Risk Management

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, there have been a number of challenges over the first part of this year and the number of children requiring placements is continuing to increase, emphasising the need for an effective and responsive recruitment strategy to meet their diverse needs. The progressing of children's plans through adoption panel is key in ensuring that children do not experience delay. The need to improve the number of adopters coming through is critical and the recruitment activity is concentrating on this in the coming months. There are 45 adopters in assessment at this current time and therefore a real prospect of a higher number of approvals in the next six months.

6 Recommendations

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

7 Background documents

Ofsted inspection of Adoption Services in Leeds December 2011

Adoption Service Statement of Purpose and Function