

17 March 2014**Agenda Item: 7**

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

ADOPTION SERVICE BI-ANNUAL REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with a six-monthly update on activity in the adoption service from September 2013 to February 2014.

Information and Advice

2. The Government continues to focus on adoption in an attempt to cope with the growing numbers of children looked after nationally. This focus is two-fold: to exit more children by adoption; and to exit children more quickly by adoption.
3. The Children and Families Bill currently progressing through Parliament now has an amended clause, whereby the Secretary of State could remove the ability to practice as an adoption agency from a specific local authority, following debate in Parliament. This is amended from the power to take the adoption function from any or all local authorities.
4. The volume of work in the adoption service in 2013-14 is expected to be as follows:

	2013-14 (Estimated)	2012-13	2011-12
Adoptive Family Approvals	60	45	31
New Adoption Plans	75	104	81
Children Placed	108	86	51
Children Adopted	85	40	42

5. This shows the required improvements in recruiting adopters. The national picture is a 15% increase in adoptions to March 2013. In Nottinghamshire we have also seen an improvement in the timeliness of assessing adopters. Before the new Stage Two Process of assessing and approving adopters was implemented in July 2013, approximately 30% of adopters were approved within eight months. Under the new process approximately 60% are approved within six months.
6. Nottinghamshire has increased recruitment by almost 100% since 2011-2012.

7. The table below shows the number of children discussed each month at the homefinding meeting, from March 2013:

Month	Children Waiting	Match	Hold	Total
March	45	53	13	111
April	32	49	25	106
May	23	60	21	104
June	24	46	23	93
July	22	42	11	75
September	22	42	16	80
November	24	49	9	82
December	20	59	3	82
January	19	46	11	76
February	20	35	10	65

8. The number linked to our own adopters has steadily increased, and the number linked with other agencies has now fallen dramatically.
9. Our Partnership with a Local Voluntary Agency continues to provide placements for children within the Midlands, thus reducing the need for permanence social workers to travel great distances.
10. The number of children waiting for adoption has steadily fallen over the year, from approximately 35 to 20, and the children in this group are those we would expect – siblings, older single children and children with development complexities.
11. For these children we deploy a range of intensive homefinding activities:
- Adoption Activity Days
 - feature in Children who Wait / Be My Parent publications
 - DVD footage on Children who Wait / Be My Parent websites
 - specific advertising
 - Register exchange events - national
 - Register exchange events - local
12. On 14 January 2014 the Department of Education (DfE) published an update to the adoption scorecards, covering the period 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2013. The scorecards were introduced as part of a new approach to address delays in the adoption system, as set out in 'An action plan for adoption: tackling delay' (March 2012).

13. Performance thresholds make clear the Government's expectations for timeliness in the adoption system. The three scorecard indicators are:
 - A1: average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (target 608 days)
 - A2: 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 (target 182 days)
 - A3: measures the number and percentage of children who wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (recorded as a percentage - no targets set for local authorities).
14. The scorecards published in January 2014 show that overall nationally there has been no improvement in timeliness since 2009 to 2012. Against the updated thresholds for A1 and A2, only 36 local authorities met both thresholds and 65 authorities failed to meet both thresholds.
15. Nottinghamshire is one of the authorities that failed to meet both thresholds. Edward Timpson, the Children's Minister, has written to all local authorities, including Nottinghamshire, to stress that meeting the thresholds will need an increasingly sharp focus, especially as thresholds become more challenging over the next few years. By 2016, the targets for A1 and A2 will be 426 days and 121 days respectively.
16. The DfE has also stated that, whilst the national picture is disappointing, the data does not cover 2013 to 2014 - the year in which a number of significant changes to the adoption system were made and which are expected to deliver improvements.
17. The 2013 scorecard shows that Nottinghamshire has not achieved the target in either the 'placing' (A1) or 'matching' (A2) indicators described above. In placing (A1), the target has been missed by 17 days, and in matching (A2), the target has been missed by 35 days. In A3, 57% of children are placed within 20 months of entering care in Nottinghamshire, compared to the national average of 55%.
18. As stated by the Children's Minister, adoption targets are ever tightening with the aim of improving performance and placing children more quickly. The national picture demonstrates the challenge that this squeezing of targets presents to local authorities. If the 2012 targets were still in place (639 days for placing, and 213 days for matching), Nottinghamshire's 2013 performance would have met the placement target and only been 4 days off the matching target.
19. The performance data used in the scorecard is also historic data, whereas the targets set are current. This makes it difficult for local authorities, all of whom have completed historic performance in relation to adoption, to meet targets being set now and squeezed further in the future. For example, the matching measurement (A2) for 2013 is applied to all children adopted from April 2010 to March 2013. These children are likely to have become subject to placement order between 2009 and 2012, which will therefore in no way reflect current performance. In Nottinghamshire, for children adopted between April and December 2013, the average matching time is 191 days, 9 days off the target of 182 days. However, the 2013 scorecard reports Nottinghamshire as 35 days off this target

because it uses historic performance data. It is also worth noting again that the target for placing (A1) has reduced by 21 days between 2012 and 2013 (639 to 608 days), which sees our historic performance being judged as off target by 17 days in the 2013 scorecard.

20. Over the past 2 years the percentage of Looked After Children (LAC) placed for adoption in Nottinghamshire has risen from 4% to 10%. This performance measurement better demonstrates that a robust consideration of adoption for all children requiring permanence is taking place.
21. Nottinghamshire has also implemented Foster to Adopt, which allows children to be placed earlier with their permanent family by using fostering regulations, prior to adoption placement. One child has been successfully placed, for another it was considered but not achieved, and for a further two is being actively undertaken.
22. The percentage of the Nottinghamshire looked after children (LAC) population placed for adoption has risen from 4% to 10% over the last year, and is now at the level we would expect to maintain.
23. Our Partnership (enabled by Adoption Reform Grant) with a Local Voluntary Adoption Agency - Adopt Together - is proving successful. As well as placing children, other benefits are:
 - staff training
 - adopters training
 - early identification of children in Nottinghamshire in need of adoption support
 - shared adoption support work
 - improved professional relationships
 - peer support.
24. We are expecting in 2014:
 - further guidance on Fostering to Adopt
 - new Regulations regarding adoption support, including personalised budgets.
 - more Adoption Reform Grant (£50m nationally)
 - to maintain new fully staffed levels
 - developments in the voluntary sector, particularly in adoption support
 - consultation on the new two stage process for Adopters in light of practice and experience.

Other Options Considered

25. The report is for noting only.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

26. The report is for noting only.

Statutory and Policy Implications

27. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, the public sector equality duty, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the six-monthly report on activity in the adoption service from September 2013 to February 2014 be noted.

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Constitutional Comments

28. As this report is for noting only no Constitutional Comments are required.

Financial Comments (KLA 21/02/14)

29. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

An action plan for adoption: tackling delay – Department for Education (March 2012).

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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