

**Report of Director of Children’s Services**

**Report to Executive Board**

**Date: 19<sup>th</sup> June 2013**

**Subject: Adoption Agency Annual report**

Appendix B



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 6 months. The half yearly report is provided to the Corporate Carers group whereas the annual report is presented to the Executive Board. This report provides the annual report of adoption service activity from April 2012 to March 2013, and the outcomes achieved by the service.

Adoption has been the subject of significant national political and media attention over the last year and children requiring adoption has increased nationally and this is reflected in Leeds. The Adoption Reform Agenda set by the government is being addressed in Leeds and whilst progress is being made the service is looking at further developments to continue to meet children’s needs for adoption. The Adoption Service was inspected in December 2010 and was rated as Good overall with Outstanding for ‘Enjoy and Achieve’.

**Recommendations**

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.

## **1 Purpose of this report**

This report details the work of Leeds City Council Adoption Service from April 2012 to March 2013 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. 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 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 an annual basis to the Executive Board.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 The Adoption Service was inspected in December 2010 and was rated as Good overall with Outstanding for 'Enjoy and Achieve'. The new single inspection regime of looked after children and safeguarding services for children will include the adoption service; due to commence in September 2013.

## **3 Main issues**

### **3.1 National Picture**

- 3.1.1 The successful adoption of children looked after by local authorities has been the subject of significant national political and media attention over the last eighteen months. The Secretary of State for Education has expressed dissatisfaction with the numbers of children who are adopted, and the time it takes for an adoptive family to be found once the decision has been made that a child should be adopted. The publication 'Further Action on Adoption' (DfE, Feb 2013) argues that the local responsibility for the recruitment and approval of adopters has led to a fragmented system that does not respond quickly to such shortfalls.
- 3.1.2 The number of children approved by courts for adoption has increased significantly in each of the last two years and nationally it is estimated that some 4,200 children were waiting to move in with a family at 31 March 2012. The supply of approved adopters has not kept pace with this demand, particularly for adopters for older children, sibling groups and those with disabilities or other complex needs. The DfE estimates an additional 500-600 adopters need to be recruited and approved per annum, in order to address the estimated national shortfall of 2,000 - 3,000 adopters (as at 31 March 2012).

- 3.1.3 In the current context of increasing financial pressures, there is an urgent need nationally to increase the number of adopters and the adoption service in Leeds has taken action to tackle this challenge effectively. The service is committed to ensure the best outcomes for looked after children, and aims to drive forward progress locally.
- 3.1.4 There is a complex set of interdependencies to understand and determine how far this is a 'supply side' issue (too few adopters of any kind) or how far it is a question of 'demand' relating to the specific needs of children waiting and the lack of suitable adopters to meet those needs and further work is being undertaken on a national level to fully understand this.
- 3.1.5 In order to address the issues the government has earmarked the Adoption Reform Grant, specifically for Local Authorities to address the issues in tackling delay for children. In Leeds the service is looking at a number of ways to address the issue locally over the next year.
- 3.1.6 In Leeds there has been a sustained increase in adoption activity which in part reflects the previous increased numbers of young children in the care system in Leeds. Supporting children to achieve permanence has played an important role in safely and appropriately redressing the number of looked after children. There were 1,474 children in care at the end of March 2012. This has reduced to 1377 at the end of March 2013.

## **3.2 Adoption Service**

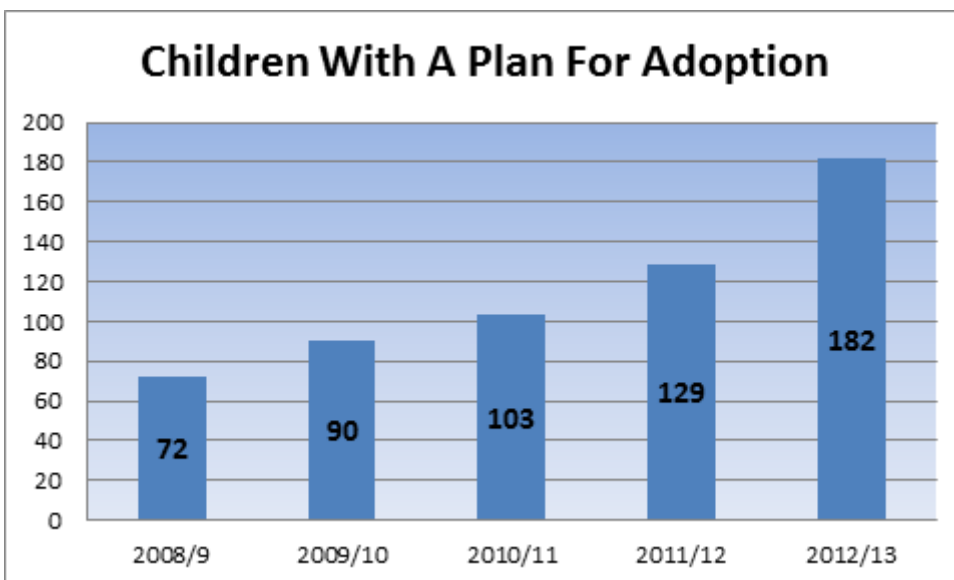
- 3.2.1 The Adoption Service continues to retain a stable and experienced management team. There has been the addition of two more adoption workers this year to address the family finding for very young children. As a consequence of the additional staffing, the service has converted one adoption officer post to a team manager post to ensure the effective supervision of staff and enabling managers to take on additional sessional staff to complete assessment work. There are now four team managers who take lead responsibility for different aspects of the work, namely adoption support, family finding, the recruitment and advertising, plus the assessment and training of prospective adopters.
- 3.2.2 The adoption service is a member of the Yorkshire and Humber Adoption Consortium as well as the regional Post Adoption Network. The consortium is driving ahead with developments in providing a regional approach to the recruitment of adopters and this work will be further developed in 2013/14. One of the Managers represents Leeds within the expert advisory group within the Department of Education on adoption and aims to ensure that the service has a voice in influencing national policy and practice in adoption.
- 3.2.3 The team managers 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. They also have an important responsibility in inter agency adoptions from outside the region, ensuring that robust arrangements are in place for supporting children and families and that introductions are planned to meet the needs of the child.

- 3.2.4 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 adoption 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.
- 3.2.5 Staff within the service provide consultation on all aspects of practice relating to adoption and permanence to the fieldwork social work teams. The service take 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 and in relation to adoption and permanence planning issues, family finding and issues arising post adoption.

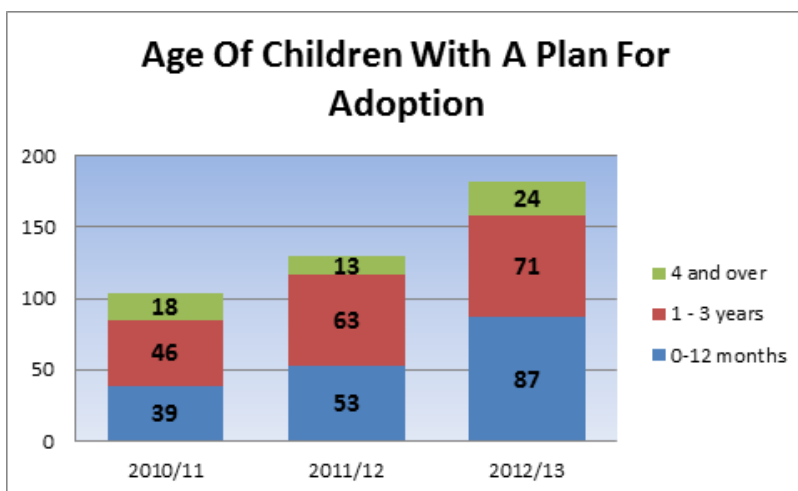
### 3.3 Adoption Agency Activity 2010/11

#### 3.3.1 Profile of Children approved in the year with a plan of adoption

Between April 2012 and March 2013, 182 children had a plan for adoption ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. Of the 182 children with a plan for adoption, there were 91 female and 91 male children. In total, this projects a 45% increase on the last year’s full year figure of 129.



### 3.3.2 Age profile



The number of children and the age profile presents challenges for the service. The rise in very young children means that traditional adopters have more choice of young children when considering a match, therefore trying to attract adopters for older children and sibling groups remains a challenge and a priority for the service. However, the complexities of some of the young children often bring uncertainties regarding future development and therefore attracting adopters to take on young children with complexities such as foetal alcohol syndrome or with symptoms following drug withdrawal, often mean that these children wait longer in achieving an adoptive placement.

### 3.3.4 Ethnicity

142 children are White UK

40 children were from Black and Minority ethnic groups (BME)

21% children are from BME groups .This is a slight increase on the last 3 years with a background representation from Eastern Europe, plus Black and Asian children, requiring further work on reflecting a more diverse range of adopters.

## 3.4 Placement with Siblings

3.4.1 As a general principle, siblings will be placed together, however, due to the individual needs of children this cannot always be achieved.

3.4.2 The numbers of children requiring adoption in sibling groups has more than doubled this year from 26 children last year in total.

This year there are:

42 children in sibling groups of 2

6 children in sibling groups of 3

8 children in sibling groups of 4

3.4.3 However, when considered as an overall percentage of children whose plan is adoption there has been a 10% increase this year of sibling groups requiring adoption. The increase in sibling groups is reflected nationally and contrasts markedly with the drop in numbers nationally, of adopters prepared to consider sibling groups of children. This year the numbers of adopters considering sibling groups has increased in Leeds which is to be welcomed and is addressed later in the report.

### **3.5 Children with an adoption plan, currently waiting**

3.5.1 At the present time there are 154 Leeds children with a plan for adoption not currently placed requiring adopters. This is a 35% increase given the same point in time last year.

3.5.2 97 of these are single children aged 0-2yrs and this is an increase from 68 in January. This age range has seen the biggest rise in numbers over the last 12 months which is reflected in the higher number of young children entering care last year reflecting children's plans moving through care proceedings.

3.5.3 41 children have potential "matches" identified and 24 of these have a date booked at adoption panel for the match. There are 11 children where their foster carers have expressed an interest in adopting them which is actively being pursued.

3.5.4 From the children waiting for a placement there are more boys than girls and 27% are children from BME backgrounds. Out of these children, 9 children have been waiting for more than a year for adoption. 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. Delays in placing more complex children will affect the performance of the scorecard and clear monitoring and tracking systems need to be in place to understand the range of family finding activity going on for these children.

3.5.5 In 2011/12 there were 2736 children referred to the Adoption Register, from England & Wales and 795 adopters, compared with 1971 children & 878 adopters in 2010/11. There are currently 472 children referred to the Regional Consortium, and 43 available adopters. In comparison, the figures in July 2010 were 298 children and 84 adopters.

3.5.6 The team have managed to successfully place an increasing number of children with adoptive families during 2012/13. This rise is due to an increase in the capacity in the service, good networks established with voluntary and other Local Authority adoption services; plus the use of the child specific model for locating families for harder to place children with complex needs.

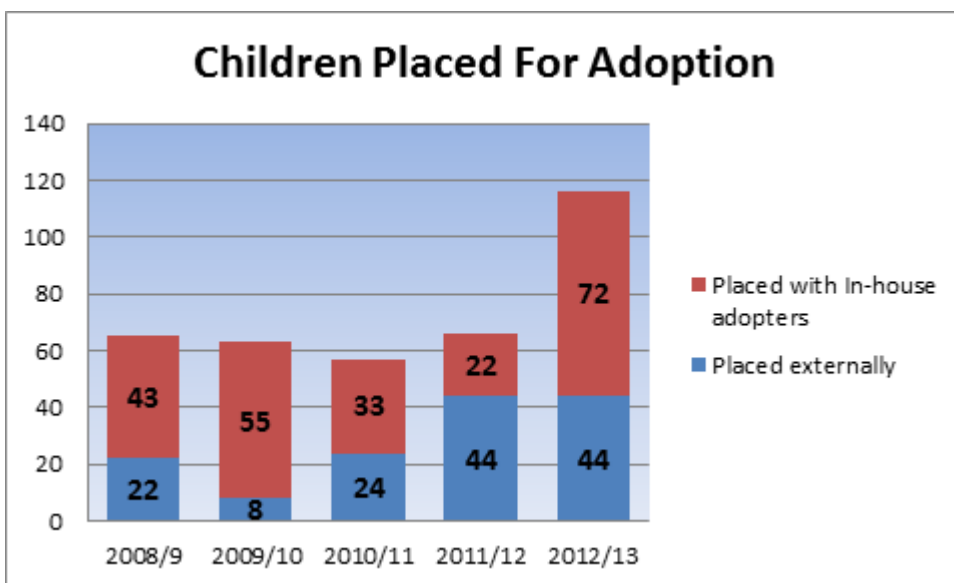
3.5.7 Considerable work is undertaken when considering a potential match to ensure the prospective family have full information about the child and their background, have met with key people involved with the child including carers, teachers, therapists prior to any decision being made to proceed to take the match to panel. The search

for prospective adopters regularly extends 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 children 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. This work is often time consuming and social workers spend time travelling across the country to locate potential families once links have been made.

- 3.5.8 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 becomes more achievable and realistic.
- 3.5.9 However, in order to continue meeting the needs of increased numbers of children further work on family finding for very young children should not be overlooked as timeliness in finding placements for very young children is key in achieving good outcomes for them. As a result, additional marketing, administrative and social work resource is in the process of being sought to move forward on recruiting families for younger children more locally.

### 3.6 Children matched in the year for adoption

- 3.6.1 Between April 2011 and March 2012, 116 children were matched with families at adoption panels. This is a 35% increase upon last year's figures.
- 3.6.2 16% of the children matched were from black and minority ethnic communities. These children often take longer to place for adoption, and we seek adoptive families who are able to meet their ethnic and cultural needs.



9 of these children were matched through consortium Local Authorities

7 of these children were matched through Voluntary Adoption Agencies within the consortium

10 of these children we matched with outside consortium Local Authorities

18 of these children were through outside consortium Voluntary Adoption Agencies

- 3.6.3 The budget expenditure on inter agency adoptions in 2012/13 was £968k. This is a significant increase on previous years. The costs consist of 2/3rds of the bill paid on placement and 1/3 paid on the final adoption order, so the large figure accounts for a combined number of children placed for adoption across the last two years. However, providing children with permanence supports better outcomes and is more cost effective over time.
- 3.6.4 Developments within the regional consortium over the next year aim to see an increase in the number of children being placed within the region, which will reduce the current high number of children placed outside the region.
- 3.6.5 More children this year have been placed within the surrounding area of Leeds which is encouraging. 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. Placing children locally affords more support to the adoptive placement from social work staff, as well as adoptive families being able to access the comprehensive adoption support services provided by Leeds.

### **3.7 Age Range, siblings and foster carer adoptions**

- 16 of the children matched were babies and 1 was relinquished for adoption.
- 16 of the children matched were aged four years or older,
- 22 children were placed in sibling groups of 2
- 9 children were placed in sibling group of 3.
- 1 child was placed in with sibling who was already in placement as a fostering to adopt arrangement.

7 children matched with their foster carer which is an increase from 1 last year and 2 children who were matched had disabilities.

### **3.8 Disruptions**

- 3.8.1 In the last year there have been three matches that have not progressed following a period of introductions and three adoptions have disrupted where children were placed. This is an increase on previous years. In most of these cases, the complexity of children's needs has played a large part in the placements ceasing with a variety of other factors compounding the issues. Disruption is a cause for concern and Leeds is taking part in a national study around adoption disruptions to help inform practice in this area. In Leeds a "lessons learnt" exercise is undertaken for all disruptions and any recommendations made are implemented.

### **3.9 Key Performance Indicators on adoption**



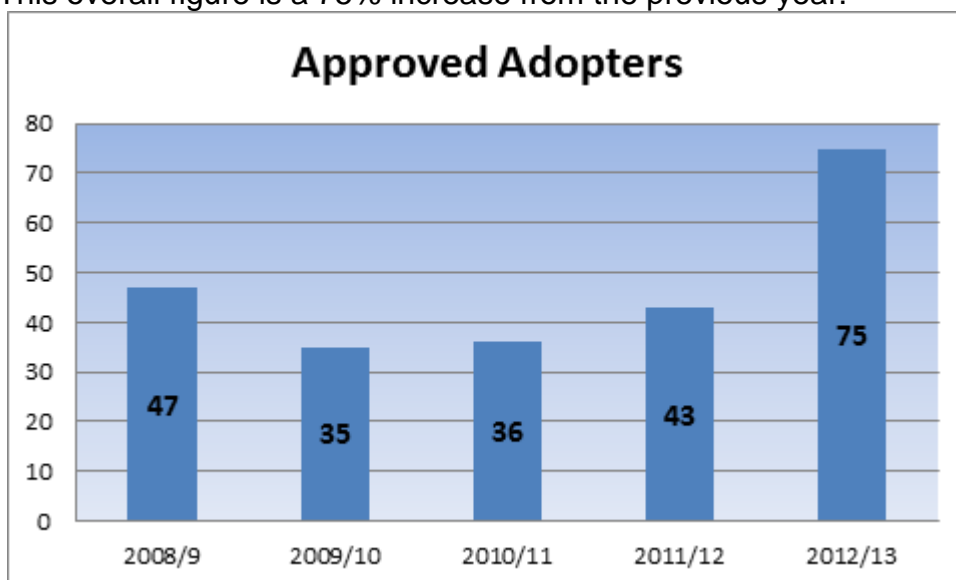
3.9.1 The number of children adopted or becoming subject to Special Guardianship Order (SGO) during the year as a percentage of the number of children currently looked after for 6 months or longer stood at 10.8 % at the end of March 2013 .This is an increase from 8.2 % in 2011/12 and previous increases from 6.8 % in 2009/10 and 7.8 % in 2010/11.

3.9.2 82 children were adopted and 48 made subject of an SGO in the financial year 2012/13. 67.5% of children were placed for adoption within 12 months of a plan for adoption, this is lower than last year which stood at 76.6% (2011/12) but higher than 10/11 at 65.4%. Although this is lower than a previous year, the volume and complexity of children waiting may account in part for the longer waiting time. However, for some children there is a delay in the court arena between the plan being agreed and the court authorisation to place the child for adoption being agreed.

3.9.3 The DfE have produced a range of comparative adoption statistics which have been used to consider performance activity in Leeds and these show that Leeds performs well above statistical neighbours and core cities and above the national average in adoption.

### 3.10 Profile of adopters

3.10.1 Between April 2012 and March 2013, 75 adoptive households were approved. 12 applications were in respect of foster carer adoptions, an increase from 4 last year. This overall figure is a 75% increase from the previous year.



3.10.2 70 adopters stated a preference for a child under 4 years of age although 5 of those were approved for a child under the age of 1 year.

5 families were willing to be considered for children over 4 years. This is an increase on last figures where no in house adopters approved for children over 5.

64 families wanted one child  
7 families wanted 2 children  
2 families wanted 3 children  
2 families were willing to take 1 or 2 siblings.

- 3.10.3 Last year only 3 households were willing to take up to 2 siblings, so this year has shown a marked improvement in seeking adopters for sibling groups which is welcome, given the larger number of siblings requiring placement.
- 3.10.4 12% adopters are from BME backgrounds. This is an increase of 2% from last year but we still need to increase our percentage of BME carers and consideration needs to be given to the specific recruitment of BME adopters. An equality impact assessment has been completed (attached at appendix E) and reviewed which seeks to address the shortfall in adoptive families from a diverse range of backgrounds.
- 3.10.5 There are 26 adoptive households approved at the present time. 16 are on hold awaiting match and the other 10 are in the process of considering children.
- 3.10.6 The government is keen to increase the speed of approving adoptive families and Leeds is involved in piloting the new Prospective Adopters Report and developing the new assessment process. This work initially presented challenges for all concerned but there has been a significant improvement in recent months as the new arrangements become embedded. 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 lifelong commitment and the speed of the assessment should not override the need for a quality assessment and preparation of the adopters.
- 3.10.7 Over the last six months we have been using additional sessional workers to undertake adoption assessments to ensure that we do not have adopters waiting for allocation. This has improved the numbers of adopters becoming approved and is an effective way to manage foster carer adoption assessments in particular. The service is also constantly looking to improve the assessment process with a view to an emphasis on a clear evidence base and analysis rather than a descriptive approach.

### **3.11 Non agency adoptions**

- 3.11.1 The local authority is responsible for assessing adopters who apply to the courts for a non-agency adoption. 23 applications have been made this year relating to Partner adoptions (previously known as step parent adoptions). This work is undertaken by the social work teams in the areas. This can be a highly complex area of work and the work is currently under review as to how non agency adoption assessments can be best supported by the adoption team.

### **3.12 The Adoption Consortium**

3.12.1 The development of the Yorkshire and Humberside Adoption consortium is crucial in developing a regional approach to meeting the needs of children requiring adoption and to meeting the government's adoption reform agenda. The consortium is currently looking at top slicing the adoption reform grant to provide a regional improvement team and developing concurrent planning and activity days for children in the region. The consortium is looking to raise the profile of adoption through TV advertising and speed up the time that children wait for adoption.

### **3.13 Recruitment & Preparation**

3.13.1 Adoption advertising has been increased during this year using a range of media including radio, TV, bus backs, roundabout signage, advertising boards and planned mail outs. In addition we have run a targeted campaign leading to a city centre drop in event in the Light in Leeds on a busy shopping Saturday at the end of National Adoption Week. The service is currently exploring the use of a shop in the city centre to promote fostering, adoption and private fostering.

3.13.2 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.

3.13.3 The service continues to provide monthly information meetings for enquirers in line with National Minimum Standards, these evenings have seen an increase in attendance with 301 potential adopters attending and a further 30 attending the event at the Light. For the second year Leeds held a targeted event to attract potential adopters from the lesbian and gay communities, 13 people attended this event and the feedback received was very positive.

3.13.4 Opportunities to register an interest in adoption are offered at the conclusion of each meeting. The Adoption Service received 155 registrations throughout the year, an increase from 115 in the previous year. We then received 87 applications in the year, training 139 adopters in 74 households.

3.13.5 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. Consequently, whilst there are high numbers of enquiries, there is also a high dropout 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.

3.13.6 We set a target of approving 60 households this year and managed to approve 75 households which is an overall increase of 75 % on last year. The new fostering and adoption website which was launched at the end of the last financial year has contributed to this success. We are constantly planning allocation and reviewing

capacity and as a result of this have been able to allocate assessments of adopters promptly which has avoided any waiting periods or lost time in the process.

### **3.14 Inter country adoption**

3.14.1 During 2012/13, the service has completed 2 initial visits to prospective adopters considering adopting from overseas. One of these resulted in an application which will be progressing in 2013/14. The service has also provided a post placement report for a child placed from India and now living in the area. There have been seven enquiries about inter country adoption and advice has been provided and information packs sent in response. The service is looking at one child being placed overseas for the purposes of adoption, with a family member, this year. The regional consortium is looking at developing a sub- regional approach to dealing with inter country adoption enquiries and the service is currently actively exploring our involvement in this development.

### **3.15 Adoption Support Services**

3.15.1 Adoption Support continues to remain an area of considerable growth and pressure within the service. All the 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 of their first year post adoption order.

3.15.2 The nature of support requested varies considerably, but frequently includes requests from adoptive parents for advice on strategies for managing challenging behaviour; requests for professional advice and help for children in school where their early developmental trauma has led to attachment difficulties. This adverse start to life can make it hard for children to settle, feel safe and ultimately be a barrier to learning and the ability to make positive social relationships. There have been 358 new referrals for adoption support into the team this year, 84 from adoptive parents and there is currently a waiting list in some areas of work. The caseloads are high in this team. The team is able to assist with talking to children about adoption (with the agreement of their adoptive parents) and helping them make 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 3 years post Adoption Order.

3.15.3 The service commissions Adoption UK and After Adoption in the form of peer support, professional consultation and training for adoptive parents both pre and post adoption order. These are helpful services for adoptive parents of Leeds children, who may have been placed anywhere in the country, as these services are accessible across the country.

3.15.4 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 700 exchanges, with almost double that number being possible if all contacts worked reliably. Additionally, in the past year the archivist has dealt with 211 other requests for

service. Many of these are retrieving records and arranging file viewing for professionals. The archivist deals with a huge number of phone queries from adopters, birth parents and professionals relating to contact arrangements and records. An additional duty for the archivist which has developed in the past year is compiling and maintaining the Veto database. This is explained later on in this report. Additionally, the protection 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, archived and retrieved as required. The service is increasing the capacity in this area of work by an extra half time post to meet the increasing demands.

### **3.16 Support groups**

- 3.16.1 There are currently two evening support groups for adoptive parents per month. One is for adoptive parents with children of all ages. The other is run monthly 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 during adolescence.
- 3.16.2 In addition, there are two monthly 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 comprised of six sessions, based on Theraplay techniques (which enhance attachment and bonding through play based and sensory activities).
- 3.16.3 The service also runs a weekly social group for adopted children aged between 12 – 14 years, in partnership with Barnardo's Futures. This regular session is invaluable in helping this minority group of young people to talk about and understand their own and other people's experiences in a supportive setting where adoption is the norm. This group have been involved in developing the young people's guide to adoption support and have made a Recording of their experience of adoption.
- 3.16.4 A newsletter is produced twice yearly which lists all the groups and development occurring in Leeds adoption support services for adoptive parents, colleagues and partner agencies

### **3.17 Training**

- 3.17.1 A rolling programme of training and workshops for adoptive parents is provided including topics such as "Telling Difficult Information", "Life Story Work" "the Impact of Social Networking Sites" and "Extreme Sibling Rivalry" .A workshop on "Related by Adoption" is aimed at helping extended family members of adoptive parents understand some of the issues faced by adoptive parents and different ways of supporting them. Training is provided for social workers on "Managing Contemporary Contact Arrangements and Implications Post Adoption" and

“Adoption and the Law”. The team also provides training and support to nurseries and schools where the impact of early developmental trauma is a barrier to learning and social development for children who are looked after and adopted.

- 3.17.2 The adoption service also works in partnership with After Adoption and provides “Safe base” training for all adopters. This is a specialist 4 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 3 year programme of support. There is also a regular follow up support group for all attendees. The programme is due to end next year and the adoption service is currently reviewing models of parenting training groups , looking also at the national programme being piloted by the DFE called “ Adopt”.
- 3.17.3 Two training events have been held in the last few months, “ Living with an Angry child” and “New Developments in Neuro and Sensory Awareness”. These have been aimed at attracting big audiences of social workers as well as foster carers and adoptive parents so that all hear the same research base in order to support a coordinated approach of a team around the child”. The feedback from these courses has been excellent.

### **3.18 Post Adoption Contact**

- 3.18.1 The adoption archivist manages around 1200 ‘letterbox’ contacts where there is an exchange of letters and/or photos between the adoptive family and the birth family. This has increased significantly in recent years. Additionally there are a 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).
- 3.18.2 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. It is very hard to intervene when a young person has made unregulated contact with birth family members and this is sometimes impossible for adoptive parents to manage without professional support.
- 3.18.3 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 & 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 in the past year and one person has registered a veto, with several pending.

### **3.19 Work with birth families**

3.19.1 The adoption service has a contract with After Adoption Yorkshire to provide an independent support service to birth parents and support to adopted adults.

3.19.2 A birth parent group is currently being co-led with a contemporary birth parent. This group has had some very positive feedback from birth parents and is able to offer some helpful advice in engaging birth parents. The aim is to help children who are being adopted by enabling their birth parents to be more realistic about what their child needs and giving them emotional permission to attach to the adoptive family and be happy without conflicting loyalty.

### **3.20 Birth Records Counselling**

3.20.1 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 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.

3.20.2 There is regular consultation with service users and evaluation forms have been very positive with all saying that they would seek support again and would recommend the service to others.

### **3.21 Adoption Allowances**

3.21.1 Expenditure on Adoption Allowances during 2012/13 was £971k supporting 131 placements.

3.21.2 There was 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.

### **3.22 Adoption Panel**

3.22.1 The adoption panels have increased this last year with 4 adoption panels now running each month. Additional support has increased recently as a result of increasing demand, with the appointment of a senior administrator and panel

manager to service both fostering and adoption panels. This will enable the business of the panels to function more effectively and respond more quickly to children's needs for timely decisions.

3.22.2 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. A recent agreement to increase the capacity of medical advisor time will assist in speeding up the process of pre adoption medical.

3.22.3 In September 2012, the children's plans were removed out of panels following new regulations. A new arrangement was established at this point, with the agency decision maker meeting weekly to consider plans for children requiring adoption. This has worked well and has speeded up the time for children needing a decision for adoption which is required prior to lodging to court an application for a placement order.

3.22.4 The adoption panel report is attached at appendix 1 and the quality assurance monitoring information is attached at appendix 2.

### **3.23 Complaints and allegations**

3.23.1 There were 2 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 1 safeguarding allegation regarding an adoptive parent during this year and the matter was addressed appropriately.

### **3.24 Strategic issues and forward plans**

3.24.1 The Adoption Service has continued to be affected by the significant rise of children requiring adoption.

3.24.2 There are competing priorities in allocating family finding work within the team and ensuring that this work is given priority alongside the need to ensure recruitment and assessment work is maintained.

3.24.3 It is positive that the Service has continued 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 2012/13.

3.24.4 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.



3.24.5 The adoption reform agenda brings further challenges to the service, with the aim of improving outcomes for children in making speedier adoption placements and recruiting adopters in a timelier manner. The improvements made over this last year have provided evidence that the strategy is correct in addressing the challenge. However, the volume of the work continues and an increase in capacity across the service is required to ensure that we can continue to rise to the challenge that the adoption reform agenda brings and more importantly to improve the outcomes for children.

## **4 Corporate Considerations**

### **4.1 Consultation and Engagement**

4.1.1 The adoption service has well established mechanisms in place to consult and engage with adoptive and prospective adoptive parents. These include the use of feedback forms and regular meetings with adoptive parents. The service also has good regional and national links which supports it in obtaining feedback on issues for adopters. The content of the report takes into account of these local and national issues.

### **4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration**

4.2.1 This is discussed throughout the report. However, children from a BME background wait longer for adoption nationally due to a shortage of adoptive parents to meet their needs. The service completed a full Equality Impact assessment in 2011. This was reviewed in December 2012 with recommendations made to address the need to recruit more adoptive families from BME communities. The action plan was presented to the Children's Services Diversity and Equalities Board in February 2013. The full report is attached for information at appendix E.

### **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 Implications, Access to Information and Call In**

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, 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. The rise in the numbers of young children and more children with complex needs means that family finding activity to locate the right family is essential. The need to continue to improve the number and range of adopters recruited and approved is critical in addressing these needs.

## **6 Recommendations**

- 6.1 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.

## **7 Background documents**

- 7.1 None

<sup>1</sup> The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.

## LEEDS ADOPTION PANELS

### Leeds Adoption Panel Chairs 6 MONTHLY REPORT 1<sup>st</sup> October to 31st March 2013 )

#### 1. Introduction

This report summarises the work of Leeds Adoption Panel over the 6 month period from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013

It is intended to complement the reports provided to the council's executive under National Minimum Standard 25.

Standard 17 of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services states that:

*“Adoption panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement.”*

#### 2. Background

During this period the adoption panels have continued to operate in a context of considerable government and resultant media interest in adoption. Local authority adoption performance is under close scrutiny with particular focus on the time taken to place children in adoptive families and the process by which adopters are prepared and assessed. At the same time the number of children in need of adoption has continued to grow, the number of children with a plan for adoption in Leeds, increasing by 45 % this year. Current indications are that the number of children coming into care appears to have stabilised. However, the numbers of children in the age categories of under 2 years old and over 5 years old have increased. This, along with an increase in the number of sibling groups, will continue to create some challenges for the local authority in achieving permanence in a timely way, and presents specific challenges for the adoption service.

Changes in Regulations implemented on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2012 removed the responsibility for recommending adoption plans for children in care proceedings from adoption panel functions with plans now agreed by the agency decision maker without panel scrutiny. This has reduced the burden of work in respect of adoption panels, although significant work is still required by social workers and team managers to have cases ready for the Agency Decision Maker. The impact on the matching processes at a later stage is not yet fully known. Concerns remain about the loss of expertise and knowledge, particularly from independent panel members, regarding children being considered for adoption.

As part of pending changes relating to the approval process Leeds has had the opportunity to pilot a new version of the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR) which is part of the process aimed at simplifying and speeding up the approval of adopters.

Despite the removal of a key area of business, in respect of adoption plans, Leeds Adoption Panels have remained busy during this 6 month period, which can be illustrated by the figures indicating a 35% increase in matches and a 75% increase in approvals this year. (Further information about the number of cases considered by the panels is contained in the report to the council's Executive by the Agency.)

The establishment of a fourth panel has assisted in keeping agendas to a more manageable level, with fewer delays and further additional panels have not been needed, which is helpful in terms of business support time and consistency.

### **3. Changes to Panel Business**

The Government is concerned to tackle delay for children awaiting adoptive placements. National consultation has taken place about the composition of adoption panels, changes in the adopter approval process and a fast track system for foster carers who wish to adopt.

Regulations which were subject to consultation are expected to come into force from June 2013. The approval process is expected to be completed within 6 months and will be in 2 stages, stage 1 being initial training and preparation, (2 months) and stage 2 being the assessment process (4 months) Other changes are likely to occur around contact arrangements for children and adoption support arrangements for adoptive families.

Reforms requiring primary legal changes are expected to come into force from April 2014.

### **4. Functioning of the Panel (overview)**

Throughout this period the Panels have continued to work effectively. Member appraisals have shown that panel members are comfortable with the chairs' styles and feel able to contribute and participate fully. Panel members respect one another's views and have valued the differing perspectives of members with different experiences. In the vast majority of cases recommendations have been achieved with the consensus of all panel members and where this has not been possible reasons for dissent have been recorded.

Panel business is conducted thoroughly and all Panel members participate and ask questions. The Chairs have agreed a consistent approach to cases so that attendees can be prepared for what to expect. Panels see applicants, prospective adopters and carers with social workers and it sees social workers on their own when additional questions need to be asked about assessment practice or about confidential references or other issues. Social

workers usually remain in the meeting to observe the recommendation being made to assist their understanding of the panel's reasoning.

Panel minute taking is a complex and skilled process and requires a high standard of recording. This is generally done to a high standard by experienced staff, and minutes are completed for scrutiny by the Chair and advisor within 2 working days. Minutes are circulated to other members following this for further comment, and the Chair authorises the final version. Chairs and panel advisers have endeavoured to ensure the quality of minutes is maintained. There is still a delay between minutes being amended by the Chair and the ADM decision. The regulations state that this should be within 7 working days from the Panel recommendation. Currently, prospective adopters may still wait 2-3 weeks for a decision. The recent increase in administrative support to panels will assist in rectifying this delay.

Standards state that panel members should receive their papers at least 5 working days prior to the panel. The system for sending out papers has remained robust and papers are generally received in good time. Where reports are missing, or there are gaps, chairs are consulted and a decision taken about whether the case can be included on the agenda. Decisions are child focused and aimed at preventing delay for children while remaining mindful of the need to meet legal requirements.

Each panel has an agency adviser who is an adoption team manager. The advisers' role is to work with the chair to ensure panel conducts its business appropriately and that panel members have all the information they need to consider their recommendation. Panel advisers provide an excellent service to their panels and the quality of advice is high. Issues raised at panel are followed up diligently. Chairs and panel members have found it helpful to have a dedicated advisor as this has assisted with the development of each panel's team identity.

## **5. Quality Assurance feedback**

The Agency endeavours to receive feedback on the functioning of panel, and this is shared with members as part of the overall review process. Feedback is obtained from social workers attending panel and from adopters about their experiences.

### ***Social worker feedback***

Responses from social workers have been low during this 6 month period. Responses received indicate a good level of satisfaction with the experience of attending panel with the majority indicating that they had the opportunity to present their case, and that the questions asked by panel of both them and their adopters were appropriate. Comments show that panel is considered to take a balanced approach to cases. Issues were raised about waiting times when panel has been delayed due to complex cases or other factors.

### ***Adopter feedback***

Adopters are asked to feedback about their experience of attending panel both for approval and for matching. On a scale which rates 10 as being good and 1 as being poor all adopters rated their experience at 6 or over with the majority rating it as 8 or over for all panels. Understandably adopters were anxious about attending panel and some found the number of panel members present, the formality of the setting, and waiting times the most unsatisfactory element of attending. Comments were also made about waiting times both when attending panel but also in relation to the timescale for agency decisions to be made.

The Quality Assurance (QA) mechanism for panel work, includes an overall assessment of work presented, and specifically monitors timescales and whether the report has been prepared by a suitably qualified social worker. The QA forms relate to the PAR (Prospective Adopters Report) and to the APR (Adoptive Placement Report) for matches. Panel do see the CPR (Child Permanence Report) when considering a match but no longer have a specific remit to feedback on the quality, since these are now considered by the Agency Decision Maker along with other reports presented in consideration of agreeing a plan for adoption.

This is probably an omission which could be rectified by the merging of a QA form for all reports presented. Often issues raised about the quality of a CPR by Panel members are added to the APR feedback but will not necessarily be captured by the agency.

### ***Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR)***

This period has seen the piloting of the new PAR which aims to reduce the length of adopter assessment reports by providing clearer focus on analysis of information rather than narrative. In general the new PAR has been well received. Panel still receive the old version when considering adopters approved by other agencies and so have the ability to make comparisons in terms of information presented. The preparation and usefulness of concise reports will always depend on the analytical skills of the writer and there is a balance to be drawn in the level of evidence provided to panel for the conclusions drawn.

Panels consider both the written reports and the presentation to Panel in making their overall assessment of quality. Generally prospective adopters are well prepared and supported. Monitoring of the 8 month timescale for adopter assessments from the point of formal application shows that 35% of adopters were approved within timescales this year. Where this has not been met, delay seems to occur prior to allocation for assessment. Further exploration of this issue is needed.

### ***Child Permanence Reports (CPR)***

Panel's now generally focus on the appropriateness of the report as a later life document for the child when the child is presented for a match. There have been some excellent examples. (24% this year and a further 31% noted as very good) In almost half cases presented there is room for improvement and there is no way for the panel to know if any recommended changes are followed through at this point in time, or indeed whether feedback is actually collated.

The CPR is not a court document; it is a document for sharing information with prospective adopters and for the child in later life. The Agency might need to consider what time is allocated for the updating of a CPR once proceedings have been completed. The main element missing at the point of a match being presented is a summary of information from independent or 'expert reports' which may have influenced the decision making process, and which is presented in a child friendly way. (*The ADM may need to be specific at the point of agreeing an adoption plan as to whether the court needs to grant permission for expert reports or elements of reports to be shared with adopters. By the time it comes to a match it is too late to address this.*) Often not included is any specific recommendation from Court, the process of decision making in relation to placement of siblings, and the general updating of the decision making chronology, (from the LAC review recommending the plan onwards). Contact plans have not always been updated and in a small number of cases, the decision about future contact with birth family, has not been made at the point of match. In these cases, prospective adopters may be concerned as to whether they should accept direct contact or not. Poor decision making around contact risks delay in family finding and may place undue pressure on prospective adopters who simply won't know whether direct contact is in the child's best interests at that time or for the future. For a prospective adopter to make a choice based on limited information seems unacceptable.

It is evident that adopters have usually now met the medical advisor, prior to Panel, as well as the child's social worker and the foster carer, thus ensuring there is an accurate picture of the child's needs for matching purposes. Panel Chairs share some concern that Life Appreciation days are being used as a means for the prospective adopters to meet the foster carers which may be an over optimistic environment, where day to day care can be outlined but may



not be the best way to understand the intricacies of the child's underlying behaviour and emotional needs.

The views of the birth parents and child are not often included in the CPR with age of child being cited as the main reason for the latter. Minimum standards require the wishes and feelings of a child are acted upon unless not in their interests and that no child is unable to communicate their views. Foster carers reports are often helpful in understanding a child's none verbal communication and responses to change for example although these reports are not always included.

Birth parents views are often not included or updated in the relevant section of CPR's. Once proceedings have been finished their views may change or they may disengage because it is too painful a process, however it may be possible to incorporate this into the relevant section of the CPR for a match, including whether or not they are willing to meet the adopters.

As previously stated the panels have ceased to consider children's plans and the quality assurance role rests directly with the Agency Decision Maker. Quality issues on CPR's are not currently being recorded in this context. The future Panel Manager to be appointed may assist with this although ultimately the Team managers have responsibility for quality of reports presented. The Agency may also choose to incorporate feedback on CPRs into the overall QA for matches, in order to assist this process.

### ***Adoption Placement Reports (APR)***

Adoption Placement reports are submitted when a match is made. A new form has been introduced during this period which guides social workers to covering the issues and information required by panel to consider the match. On the whole APRs are of good quality. Some lack detail in the support plans. The support outlined tends to be repeated in all cases. It links to the child's needs which are not always known at the point of match so inevitable has some limitations. Where vulnerabilities have been identified either in respect of the child or the adopters it would be helpful to see these areas more specifically addressed. The plan may need to be amended so that these areas, especially where prospective adopters have vulnerability or where other risks are identified are individually addressed.

It is clear that strenuous efforts are made to identify placements for children within the 6 month timescale. This has been achieved for 35% of children this year.

Where timescales are not met, the reasons why are generally evident. Panel records the reasons and ensures that appropriate questions are asked about any delay identified. The main reasons are the complex needs or age of the child, sibling groups for whom fewer adopters are available, (with further decision making needed if sibling groups are to be split). In some cases the Placement Order is granted sometime after the plan being agreed. This may be due to additional late assessments of parents or family members have

been agreed. In a very few cases there have been delays for children entering care, and the older age and added complexity of needs has made the process of both planning and family finding harder to achieve.

### ***Social worker qualification***

The restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations stipulate that social workers preparing adoption reports must be qualified social workers with 3 years experience and direct experience of adoption work. Where this requirement is not met, a social worker who meets these criteria must take responsibility for the report.

### ***Practice***

A number of practice issues have been raised by Panel members over the year. Some of these relate very specifically to individual cases where Panel members were concerned about practice and feedback has been provided directly and confidentially.

Health advice when available continues to be excellent and support in education has usually been explored carefully. The absence of a medical advisor on some panels has restricted the panel's confidence that all health issues are addressed thoroughly. Additional medical advisor time has recently been agreed and going forward this issue is likely to be addressed.

### ***Panel Chair and Agency meetings***

6 monthly meetings take place with the Panel Chairs, Agency Decision Maker and service managers to discuss practice issues.

## **6. Conclusion**

The quality of adoption work in general has remained good in Leeds and there has been evidence of excellent practice in a significant number of cases. Both Panel members and Agency will need to tackle the changes in practice, and the revised expectations on performance in the coming year. The volume of work shows a significant increase this year and represents a huge throughput of work, Maintaining quality while working on improving timescales for decision making and family finding will continue to present challenges in the coming year.

Sheila Barton  
Carolyn Williams

Independent Adoption Panel Chairs.

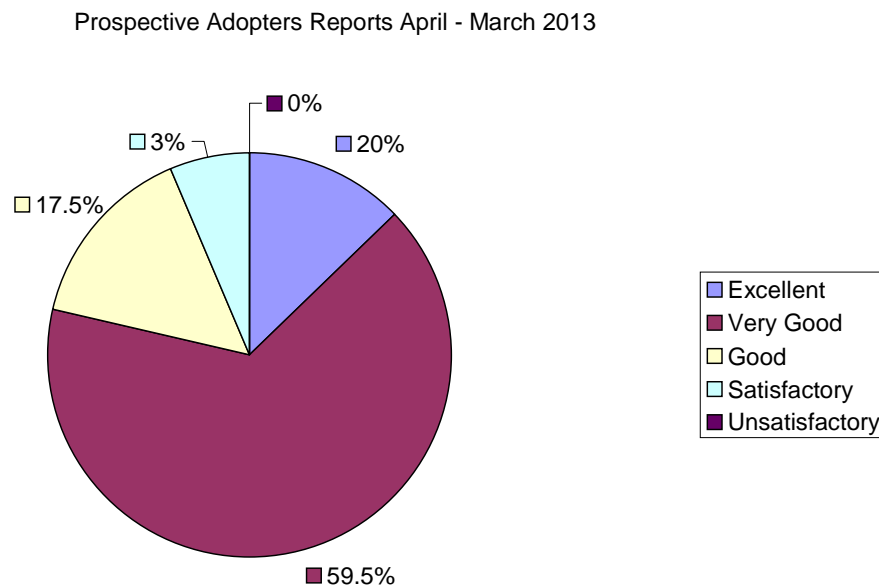


**ADOPTION PANEL  
QUALITY ASSURANCE MONITORING INFORMATION ON CHILD  
PERMANENCE REPORTS, PROSPECTIVE ADOPTER REPORTS AND  
ADOPTION PLACEMENT REPORTS**

This information reflects the overall quality of the assessment reports and presentation of the reports to the Adoption Panel. It includes child permanence reports written by social workers, prospective adopter's reports written by adoption social workers and adoption placement reports (matching reports) which are completed jointly by social workers and adoption social workers.

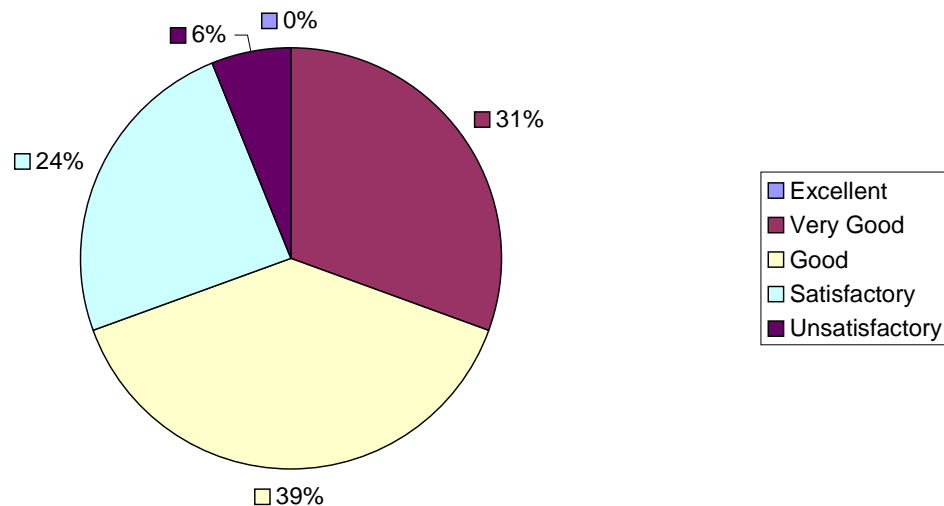
**April 2012 – March 2013**

Prospective Adopters Report



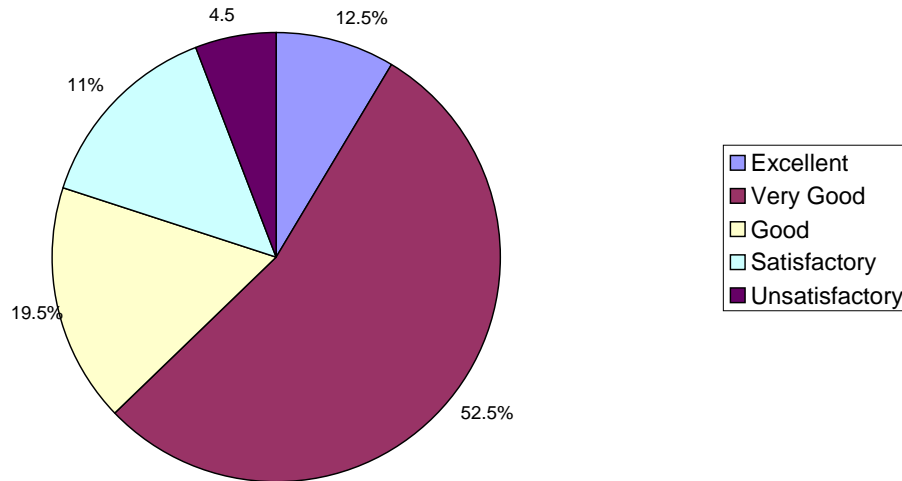
Child Permanence Report

Children's Permanence Reports April - October 2012  
(NB. There was no QA completed between November and March 2013)



## Adoption Placement Report

Adoption placement reports April –March 2013



### Sample of comments from the panel on Prospective Adopters' Reports

1. Feel that the couple were well prepared.
2. Clearly knew the couple well, but answers need to be more succinct.
3. Well presented at panel.
4. Excellent adopters commended the social worker on the accuracy of her report and the clear picture it gave of them.

### Sample of comments from the panel on Child Permanence Reports

1. Chronology on birth parents not clear.
2. Insufficient planning detailed in the report.
3. Social Worker and Team Manager presented the case well.
4. CPR is very detailed with some graphic detail which does not need to be included.
5. CPR is difficult to read, sibling assessment had not been completed.
6. No proactive planning for permanence endorsed. Opportunities to secure child's future needs missed.
7. Well presented.
8. Gave good picture of the background but marred by errors and typos.

### Sample of comments from the chair on Adoption Placement Reports

1. Good Partnership between the Social Worker and Adoption Officer.
2. Social Worker had excellent knowledge of the child.
3. Clear and well written report.

## Analysis

These figures show the work being looked at by panels and the important role of the panel in quality assurance. Comparison with last years' information suggests that there have been improvements in quality across the board although the scoring system has been amended slightly this year. More categories have been added so that we now have excellent, very good, good, satisfactory and inadequate, compared to only 3 categories last year- very good, satisfactory and inadequate.

The quality of prospective adopters' reports (PAR) remains high and the numbers deemed to be satisfactory has reduced from 10% to 3% from last year. There were no PAR reports judged as inadequate.

The number of child permanence reports deemed to be unsatisfactory reduced from 18% to 6% compared with 2011-2012 figures. Unfortunately it has not been possible to continue the quality assurance function for CPRs since moving the business from panels to the Agency Decision Making meetings in September 2012. This will be resumed for 2013-20214 as soon as we have a panel manager in post to take on the quality assurance function.

Adoption placement reports (APR) indicate improvements at the lower end with fewer satisfactory reports and more reports deemed to be good, thus 44% were deemed to be satisfactory last year and only 11% this year. The numbers of unsatisfactory APR reports remain the same at 4.5%.

There is a need to continue to address the concerns about inaccurate child permanence reports and inappropriate information being included in the reports. Training needs to continue to be provided for social workers and to be offered on a rolling programme so that new social workers will benefit. Team managers need to ensure that reports are fully checked for accuracy and content before sign off. Training provision has been arranged in May 2013 to assist managers in quality assuring the content of CPRS and this will be offered to the area social work team managers as well as managers in the Adoption Service.

Since September 1<sup>st</sup> 2012, there has been a change in the regulations and adoption panel no longer accept children for adoption. The quality assurance function for CPRs therefore is removed from panel and located within the Agency Decision meeting. As stated above, it has not been possible to provide a detailed quality assurance check on the CPR paperwork, as this meeting has had limited staff time to undertake this task. The frequency of the meetings, which are held weekly, make it impossible for the Agency decision maker to perform the level of checking that had been done by the independent panel chairs and this is a weakness in the new arrangements. The perception is that that CPR quality did improve in the first few months but this has not been sustained. However the newly appointed panel manager will be taking on this function as a key priority and will also assist in the quality assurance of all reports being presented to panels.

Val Hales  
Deputy Service manager  
25<sup>th</sup> April 2013