

Report



meeting

SOCIAL SERVICES STANDING
SELECT COMMITTEE

agenda item number

date

16th December 2003

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES

PROGRESS ON ADOPTION BEST VALUE REPORT

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To provide the Select Committee with information on the progress of the Best Value Improvement Plan relating to Adoption Services.
- 1.2 To allow the Select Committee to comment on the issues raised.

2. Information and Advice

- 2.1 The Best Value Improvement Plan is attached and the progress on each action is indicated.
- 2.2 There has been significant progress with all actions either having been achieved or nearing completion. This report highlights some of these areas and also areas where there are ongoing concerns.
- 2.3 In relation to 'Improvement Priority 1: Permanency for Looked After Children', the percentage of looked after children adopted continues to be high and it seems likely that for the current year it will be at least 12%. Systems are now in place for permanency plans to be agreed by 4 month review (1.2), for permanency plans to be reviewed every six months (1.3) and a pilot scheme for Family Group Conferences (1.1) is currently underway. Further work is taking place on the proposals which have been agreed in relation to permanent fostering (1.6). An agreement has been reached with an independent agency to provide an independent counselling service for birth relatives (1.4) and a budget has been allocated for this.
- 2.4 In relation to 'Improvement Priority 2: Timescales to Adoption,' there have been improvements made to the process in line with the recommendations of the Best Value Review but, as yet, there has been no improvement in overall time taken to achieve an adoption order. Some of the newer measures are likely to impact over the coming year and it is anticipated that in twelve

months time we will be able to report improvement. Further work will be advanced with the courts, legal services and CAFCASS. (2.12)

The percentage of foster carer adoption (2.10) has risen from 7% in 2000 – 2001 (the national percentage at this time was 14%), to 12% (the current national figure is 15%) and is showing signs of continuing a steady increase.

- 2.5 In relation to 'Improvement Priority 3: Recruitment and Matching' there has been a lot of activity and a number of important initiatives. The overall number of approved adopters (3.1) has not increased, however, this is because the County Adoption Team (CAT) has not been fully staffed. All staff have individual targets and these have been met. It is anticipated that the team will be fully staffed in the near future. The average time for adopter approval is now on target at eight months. (3.2). Structures and processes have been altered to ensure there are stronger and more effective links between key staff involved in the adoption process, and new and innovative recruitment methods are being employed (3.3 – 3.7).
- 2.6 In relation to 'Improvement Priority 4: Develop Post Adoption Support Services' there have been a number of important developments. Phase 1 of The Adoption and Children Act 2002 has now been implemented and there are now new statutory duties for Councils in relation to supporting adopted children in adoptive families. Staffing levels in the Support After Adoption team have been increased through the ring-fenced Adoption support Grant (4.1 – 4.4). Services to adopted adults will be a focus of new Support regulations of the Adoption and Children Act yet to be implemented. It is hoped to develop the specialist resource for Birth Records Counselling (4.5) together with the other provisions for adopted adults at the time the new measures come into force.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Best Value Improvement Plan be considered by the Standing Select Committee in 12 months time.

STUART BROOK
Director of Social Services

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF ADOPTION SERVICES

BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN – Updated on 12.11.03

IMPROVEMENT PLAN LINKS TO THE FOLLOWING:-

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT GOALS

Quality Protects Programme Performance Indicators

Objective 1: To ensure that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of childhood. =Performance Assessment Framework Indicator C23 - the number of looked after children adopted during a year as a percentage of children looked after at year end.

= Quality Protects performance indicator 2 - Average time children remain looked after before they are adopted.

The Central Government goal through the Public Services Agreement targets for Local authorities is to maximise the contribution adoption can make to providing permanent families for children without compromising on quality and so maintaining current levels of adoptive placement stability. Nationally this will be measured through an increase in the number of looked after children adopted, a reduction in the average time looked after before adoption and monitoring adoption disruptions.

National Adoption Standards for England

The Government has issued standards for adoption services in England which cover services for children, adopters, birth parents and relatives. These standards deal with entitlements, information, processes, timescales, complaints and support and represent a detailed framework for the provision of adoption services.

COUNTY COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN

Building a Future - Nottinghamshire Strategic Plan 2001 - 2005. Children looked after are a vulnerable section of our community and the achievement of positive outcomes for them through adoption to the strategic goals in education, culture and regeneration by enabling them to reach their potentials and participate in the community and labour market.

Social Care and Health Goal - Reduce the time children spend in care before returning home or being adopted.

Social Care and Health Target - Reduce the average length of stay of Children Looked After who have been in local authority care for over three months by 5 %.

DEPARTMENTAL STRATEGY

Children's Services Strategy - Item 7: If a return home cannot be achieved within a time scale that matches the child's needs, permanency will be achieved through an alternative appropriate placement, within the shortest realistic timescale. The placement will be supported as necessary to enable it to succeed.

KEY OVERALL SUCCESS CRITERIA

The overall aim of the Improvement Plan is to support the continued high number of adoptions, to improve timescales reducing uncertainty for children and developing alternative choices for achieving permanency:

- Average time children looked after before adoption reduced from 36 months to 24 months by 2003/2004.
- Reduce average time from admission to panel from 13 to 6 months.
- Reduce average time from panel to placement from 9 to 6 months.
- Reduce number of looked after children to 490 by April 2003.
- Increase percentage of permanency plans agreed at 4 month review to 90%.
- Achieve 80% of plans to panel for consideration in two months.
- All looked after reviews with adoption plans held on time and chaired independently.
- Decrease in the number of adoption children becoming looked after.
- Decrease in the number of post placement pre-order disruptions.
- Improve by April 2003 from 43% to 50% the percentage of children who have been looked after more than four years who have been in the same foster placement for at least two years.

RESOURCING

Implementation of the improvement plan will primarily be resourced through improved planning, monitoring and decision making with existing levels of staffing and budgets. Quality Protects funding has already been allocated to the Independent Reviewing Officers Team and to social work posts in the localities which will impact on the adoption casework. An Invest to Save Loan has been used to increase the establishment of the County Adoption Team. In 2002/03 money will be allocated from the CAMHS grant (£10,000) for support to adopted children and the allocation for adoption allowances increased to support more placements. The Adoption Support Grant has been used to provide extra staffing to the Support After Adoption team to cover the shortfalls in social work staff identified in the Best Value Review.

IMPROVEMENT PRIORITY 1: PERMANENCY FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Quality Protects Objective 1: To ensure that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of their childhood.

Success criteria: High percentage of looked after children adopted during the year.
Proportion of children looked after more than 4 years who have been in their first foster placement for at least 2 years.

Point	Task	Who	Resource	Timescale
1.1	Establish pilot scheme on the use of Family Group Conferences.	Commissioning Officer	Q.P. bid for resources.	Options to CCSI Oct. 2002.
1.2	Permanency plan agreed by 4 month review and evidence parallel planning in place.	Localities/Independent Reviewing Team	Statutory Review/monitoring tools.	From Now.
1.3	Permanency plans to be reviewed every 6 months, relatives and foster carers to be considered, new plan considered if previous not achieved.	Localities/Independent Reviewing Team	Statutory reviews.	From Now.
1.4	Independent counselling service to be developed from a voluntary agency for birth relatives involved in court proceedings.	Lead Manager/Commissioning Officer	Reallocation of existing grant.	By April 2003.
1.5	Specific approval for permanent foster carers and the permanent match for children under 12 years old should be	Fostering panels/Fostering service/children's team.	Panel time and worker time to report to panel	

	approved by the fostering panel.		Commissioning Officer to develop procedure.	
1.6	Review current use of permanent foster carers and the process of recruitment and support.	Commissioning Officer/Lead Manager Fostering.	Management time	Proposals to Joint CCSMG Dec. 02

It is probable that in the current year 2003-2004 the percentage of Looked After children will increase to 12%.

IMPROVEMENT PRIORITY 2: TIMESCALES TO ADOPTION

Quality Protects Performance Indicator: Average time children remain looked after before they are adopted.

Success criteria: Admission to Panel 6 months.
Placement to adoption order 12 months.

Point	Task	Who	Resource	Timescale
2.1	Clarify Senior Management responsibilities.	Programme Manager	Management time.	Report proposal Joint CCSMG April 02.
2.2	Adoption plans/parallel plans to be monitored.	Locality Managers/Lead Manager Adoption	Bimonthly Locality monitoring meetings involving CAT/IRO/CAFU.	From July 2002
2.3	Plan to Panel in 8 weeks of decision	Children's Teams/CAFU	Social worker time.	From April 2002
2.4	Timescales from each stage of process to be monitored and reviewed.	Lead Service Manager /Performance review Team/CAFU.	FAM systems - quarterly statistics.	From April 2002
2.5	All permanently looked after children to have detailed chronological history on computer.	Commissioning Officer.	I.T. resource development/admin support.	By April 2003.
2.6	Develop a policy regarding the use of Section 20 admissions and monitor their use.	CCSMG	Performance Review section to monitor.	Sept. 2002.
2.7	Review current adoption process and pathways to isolate causes of delay, streamline and clarify roles and responsibilities.	Lead Manager Adoption.	Management time.	Sept. 2002.
2.8	Increase number of adoption panels to three.	Lead Manager Adoption	£6,000 from Quality protects Grant.	June 2002.

Point	Task	Who	Resource	Timescale
2.9	Identify children with difficult to resource adoption plans and fast track external recruitment options.	Lead Manager Adoption/CAT/CAFU/IRO	Statutory Review	Sept. 2002.
2.10	Where older children have developed significant attachment their carers should be encouraged to adopt.	IRO	Within current services.	Target to have similar percentage of foster carer adoptions to national average 2005.
2.11	Review relationship between adoption allowances and fostering allowances and identify options dealing with equality and incentive.	Lead Manager Adoption.	Financial shortfall in adoption allowance budget.	Sept. 2003.
2.12	Timescales and delay to be subject of further discussions with courts, legal services and CFCASS.	Assistant Director	Management time	April .2003.

Still problems in achieving timescales throughout the process although there are promising signs of improvement in relation to the reduction in times from the Best Interest Decision to the Plan to panel, in the time spent linking children with CAT adopters and in the time from between review decision and lodging. The new arrangements in relation to these areas have not been in place for long and will need to be reviewed again in six months but initial signs are that they are proving effective. Regrettably delays with courts and legal services continue to feature in too many cases.

IMPROVEMENT PRIORITY 3: RECRUITMENT AND MATCHING

Quality Protects Performance Indicator: Average time children remain looked after before they are adopted.

Success criteria: Proportion of looked after children placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision that adoptions is in the child's best interests.
Average time from Panel to placement to 6 months.
Number of families approved as adopters increased by 12.
Average timescale for adopter approval to 8 months
Increase number of placements approved from internal or external sources to 60 per annum.

Point	Task	Who	Resource	Timescale
3.1	Increase number of approved adopters.	County Adoption Team/Lead Manager Adoption.	Extra posts from Invest to save.	From Sept. 200
3.2	Reduce average time for adopter approval.	County Adoption Team/Lead Manager Adoption.	Extra posts.	By April 2003.
3.3	Revise process for responding to specific advertisements so initial response goes to CAT.	CAT	Extra posts	From July 200:
3.4	County Adoption Service to be involved in the making of adoption plans. External advertised children allocated a team member.	County Adoption Team	Extra posts in County Adoption team and CAFU.	From July 2002
3.5	Consider closer links between County Adoption team and central Adoption Unit to consolidate family finding processes.	Lead Manager Adoption	Larger premises/appendix E payments.	By April 2003.
3.6	Experiment and evaluate new methods of family finding: internet, using PR consultants, alternative publications, contracting out difficult to place to VAA.	Lead Manager Adoption.	Funding currently earmarked for SLA with VAA/external purchasing budget.	Ongoing.
3.7	Service managers to make final decision if possible family link not suitable.	Children's Service Managers	Management time.	From April 200

Vacancies in the County Adoption Team have meant that the overall number of adopters has not increased. The social work staff in post have met their individual demanding targets.

Recruitment to the vacant posts is ongoing and it is hoped that the team will be fully staffed by March 2004.

IMPROVEMENT PRIORITY 4: DEVELOP POST ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES.

Success criteria: Increase numbers of families receiving post order support.

Point	Task	Who	Resource	Timescale
4.1	Explore possible sources for additional investment in Support After Adoption.	Directorate	1 fte social work post.	2003/04/budget round.
4.2	Agreed procedure for adopters right to assessment for post adoption support.	Commissioning Officers.	Commissioning team time	April 2003.
4.3	Increase range in support of packages.	Support After Adoption Team.	CAMHS grant money for groupwork and therapy/ QP money for respite support.	Sept 2002.
4.4	Increase support for contact arrangements.	Support After Adoption/ Lead Manager Adoption.	1 ½ f.t.e. posts-funding to be identified.	April 2003.
4.5	Create specialist resource for Birth records Counselling.	Lead Manager Adoptions/ Support After Adoption Team.	1 ½ f.t.e. social work posts - funding to be identified.	April 2003.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION ARRANGEMENTS

1. 6 monthly progress reports to Children's Senior Management Team.
2. Report back to Social Services Standing Select Committee (bi-annual item).
3. Business Planning Process for teams.
4. Annual Quality protects Performance indicators Reports.

STRATEGIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In the initial stages the two main users of the Adoption Service are children who require an adoptive family and prospective adopters who wish to become parents via adoption. However the Service recognises the lifelong needs of adopted children and all other parties involved in the adoption and provides appropriate support to all these. The impact of these proposals increase both the quality of the service we can offer and the speed at which the adoption process will move forward. The Adoption Service seeks to place all children regardless of health, race or background. It welcomes applicants from everyone regardless of race, religion, language, disability, sexual orientation or marital status. The improvements of the Adoption Service meeting the goals of the Sustainability Checklist developed in accordance with local Agenda 21. It seeks to minimise the effects of social exclusion and hence has a positive impact on building sustainable communities, minimising crime, reducing factors that contribute to ill health such as poverty, stress and lifestyles for a vulnerable group in the community. The Adoption Service encourages social equality through improved outcomes and opportunities for looked after children.

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