

Report of the Director of Children’s Services

Executive Board

Date: 20 June 2012

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 Board of the council receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency every six months. This report provides the annual report of adoption service activity from April 2011 to March 2012, and the outcomes achieved by the service.
2. 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 clear indications that further support will be required due to the increasing numbers of children with a plan for adoption.
3. The adoption service was inspected in December 2010 and was rated as “good” overall with “outstanding” for ‘Enjoy and Achieve’.

Recommendations

4. 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.

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1. This report details the work of Leeds City Council adoption service from April 2011 to March 2012 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.
- 1.2. It is also used 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.
- 2.2. 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.
- 2.3. 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 is expected in December 2013.
- 2.4. The government has reviewed the adoption inspection arrangements and has indicated a focus on early inspection of selected adoption agencies. It is unlikely that Leeds will be an immediate priority for early inspection but this eventuality cannot be ruled out and the service maintains a focus on preparedness for inspection. Martin Narey was appointed by the Prime Minister to undertake a review and prepare a report on adoption nationally. He has undertaken a number of visits to adoption agencies including Leeds. Feedback from Martin Narey was positive, especially in respect of our adoption support service.

3. Main issues

3.1. National picture

- 3.1.1. The work of Leeds City Council as an adoption agency is governed by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (ACA 2002) which was fully implemented in December 2005. A full revision of the statutory adoption guidance was issued by the Department for Education in February 2011. Statutory guidance does not have the full force of statute but should be complied with unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons which justify a variation. There was also a further amendment to adoption regulations that came into force from April 2011 which dealt with the regulations governing the constitution of adoption panels. New adoption national minimum standards were also published at the end of March 2011 and together with the adoption regulations form the basis of the regulatory

framework which governs the conduct of adoption agencies. There has been considerable national focus on adoption activity as the government has raised concerns about the reduction nationally in children in care being placed for adoption and delay in placing children for adoption. The government is also concerned about the need to recruit more adopters and there is a national move to raise the profile of adoption and shorten the assessment process.

- 3.1.2. In reflecting upon the national picture since 1999 the number of children adopted from care has increased substantially but these figures have fallen in the last three years and the numbers of children placed for adoption in England fell from 2,700 to 2,400 in 2011.
- 3.1.3. However the picture is different locally with a sustained increase in adoption activity over the last two years. This reflects improvements in care planning locally and a focus on providing vulnerable young children, who cannot remain within their birth family with permanence at the earliest possible opportunity.
- 3.1.4. In March 2012, as part of its action plan to address delay in the adoption process, *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* the Department for Education announced the introduction of 'Adoption Scorecards'. The scorecards use three key indicators to assess the timeliness of the performance of local authorities in relation adoption:

Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (days);

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);

Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %).

- 3.1.5. Authorities who do not meet the threshold set by the government in relation to these indicators will be subject to an inspection of their adoption services.
- 3.1.6. The scorecards report data for the three years covering March 2009 to March 2011. Leeds currently meets the thresholds for all three headline indicators, is close to the England average for all three, and compares well against statistical neighbours and core cities.

3.2. **Adoption service**

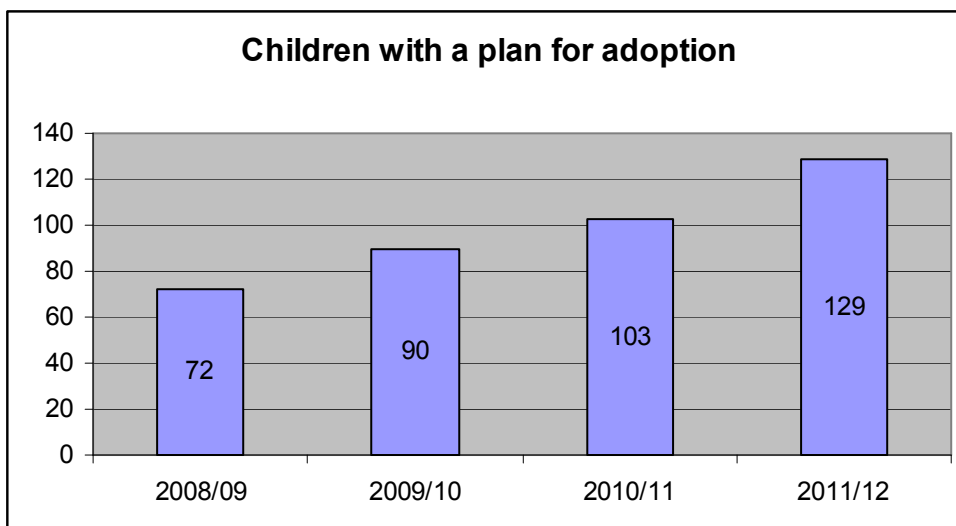
- 3.2.1. The adoption service has retained a very stable and experienced management team. The team managers within the adoption service take lead responsibility for different aspects of the work, namely adoption support services, family finding, and the recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters. The teams are made up of a number of experienced social workers with one non social work qualified adoption support worker who is a teacher. The teams provide a duty help line service for prospective adopters, adoptive families, birth parents, social workers and colleagues who require 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. The team managers also play a key role in providing specialist advice to staff within the fieldwork teams in relation to adoption work and provide specialist advice to the adoption panels.

- 3.2.2. Staff within the service provide consultation on all aspects of practice relating to adoption and permanence to the fieldwork social work teams. The service takes a lead role in developing policy and practice 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 and family finding for children.
- 3.2.3. Leeds City Council continues to be a member of the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium as well as the regional Post Adoption Network. A team manager attends the quarterly consortium meetings as well as representing Leeds within the adoption expert advisory group within the Department for Education. The service is also involved in the national adoption stakeholders group influencing practice in adoption.
- 3.2.4. The adoption service was last inspected by Ofsted in December 2010. The outcome of both of those inspections was very positive with the service being judged overall as 'good' for adoption and 'outstanding' for enjoying and achieving. Although it is not anticipated that the service will be inspected again until 2013 as it is a requirement that adoption services are inspected on a three yearly cycle, the new government agenda and indication of early inspections for identified services may result in an earlier inspection.

3.3. Adoption Agency activity 2010/11

- 3.3.1. Children approved for adoption: Between April 2011 and March 2012, 129 children had a plan for adoption ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. 134 plans were considered by adoption panel with 5 children's plans being deferred for further work. Two of these remain outstanding and will be represented at panel in due course. Of the 129 children with a plan for adoption, there were 61 female and 68 male children. This projects a 25% increase on the last year's full year figure of 103 children.



3.3.2. Age: 53 children (41%) were in the 0-12 months age range compared with 44% in 2010/11. 63 children (48%) were pre school children, which is a slight increase on last year's figures, and 13 children (10%) were over the age of four were made subject to an adoption plan. This is an increase of 3%, indicating increased numbers of plans for older children requiring adoption are being agreed.

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

White UK	107
White and Asian	3
Any other White background	6
Any other mixed background	3
Black Caribbean	2
Any other ethnic group	1
White/Black Caribbean	4
White/Black African	2
White/Kurdish	1

3.3.3. The overall percentage of minority ethnic (BME) children with a plan for adoption (18%) remains slightly lower than the 20% of the last two years.

3.4. **Placement with siblings**

3.4.1. The potential for siblings to be placed together is always actively considered. Social workers undertake an assessment of the sibling relationship which is informed by views of key people involved with the children to determine the care plan for siblings within adoptive placements.

3.4.2. There were 14 children in sibling groups of two and there were 15 children in sibling groups of three this last 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 a drop in numbers of adopters prepared to consider sibling groups of children.

3.5. **Disabilities**

3.5.1. None of the children accepted for adoption were categorised as children with a learning or physical disability. However an increasing number of children are recognised as having delayed development; attachment difficulties; 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.

3.6. **Children with a plan currently waiting**

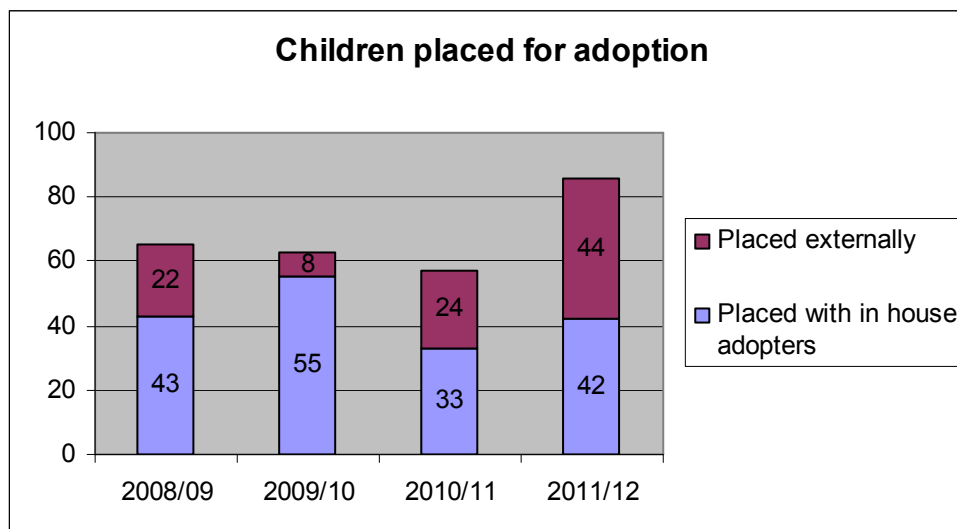
3.6.1. Currently, there are 114 children with plans for adoption in Leeds, 53 have potential matches identified and 17 of these have matching panels booked. Of the remaining 61 still requiring adoption, Placement Orders have not yet been granted for 13 of these. It is not possible to advertise these latter children or expedite placement plans until a Placement Order has been made. From the children waiting for a placement there 37 are boys and 24 are girls. 27% are children from BME backgrounds.

3.6.2. Nine children have been waiting for more than a year for adoption, compared to 10 when this exercise was undertaken six months ago.

- 3.6.3. 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.
- 3.6.4. The number of children referred to the national adoption register and regional consortium has increased, and the number of adopters has decreased significantly. In January 2010 for example, 990 adoptive families were on the national adoption register and 1150 children were referred for placement. Currently, there are 352 adopters available and 2167 children have been referred. In July 2010, 84 adopters were available through the regional consortium and 298 children were referred for placement. Currently, there are 49 families available and 409 children referred.
- 3.6.5. It has to be acknowledged that the increasing volume of children with plans for adoption is putting considerable strain on all parts of the system including the capacity of the adoption service to allocate a family finder in a timely way, the pressures on panel availability and the need to convene additional panels and the need to recruit more adopters. There has also been considerable pressure on the adoption medical advisor as there is a requirement that all children have a pre adoption medical prior to their plan for adoption being considered at panel. The medical advisor also meets with prospective adopters prior to panel when a match is being considered to provide adopters with the opportunity to discuss any aspect of the child's development or medical history.

3.7. Profile of children placed for adoption

- 3.7.1. When a child's plan for adoption has been approved, the adoption service will respond promptly to identify adopters for them. Although the process cannot start formally matching children with prospective adopters until a Placement Order has been granted, consideration is given to whether any adopters are likely to be suitable prior to the granting of the order to ensure as little delay as possible. Adoption officers from within the adoption teams are allocated to take the lead role in expediting the family finding process. It is the responsibility of the social worker for the child to ensure that there is early notification to the adoption team of children with a potential plan for adoption. This early notification helps inform the recruitment activity and enables early discussion about the detail of the plan for the child and their background information and matching needs. It is to the team's credit that they have managed to successfully place an increasing number of children with adoptive families during 2011/12 but the increasing volume of family finding work has impacted on the capacity to allocate a family finding social worker to all children with a plan for adoption prior to Placement Order.
- 3.7.2. Between April 2011 and March 2012, 86 children were presented at the panel for matching with an adoptive family. The previous year 2010/11 the annual figure was 57 children. This represents a full year increase of 50% on the previous year's matches to the adoption panel. This figure 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. 17% of the children matched were from black and minority ethnic communities.



	Number of Children
Match was deferred and not subsequently progressed by the agency	1
(49%) Placed with in house adopters	42
Placed with other local authorities within the consortium	5
Placed with VAA in the consortium (9%)	3
Placed with other Local Authorities outside the consortium (17%)	15
Placed with other voluntary adoption agencies outside the consortium	22
A total of 43% of children were matched with children outside of the region	

3.7.3. Family finding tends to take longer for older children, children that are part of a sibling group or children with significant complex needs often as a result of their history of experience of neglect or trauma. Considerable work is undertaken when considering a potential match to ensure the prospective family have full information about the child and their background, have met with key people involved with the child including carers, teachers and therapists prior to any decision being made to proceed to take the match to panel. The search for prospective adopters may have to extend 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 are referred to the child specific model through families that last for a sustained and targeted campaign to find a family in order for a suitable match can be identified.

3.7.4. There are also a small number of children who because of their age and profile may either have a dual plan for adoption and permanent fostering or may have

their plan for adoption changed to permanent fostering as the potential for achieving permanence through fostering is greater.

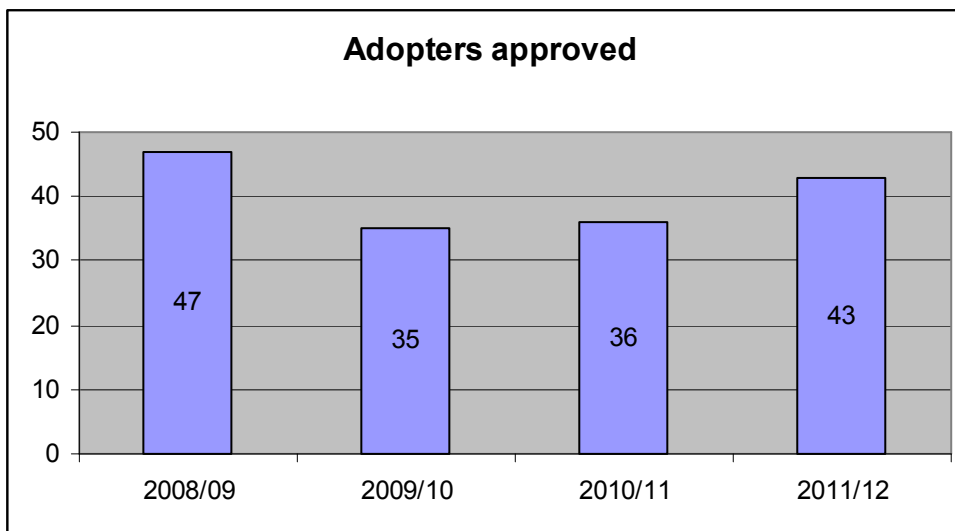
3.7.5. Due to the increasing need to access external resources there has been an increase in the budgetary provision for inter-agency placements to ensure that children are not waiting unnecessarily for adoptive placements. The cost of an inter agency adoption placement at its maximum is £27,000 for one child. This is cost effective compared to the cost of a child remaining in care as an Independent Fostering Agency costs the Authority an average of £800 per week. Almost half of the children placed for adoption are outside of the Yorkshire region, which places additional demands on the service. 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. In the last year there has been one adoption disruption. It is essential lessons are learnt from any disruptions. Leeds is taking part in a national study around adoption disruptions to help inform practice in this area.

3.8. Age range and siblings

3	Children matched were babies under the age of 1
66	Pre-school children aged 1- 4 years
22	Children matched were aged between 4 and 7 years of age
18	Children matched were placed in sibling groups of 2 and there was one sibling group of three matched in the year
1	Child was recorded as having a disability
5	Children were matched with their foster carers for adoption

3.9. Key performance indicators on adoption

- 3.9.1. The number of children adopted or becoming subject to Special Guardianship Order (SGO) during the year as a percentage of the number of children currently looked after for six months or longer stood at 8.2 % at the end of March 2012. This is an increase from 6.8 % in 2009/10 and 7.8 % in 2010/11. 104 children were either adopted or made subject of an SGO in the financial year 2011-12. The number of children looked after for six months or more on 31/3/12 was 1263.
- 3.9.2. The percentage of children placed for adoption within 12 months has increased this year to 76.6% from 65.3% the previous year.
- 3.9.3. 76.6% of children were placed for adoption within 12 months of a plan for adoption, this is higher that the previous year when percentage at 65.4%, but lower that the previous year 2009/10 at 88.3%.



3.9.4. The DfE have produced a range of comparative adoption statistics which have been used to consider performance activity in Leeds including recently introduced adoption scorecards for agencies to monitor activity. The scorecard is attached at appendix A for the year end information.

3.10. Profile of adopters

3.10.1. Between April 2011 and March 2012, 43 adoptive households were approved. Four applications were in respect of foster carer adoptions. This overall figure is an increase from the previous year but remains a challenge to increase.

3.10.2. 13 adopters were approved for children aged 0-5 years an increase of six compared to the previous year; however no adopters were approved for children over five years old compared to two the previous year.

3.10.3. Of the 43 families approved to adopt in the half year, 40 wanted one child and three households were willing to take up to two siblings. This is a decrease on previous years and reflects the national picture of a decreasing number of adopters willing to consider adoption of sibling groups. This remains a challenge for the service.

3.10.4. Ethnicity

White British ethnicity	39
Other white background	2
Black or minority ethnicity	2

3.10.5. This represents 10% BME adopters and is lower than our aspiration to recruit 20% BME adopters. This figure does not reflect the number of BME children with a plan for adoption made this last year and further consideration needs to be given to the specific recruitment of BME adopters.

3.10.6. There are 26 adoptive households approved at the present time. 22 are on hold awaiting match; one is on hold for personal reasons and three households to be matched.

- 3.10.7. There were 13 assessments discontinued for various reasons in the year due to personal circumstances of adopters and adopters withdrawing from the process. There were two assessments within discontinued by the service and one of these was presented to panel with a brief report.
- 3.10.8. One of the team managers takes a lead role in terms of recruitment and assessment and has oversight of the recruitment and preparation processes for prospective adopters. The approval of adopters remains an issue 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.
- 3.10.9. 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 more streamlined paperwork with an emphasis on evidence base and analysis rather than a descriptive approach. We are also part of a national group, working with colleagues in the field to undertake this work.

3.11. **Step parent adoptions**

- 3.11.1. In total, 23 applications to adopt were received. From those received, five were subsequently withdrawn leaving a total of 18 applications for the year. This work is undertaken by children's social workers in the area teams. This work is currently under review to ensure that specialist support and advice is available to these highly complex cases.

3.12. **National adoption standards timescales**

- 3.12.1. The adoption agency is required to monitor its performance against a range of timescales in respect of the decision to place a child for adoption, assessing and approving prospective adopters and the proposal to place a child with particular adopters.
- 3.12.2. Only three children (2% - compared to 36% in the 2009-10) of children's cases were presented at the panel within two months of the referral to the adoption section. 40 % of children's plans come to panel between three and six months of a child being referred to adoption and 30% between six and nine months. A further 10% takes longer than 10 months. The delay in coming to panel for children often reflects the fact that adoption is part of a parallel planning process and could not be presented to panel until all the assessments had been reported within care proceedings and alternatives to adoption had been clearly ruled out. However, in order to address this issue it is now agreed that a full review does not have to be convened to consider the plan following submission of all the expert reports and agreement has been given for the team to be consulted and the care plan for adoption recorded with the expectation that the plan for adoption should be considered by Panel within two months. Compliance with this new arrangement is now operational and will be recorded clearly on panel minutes in line with new expectations within the Adoption Minimum Standards.

- 3.12.3. Of the 86 children matched this last year it is positive that 31% were matched within the national timescales of six months or less of the plan for adoption being approved at panel. 39% were matched within 12 months. As discussed previously child specific factors also impact on our ability to identify appropriate adopters and these may include: the age of the child: a plan to place as part of a sibling group or particular complexities relating to the child's special needs. It is also of note that for some children there can be delay between the plan for adoption being agreed at panel and the conclusion of care proceedings and granting of a Placement Order at final hearing.
- 3.12.4. Adopter recruitment and effective family finding is a service priority. 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. 41% of adopters were approved within the prescribed timescales of eight months from the start of the assessment to approval. The delay in progressing these assessments completed outside the timescales have been scrutinised and the majority of delays resulted from specific life events within the prospective adopter household: decisions being made to halt the assessment for a period; or the assessments taking longer to ensure that the applicants were fully prepared for the adoption task. In a few situations there were delays in allocation of the assessment which reflected the need to prioritise other tasks or due to staff sickness. The continued high volume of children's cases needing to come to panel during the year has also resulted in very busy panels and the need to constantly prioritise items for panel. As a consequence decisions have had to be made at times to delay bringing an assessment of a new adopter to panel to enable a plan for a child or a match with prospective adopters to take priority. In view of this steps have been taken to develop a fourth adoption panel to further minimise delays and this will be fully operational from September 2012, although in the meantime additional panels have been undertaken.
- 3.12.5. The timescales for Agency Decision Making following panel were adhered to in 95% of cases.

3.13. **The Adoption Consortium**

- 3.13.1. The Yorkshire and Humberside Adoption Consortium brings together all local authorities and voluntary agencies to maximise placement choice for children and to minimise delay in family finding by sharing prospective adopters. There is nil cost to the local authority if the number of placements made equals the number received. The cost thereafter is at 2/3rds of the standard local authority inter agency fee of £14,452 per placement. This contrasts with the cost of placements with a voluntary adoption agency which for 2011 were £23,179. The quarterly meetings attended by the team manager are used to clarify and develop policy and practice issues across the consortium.

3.14. **Recruitment and preparation**

- 3.14.1. The adoption service received 115 registration of interest enquiries to the service throughout the year. The 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.

Information meetings have been well attended, on average 30 people per meeting. Leeds also held a targeted event to attract potential adopters from the lesbian and gay communities. There are always a range of people making initial enquiries to the service; some people are at the very early stage of their thinking about adoption and other people are much further on and clear about their wish to parent through adoption and ready to proceed with the next stage. Hence there are high numbers of enquiries and a considerable drop of rate in relation to people then progressing on to making an application. It is very important that potential applicants have time to consider all the issues thoroughly and enabled to proceed at a pace which is right for them.

- 3.14.2. A new adoption and fostering website has been developed. As most applicants research information on line before making direct contact with an agency. This has been given a council wide priority. This growth will impact upon the capacity within the service and there are arrangements underway to address this. The target for approval of adopters over the next year is 60 adoptive households.
- 3.14.3. 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.
- 3.14.4. 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 ensuring that there is no waiting list of adopters waiting to be assessed. 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 speed of the assessment should not override the need for a quality assessment and preparation of the adopters.

3.15. Inter country adoption

- 3.15.1. During 2011/12, the service have completed two initial visits to prospective adopters considering adopting from overseas. There have no applications and no assessments undertaken this year although the service has provided post placement reports for children placed from India in the area.

3.16. Adoption support services

- 3.16.1. Since the implementation of the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 there has been a legal duty on the local authority to provide adoption support services to adoptive families, adopted children and birth families. This continues to remain an area of considerable growth and pressure within the service. There is a requirement within the regulations to have an adoption support service advisor which in Leeds is the deputy director and delegated to the adoption support team manager who maintains oversight of the range of adoption support services provided to all parties in the adoption process. All staff within the adoption teams are involved in some way with adoption support work as the assessment teams

support adoptive families up to the end on their first year post order. We are very fortunate in Leeds to have an established, skilled and experienced post adoption support service. This was recognised by Ofsted in the adoption inspection in December 2010 and also commented on positively by Martin Narey in his recent visit to Leeds.

- 3.16.2. The nature of support requested varies considerably but frequently includes requests for advice on strategies for managing behaviour; help and advice for children in school where their attachment difficulties may be making it hard for them to settle and learn and assistance with talking to children about adoption and making sense of their sometimes very troubled backgrounds. The service also has responsibility for providing an assessment of support needs to families living in Leeds whose children were placed by a different Agency after the first three years post Adoption Order.
- 3.16.3. 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 adoption clinic. The growth of the information exchange scheme has put additional pressure on the adoption archivist. The scheme started in 1993 with 25 post adoption contact exchanges and in the past year the archivist has overseen over 600 exchanges, with double that number being possible if all contacts worked reliably. Additionally, the archivist has 234 other requests for service. Many of these are retrieving records and arranging file viewing for professionals who have access to these approved. The archivist deals with a huge number of phone queries from adopters, birth parents and professionals relating to contact arrangements and records. Additionally, the safe keeping of files (adoption records have to be kept safe, retrievable and useable for 100 years) is overseen by the archivist who arranges for these to be scanned and archived.

3.17. **Support groups**

- 3.17.1. As the adoption support team is relatively small for a city the size of Leeds, there is an emphasis on providing a variety of groups to meet the majority of adoption support needs. There are currently two monthly evening support groups for adoptive parents. One is run by two adoption support staff and is for adopters with children of all ages. The other is run by the adoption support team manager in conjunction with an adult psychotherapist colleague from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. This is a specialist group designed for adopters of adolescents as many of these young adopted people bring additional challenges for their parents. Additionally, there are two monthly soft play parent and child support groups in the east and west of the city. These are especially useful in helping to identify families who may be having difficulties with becoming a new family unit. Some of these families may be invited to attend a weekly specialist group for six sessions, based on Theraplay techniques (a way of enhancing attachment and bonding through play based and sensory activities) The service also runs a weekly social group for adopted children aged between 12 – 15 years, in conjunction with Barnardo's Futures. This is invaluable in helping them to understand that although they are a minority group, they are enabled to meet other youngsters and talk about issues in a supportive environment.

3.17.2. A newsletter is produced twice yearly and this lists all the groups and development occurring in Leeds adoption support services for adoptive parents and for colleagues information.

3.18. Training

3.18.1. Adoption support staff provide a fourth day of training for newly approved adoptive parents who are awaiting a placement of a child on preparing for introductions and attachment and bonding as well as contact arrangements. Training workshops for existing adoptive parents are usually scheduled to take place prior to support groups to enable ease of access for adopters and includes topics such as “Telling Difficult Information”, “Life Story work” and “Extreme Sibling Rivalry”. A workshop on Related by Adoption is delivered to extended family members of adoptive parents to help them understand some of the issues faced by adoptive parents. Training is currently being prepared for social workers and legal section on “Managing Contemporary Contact Arrangements Post Adoption”. Adoption support staff also provide a great deal of training and support to nurseries and school where the impact of early developmental trauma is a barrier to learning and social development for adopted children.

3.18.2. The adoption service also works in partnership with After Adoption and provides safe base training for all adopters. This is a specialist four day training course once children have been placed and is a parenting programme specifically developed for adoptive parenting. The evaluation of the training is extremely positive and is part of a three year programme of support.

3.19. Post adoption contact

3.19.1. Almost all children now being placed for adoption retain some form of contact with their birth families and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 emphasises the importance of considering contact and supporting such arrangements where appropriate. The team manages around 1000 ‘letterbox’ contacts where there is an exchange of letters or photos between the adoptive family and the birth family. Additionally there are a growing 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). 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 as still being an ongoing protection worry for their adoptive parents. It is very hard to intervene when a young person has made unregulated contact with birth family members and this is very hard for adoptive parents to manage.

3.19.2. The service has been promoting the consideration of “Vetos” for young adopted people by writing to adopters in the year that their child is seventeen. Adopters are encouraged to find the right moment to discuss this facility, which was introduced by the Adoption and Children Act in 2002, with their child. This enables young people to consider in advance whether there are any circumstances in which they would not want to consider approaches from all or some members of their birth

family. When they are eighteen they can register a veto once they have received adoption support advice about the impact of this. Several young people and their adoptive parents have needed to receive support about this and it is anticipated that this will be a growing area of work in the next few years.

3.20. Work with birth families of adopted adult

3.20.1. After Adoption Yorkshire provide a support service to birth parents. This is an independent comprehensive service and the male birth parent support worker has worked extremely well with the adoption support service in promoting the take up of services for birth parents. Many issues about contact have been able to be resolved as well as advice about letter writing and other forms of support. A birth parent group is currently being run and this will inform the need for other services. The worker is keen to join in our training initiatives and joint training is being planned for both social worker and legal staff.

3.21. Birth records counselling

3.21.1. The local authority has a legal responsibility to provide a birth records counselling service. The service has continued to receive regular requests for birth records counselling and there is currently a short waiting list. There has been an increase in the number of enquiries from younger adopted people, whose histories can be more complex, coming as many do from a background of abuse and neglect. These are often referred to After Adoption Yorkshire, as independence from the local authority can be a helpful factor in understanding the events prior to adoption.

3.21.2. We regularly consult with service users and the evaluation forms have been very positive with all saying that they would seek support again and would recommend the service to others. We also invite adopter contributions for the newsletter and publish these whenever possible. Our latest consultation in March 2012 was on the provision of letterbox and direct contact services for adopters and responses are still being received and evaluated.

3.22. Adoption allowances

3.22.1. Expenditure on adoption allowances during 2011/12 was £623,652 for 111 children and young people. There were also a number of one off payments made for example towards the costs of introductions and settling in expenses. There are a number of very complex adoptive placements which require considerable ongoing support including at times funding of therapeutic services. The adoption team gives robust consideration to a request for an adoption allowance ensuring that all other options such as state benefits, including disability living allowance is considered, and a financial assessment of the adopter's means is undertaken before agreement is given to an ongoing allowance. In line with the Adoption Support Regulations one off lump sum payments are often considered where appropriate to provide support to an adoptive family rather than an ongoing allowance. Allowances are only agreed in cases where the child/ren would be unlikely to be adopted without it and the monthly finance review panel ensures that the process for considering these cases is robust.

3.23. Adoption panel

- 3.23.1. It is the responsibility of the service to ensure the effective running of the panels. The team managers undertake the role of agency advisors at the panels and undertake a significant role in providing consultation and advice to social workers on aspects of adoption and permanence planning and play a quality assurance role in terms of the oversight of the papers being presented to panel. Panel makes a recommendation about the cases that are presented at panel and the final decision is made by the Agency Decision Makers who are the deputy director for safeguarding and specialist services and the head of children's social work service.
- 3.23.2. There has been a sustained significant increase in the workload of panel over the last year which reflects the upturn in adoption activity in Leeds. 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 and the service is operating five panels a month and is in the process of constituting a fourth formal panel to commence in September 2012. 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 to ensure panels are quorate and has enabled the service to operate additional panels to reduce delay for children. However, the frequency and length and management of the panels remains of concern to the service. The management of the panel arrangements have recently been reviewed to ensure that the service can ensure that children's plans are progressed without delay.
- 3.23.3. 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 shown great commitment in being available for additional panels, often at short notice. We have appointed to two new Independent Chairs to the panel during the year. They provide a panel chairs report to the agency on an annual basis. This is appended to the report.

3.24. Complaints and allegations

- 3.24.1. There were three 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. There was one allegation regarding an adoptive parent during this year and the child protection procedures were followed to ensure that children were safeguarded appropriately.

3.25. Strategic issues and forward plans

- 3.25.1. The adoption service has continued to be affected by the significant rise of younger children in care population since 2009. The impact has been shown in the sustained increase particularly in the numbers of children with plans for adoption.
- 3.25.2. At times it has been difficult to manage the many competing priorities and to allocate family finding work within the team and ensure that this work is given

priority alongside the need to ensure recruitment activity is maintained. A commitment has been made to ensure minimal delay in expediting plans for adoption and family finding and matching is recognised as a complex and specialist area of work. Children need to be prepared carefully for a move and foster carers play a very important role in supporting children with these transitions. Staff within the team advise social work staff on all aspects of adoption planning and provide training to social workers about adoption issues.

- 3.25.3. It is a significant achievement that the service has continued to work to maximise the opportunity for children with plans for adoption to be placed in a timely way with a further increase in the number of children matched with adopters in 2011/12.
- 3.25.4. The adoption panel has also continued to operate very effectively and flexibly with a clear prioritisation of the agenda. The team has maintained a commitment to organise additional panels where required in order to endeavour to keep pace with the volume of work and to ensure that the panel processes do not result in any delay in progressing plans for children as appropriate. The challenge over the next year is to ensure that the panel remains effectively managed to ensure that children are placed in as timely a way as possible this will be a key requirement under the new adoption inspection framework.
- 3.25.5. Life story work is a vital area for all adopted children. This work provides children with an understandable way of talking about themselves and their life history and this capacity is clearly associated with better functioning and better outcomes in adult life in part because it assists in resolving trauma. The therapeutic team have worked well with social workers in developing and improving this area of work. This will continue as a priority as the new adoption inspection framework addresses this area and the issue of direct work with children specifically.
- 3.25.6. The approval of adopters remains an issue for the service with competing demands for adoption officers to spend time family finding for children.
- 3.25.7. 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.

4. Corporate considerations

4.1. Consultation and engagement

4.1.1. None specifically for this report.

4.2. Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

4.2.1. As in body of the report.

4.3. Council policies and city priorities

- 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.

4.4. Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1. None identified in this report.

4.5. Legal and resources implications

- 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. In conclusion, there have been a number of challenges over the year and the number of children requiring adoption is continuing to increase, emphasising the need for an effective and responsive recruitment strategy to meet their diverse needs. Efficient progression of children's plans through adoption panel is key to ensuring that children do not experience delay. The need to improve the number of adopters recruited and approved is critical and the recruitment activity is concentrating on this in the coming year.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1. 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 documentsⁱ

- 7.1 The Adoption Service Statement of Purpose and Function is attached to this report as an appendix.

- § Ofsted inspection of adoption services in Leeds December 2010

- § Adoption scorecard

- § Adoption panel report

ⁱ The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.