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Report of the Director of Children & Families

Report to Executive Board

Date: 17 July 2017

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 side of the Council receives written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption agency every 6 months. The annual report is presented to the Executive Board and this report provides the annual report of adoption service activity from April 2016 to March 2017, and the outcomes achieved by the service.
2. The last year has seen significant changes in the government's adoption reform agenda and Leeds has been an active part of the wider Yorkshire and Humber region in moving towards a regionalised adoption service. In West Yorkshire plans to develop a shared adoption service, with Leeds taking on the host role for the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) called One Adoption West Yorkshire have moved at pace whilst maintaining business as usual.
3. On the 3rd April the new agency One Adoption West Yorkshire was successfully established with staff transferring across from Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees and Wakefield to work for Leeds as part of the new regional adoption agency now fully operational.

Recommendations

4. That the Executive Board receive this annual report and continues to support the work of the adoption service and the newly formed regional adoption

service to ensure our adopted children receive the best possible outcomes and support.

1 Purpose of this report

This report details the work of Leeds City Council Adoption Service from April 2016 to March 2017 inclusive. The purpose of the report is to consider the activity of the service in relation to its compliance with the national minimum standards and is also used to identify any significant trends within adoption and how Leeds can continue to meet the changing demands within the adoption service.

2 Background information

- 2.1 Adoption is one of the most important and significant decisions that can be made for a child. 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 throughout life.
- 2.2 The adoption service was last inspected by Ofsted as part of the single inspection of Children Social Work Services between 20th January 2015 and the 11th February 2015; the report was published on the 27th March 2015. Adoption services were subjected to robust scrutiny which resulted in some very positive and helpful feedback. The adoption service was judged to be good overall.

3 Main issues

National Picture

Political interest in adoption has continued during 2016/17 with the National Leadership Board monitoring and appraising the performance of adoption services and their delivery of the substantial reform agenda including the development of regional adoption agencies.

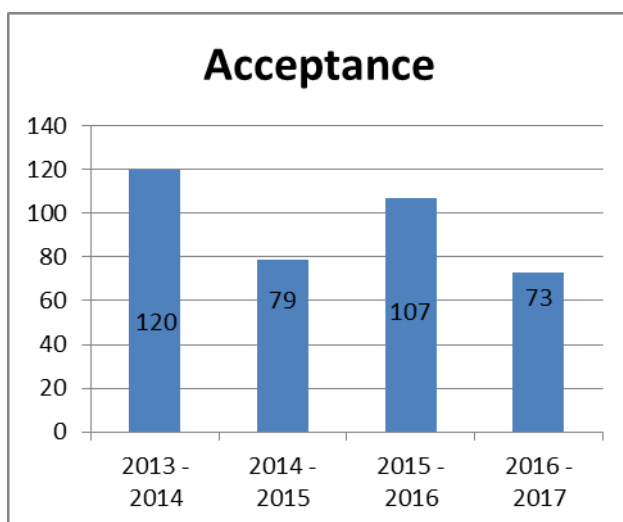
- 3.1.1 During this period the reduction of placement and adoption orders made nationally has continued to decline locally. The adoption service in Leeds has responded to these changes with adopter recruitment focusing on adopters who are able to consider children with complex needs and uncertainty, children who are older and sibling groups. In addition, we have also sought to recruit adopters who are able to consider early permanence as a route to adoption. Consequently, the numbers of adopters approved has reduced in line with the numbers of children with a plan for adoption in the system as a whole.

3.2 Adoption Service

3.2.1 The Adoption Service has seen some changes over the year with a number of staff retiring as a result of the reduction of children requiring adoption. These changes have been well managed to ensure the service continues to have an experienced and knowledgeable group of staff.

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. Training events are also provided for children's social workers and managers in relation to adoption and permanence planning issues, family finding and issues arising through adoption support.

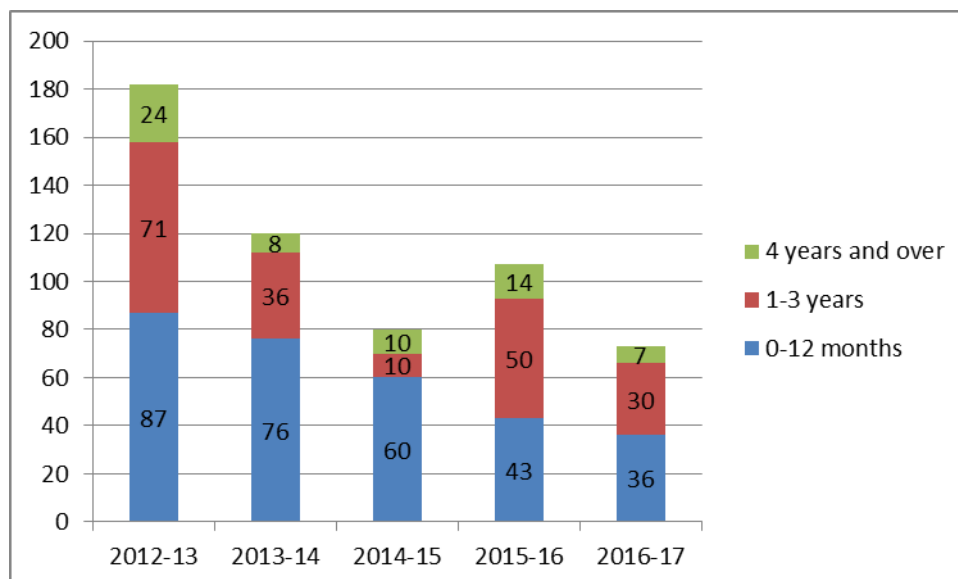
3.3 Number of Children approved in the year with a plan of adoption, April 2016 to March 2017



3.3.1 Between April 2016 and March 2017, 73 children had a plan for adoption ratified by the Agency Decision Maker. Of the 73 children with a plan for adoption, there were 36 female and 37 male children.

3.3.2 In total, this is a 32 per cent decrease on the last year's full year figure of 107 children. This picture is also reflected as a national level.

3.3.5 Age profile



3.3.6 The age range of children requiring adoption has remained the same only lower generally across the spectrum of age.

3.3.7 Ethnicity

Of the 73 children with a plan for adoption this year, 57 children were from white British backgrounds and 16 children (22%) were from Black and Minority Ethnic groups, including children from eastern European, Gypsy Roma, Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds.

3.4 Placement with Siblings

As a general principle, siblings will be placed together; however, due to the individual needs of children, this cannot always be achieved. The agency recommends the use of sibling assessments to ensure good quality decision making and support plans when making sibling placements for adoption.

The numbers of children requiring adoption in sibling groups is 30, compared to 35 in the previous year. This year there are:

24 children in sibling groups of 2

6 children in sibling groups of 3

3.5 Children with an adoption plan, currently waiting

3.5.1 As of 1st April 2017 there are 42 Leeds children with a plan for adoption not currently placed and requiring adopters. This is a roughly similar number of

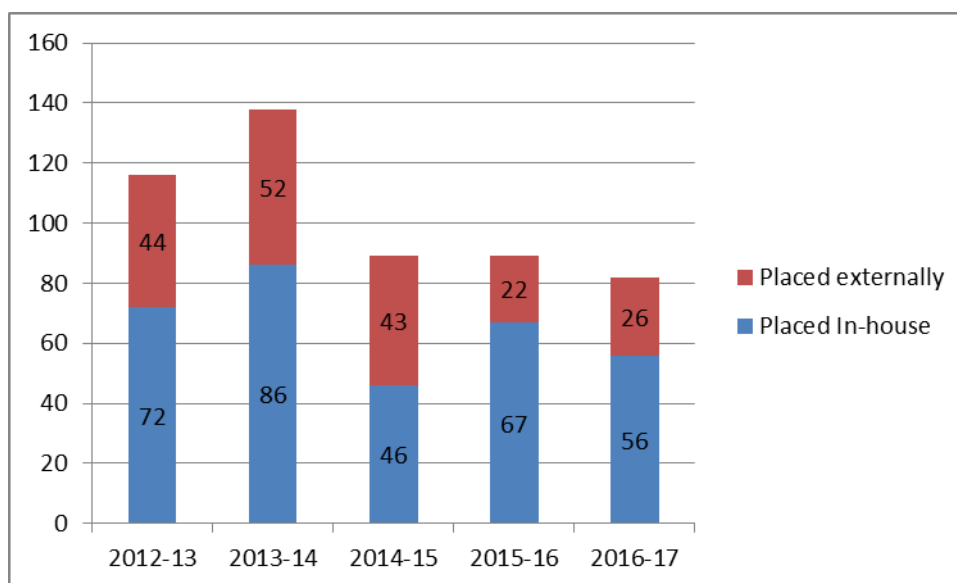
children as the same time last year, when there were 51 children with a plan for adoption but not yet placed.

- 3.5.2 23 children out of the 42 are 0-1yrs and 11 who are aged between 2 and 4 years. 15 children have potential “matches” identified and 9 of these have a date booked at adoption panel for the “match” to be formally considered.
- 3.5.3 From the children waiting for a placement there are 21 girls and 21 boys, and 28 per cent are children from BME backgrounds, with the remaining children coming from White British backgrounds. The plans for these children are actively reviewed with clear monitoring and tracking systems to understand the range of family finding activity going on for these children and whether adoption remains the right plan for each child. The delays for these children are related primarily to the needs of the children; the need to place siblings together, the age of the children or their particular special needs or complexity.
- 3.5.4 The search for prospective adopters regularly extends across the country using the National Adoption Register and at National Exchange days across the country. Some children are featured in adoption publications. One area of considerable success has been the use of Adoption Link, which is an online matching service where approved prospective adopters are able to log in securely and identify potential links. This has enabled the placement of some harder to place children, as well as positively engaging adopters in the matching process. Family finding work continues to be time consuming and social workers spend time travelling across the country to locate potential families once links have been made and to offer support post-placement.

3.6 Children matched in the year for adoption

- 3.6.1 Between April 2016 and March 2017, 82 children were matched with families at adoption panels; this is an 8% decrease on the number of children matched between April 2015 and March 2016, reflecting the lower numbers of children coming through for adoption.
- 3.6.2 During April 2016 and March 2017, 13% of the children matched were from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. This is higher than the national average and could be seen as a positive for children from BME communities who often take longer to place for adoption. However, we are keen to improve upon this and an Equality Impact assessment is currently underway to ensure that we are maximising the opportunity to recruit adopters to meet the needs of this group of children.

56 of the children matched were placed with Leeds City council adopters
 4 of these children were matched through local authority Adoption Agencies within the Yorkshire and Humber regional consortium.
 9 of these children were matched through Voluntary Adoption Agencies inside the consortium
 7 of these children were matched with outside consortium Local Authorities
 6 of these children were matched through outside consortium Voluntary Adoption Agencies



3.6.3 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, Early Permanency Placements and foster carer adoptions

- 32 of the children matched were babies and 1 was relinquished for adoption
- 38 children were of pre-school age
- Of the 82 children, 11 of the children matched were aged four years or older
- 26 of the 92 children were placed in sibling groups
- 5 children were placed in an early permanency placement arrangement
- 6 children were matched with their foster carer

3.8 Disruptions

3.8.1 In the last year, one adoption placement has disrupted, affecting one child placed for adoption. This represents a continued decrease in disruptions of adoptive placements, but any disruption is distressing for all involved. In this case, the key factors related to the child's significant needs and ongoing adoption support.

- 3.8.2 Disruption is a cause for concern and in every case a disruption meeting takes place to ensure that a full understanding of the issues leading to the breakdown are fully understood to inform future planning for the child and the adoptive parents.

3.9 Adoption Scorecard statistics and Key Performance Indicators.

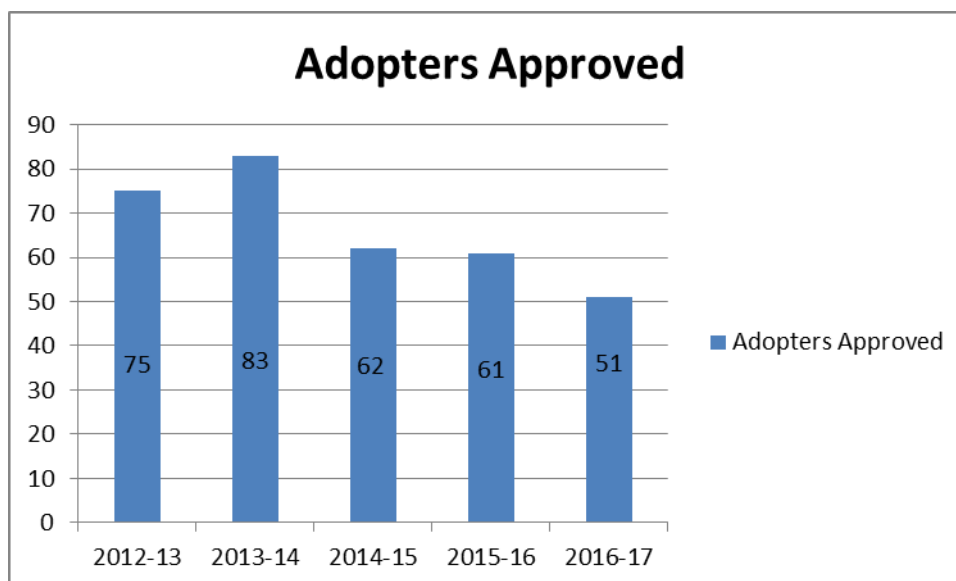
- 3.9.1 The DfE produce a range of comparative adoption statistics which are analysed for the purposes of scrutiny with regard to adoption performance in all adoption agencies across England. The introduction of the new strategy from the government suggests that the adoption scorecard in its current format will be phased out and replaced with a new scorecard that focuses on regional adoption agencies rather than local authorities over the next 12 months.

Leeds does not achieve the government-set, ever-decreasing thresholds for the two main adoption indicators. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (indicator A1) for Leeds children who were adopted was 536 days (2012-15 average), which is Leeds' best performance since the adoption scorecards started, 11 days less than the previous year's average. Despite this figure being 49 days above the government-set threshold, it is 57 days less than the England average, and better than all comparator averages.

Indicator A2 reports the 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. At 238 days (2012-15 average), performance in Leeds was the same as the previous year, 117 days above the threshold set by the government, and 15 days above the England average. Leeds' performance is, however, better than the Yorkshire and The Humber and statistical neighbour averages. The government threshold is 121 days and no local authorities met this threshold and the England average is 223 days.

3.10 Profile of adopters

- 3.10.1 Between April 2016 and March 2017, 51 adoptive households were approved.
- 3.10.2 Due to the reduction of children with a plan for adoption over the 2013 to 2016 period, and a number of adopters waiting for placements the adoption team changed the recruitment strategy undertaking a targeted recruitment approach for specific children and sibling groups. The agency continues to adapt the marketing and recruitment strategy to respond to the changing needs of children needing adoption.



3.10.3 27 households stated a preference for a child under 2 years of age. The remaining 24 households wished to adopt a child aged up to eight years, with 11 households wishing to adopt a child aged 0 to 3 years and 13 households wishing to adopt a child aged 0 to 4 years.

3.10.4 There has been an increase in adopters able to consider children aged over two years. This is a positive move considering the number of children waiting for adoption aged over four years.

43 families wanted one child

6 families wanted 2 children

1 family wanted 3 children

1 family wanted 1 or 2 children if they were part of a sibling group

15 households approved in the 2016/17 period stated a preference to consider early permanence as a route to adoption. This is very positive.

3.10.5 6 applications were from foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care. This is a slight decrease on the 2015/16 figure of ten foster carers.

3.10.6 13% adopters are from BME backgrounds. We need to monitor our percentage of BME carers and keep a focus on ensuring that we approve a full range of adoptive families to meet the range of children requiring placement, while at the same time not relying on matching children with regard to ethnic identity as an overriding factor.

3.10.7 As of 1st April 2017, there are 23 approved adoptive households. 13 are available to consider placements. 2 have a panel date booked for a match and 8 are considering potential matches.

3.10.8 The stage 1 and stage 2 adoption assessment processes are now fully embedded into our practice in Leeds, and the service has robust systems for both the administration of the process and ensuring timely social work

assessment and intervention. In the 2016/17 period, 53 per cent of households met the timescale for stage one and 86 per cent of households met the timescale for stage two. Delays in stage 1 are generally due to delays in statutory checks being returned and adopters asking for more time before progressing to Stage 2.

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. 55 applications have been made this year relating to Partner adoptions (previously known as step parent adoptions), which is a steady figure from the previous year. This work is undertaken by the social work teams in the areas. Further scoping work is required to bring this into the new regional adoption agency, One Adoption West Yorkshire.

3.12 Recruitment & Preparation

3.13.1 Adoption advertising has continued using a range of media including radio, bus backs, advertising boards, social media and google ad-works. Social media in particular has been increased as a positive way of reaching a large number of people..

3.13.4 The service continues to provide information meetings and have increased these from monthly to every 3 weeks; Leeds has also held targeted recruitment events for LGBT adopters and single adopters. The information meetings continue to be held in alternating venues in the North and East of the city with the hope of increasing accessibility for prospective adoptive families.

3.14 Inter country adoption

3.14.1 The Yorkshire Adoption Agency provides expert inter-country services to all adopters on behalf of the Local Authority consortium agencies. This value for money contract saves Leeds time and money as inter-country work is very specialist, complex and time consuming. Post-order report visits to the child's country of origin following the placement remain the responsibility of our service and these extend up to five years post placement when adopting from some countries.

3.15 Adoption Support Services

3.15.1 Adoption Support continues to remain an area of considerable growth and considerable need within the service. As more children have been placed for adoption in the past four years, the corresponding need for adoption support services rises. The Adoption Support Fund has increased expectations of adopters and consequently added a layer of complexity to the work undertaken by the team, including the administrative burden that the process brings.

- 3.15.2 The nature of support requested varies, but frequently includes requests from adoptive parents for advice on strategies for integrating children into families, managing challenging behaviour and support with telling difficult life story information, as well as requests for professional advice and help for children in school where early developmental trauma has led to attachment difficulties. There have been 218 referrals for adoption support into the team this year, including new families and families who have previously received services.
- 3.15.3 The service continues to have contracts with Adoption UK and PAC/UK for family support services.

3.16 Support groups

- 3.16.1 There is currently one evening support group for adoptive parents per month for adoptive parents with children of all ages. In addition, there are two monthly parent and child stay and play support groups in the east and west of the city. An experienced adoptive parent volunteers at each session. Some of these families may be invited to attend a six weekly parent and child play social group, based on theraplay techniques, which enhance attachment and bonding through play based and sensory activities.
- 3.16.2 A newsletter is produced twice yearly by the adoption support team in conjunction with colleagues in Communications. This publication in spring and autumn 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 theraplay, play for grown-ups, nursery and early years education, anger and non-violent resistance, and internet safety.
- 3.17.2 Safe Base training for adoptive parents both pre and post adoption order continues. The team have been piloting a new evidence based parenting programme, AdOpt, funded by the DfE. The outcomes from this are extremely positive to date. The service has also commenced a 12 week parenting course based around the principles of Non-Violent Resistance targeted at families experiencing a high level of child to parent violence.

Adoption Support Fund

- 3.17.3 The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) opened for business nationally on the 1st May 2015. The fund has been set up to reduce the gap between adoptive children needing therapeutic services and receiving them, ultimately to improve outcomes for young people and families. Between April 2016 and March 2017 Leeds received £390k from the adoption support fund in order to support to adoptive families.

- 3.17.5 The administration of the adoption support fund is time consuming yet essential to ensure that funds can be secured to provide services.

3.2 Adoption Panel

- 3.21.1 There has been a reduction in adoption panels undertaken each month from four to three due to the less demand. The Adoption and Fostering Panel Manager role continues to work well offering a central contact point and coordinating the smooth running of panel business. Positive feedback is also received regarding the role of panel advisors in panel. The quality and timeliness of minutes is taken seriously by panel chairs and significant efforts are made by panel chairs, panel members, administrators and panel advisors to ensure the minutes reach the agency decision maker in a timely manner.
- 3.21.2 The quality of adoption work presented to panel remains good in Leeds. Panel members and the Agency continue to work together in order to manage the ongoing changes and improvements in practice and expectations on performance. Quality Assurance is taken seriously and the feedback forms were revised in April 2015 to provide more detailed feedback to social workers with the aim of continuing to raise performance.
- 3.21.3 Six monthly meetings continue to be held between the agency and panel chairs with the aim of ensuring good communication regarding the development of the service. Panel chairs are encouraged to raise any issues as they arise and panel chairs also have the opportunity of an annual appraisal with the agency decision maker.

3.22 Quality Assurance

- 3.22.1 The adoption service has a clear quality assurance framework. This includes service user feedback, feedback from adoption panels and case file audits. Case file audits have been carried out regularly in 2016/17 and the quality of work undertaken is consistently very good. 95 per cent of the prospective adopters reports presented to adoption panel were rated as good and 81 per cent of the matches presented had the paperwork rated as being good. A significant effort goes into the feedback to workers in order to maintain and raise standards in a clear and supportive manner and training needs of staff are reviewed in an ongoing manner.
- 3.22.2 With regard to feedback from service users at adoption panel, 37 questionnaires were received from attendees at panel and of these, 18 questionnaires rated the experience of panel at 10 (out of a possible score of 10) and a further 18 questionnaires rated at 7 out of 10 or above, which indicates a high level of satisfaction overall. There was only one instance of very poor feedback, which related to a particular case and has been considered individually with the adopters to address these concerns. The majority of people (89 per cent) returning their feedback questionnaires also indicated that they had received their panel outcome letters within the aimed

for timescale of 21 days, which is a very positive development and reflects efforts within the Business Support Team to improve this timescale.

3.22.2 With regard to feedback from service users at adoption panel, the majority of adopters indicated a high level of overall satisfaction following their attendance at panel, with only one instance of a low level of satisfaction, which was followed up with the attendee to better understand their feedback and ways to improve the panel experience. Most attendees found the panel chair and panel members to be welcoming and supportive in the discussions held.

3.22.3 There were five complaints made regarding the Adoption Service during the year. Three of these complaints were upheld at stage 1 with the other 2 not being upheld. The Service Manager maintains an oversight of all complaints and discusses the learning with the management and social work teams as appropriate.

3.23 Strategic issues and forward plans

3.23.1 The move towards a regionalised adoption service has now taken place and we are keen to improve on the positive outcomes for children. The new agency will need to continue with its targeted adopter recruitment strategy and will aim to recruit adopters who can parent the more challenging harder to place children and who are able to adopt a child through the Early Permanency route to adoption. Recruiting and supporting the Early Permanence adopters (who are, in effect, foster carers for a short time as well) is challenging and time consuming but the rewards and benefits for the child are significant.

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 this report takes into account these local and national issues.

4.2 Equality and Diversity / Cohesion and Integration

4.2.1 This is discussed throughout the report. The number of children from a Black and Minority Ethnic Group in need of adoption in the 2016/17 period is 22%. Nationally children from a Black and Minority Ethnic background tend to wait longer for a placement due to a shortage of adoptive parents to meet their needs. The challenge is to recruit a more diverse range of adoptive families from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities. This is reflected in our recruitment strategy and specific statements in relation to this can be seen on our adoption recruitment website and in our statement of purpose. The Regional Adoption Agency is undertaking an equality impact assessment over

the next 6 months to ensure that we continue to focus on recruiting a diverse range of adopters.

4.3 Council policies and City Priorities

- 4.3.1 The activities in this report contribute to the Best Council Plan outcome for everyone in Leeds to 'be safe and feel safe' with specific priorities to 'keep people safe from harm' and 'support children to have the best start in life'. In addition, the supporting Children and Young People's Plan identifies Looked after Children as one of three priority 'obsessions'. The adoption service is integral to our plan to safely and appropriately reduce the numbers of Children Looked After 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 The changes in the demand for adoptive placements has declined again this year, significantly lower than the peak in 2012/13, and as a result, staffing resources have been reduced and deployed elsewhere to ensure the service is value for money.

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

The landscape in adoption continues to change rapidly and Leeds adoption service continues to provide an effective service for the children requiring adoption. The 2015 Ofsted inspection provides evidence of the good service provided.

6 Recommendations

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 documents¹

- 7.1 None

¹ 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.

