

8 October 2012

Agenda Item: 7

REPORT OF THE GROUP MANAGER, REGULATED AND CORPORATE PARENTING

PROGRESS IN THE ADOPTION SERVICE

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform Members about progress and developments in the adoption service and Nottinghamshire's response to the national agenda.

Information and Advice

Timescales in adoption

2. Nottinghamshire is currently measured in three areas of the adoption process:
 - a) N161, the time taken from adoption panel approving the child's plan to placement with adopters.

This is the figure which was released in league tables in October 2011, during National Adoption Week. At that time Nottinghamshire placed 54% of children within the 12 months target.

This measurement is taken for children adopted during the year, which inevitably means it relates to historic practice. The league table in October 2011 was based on children who became subject to an adoption order between April 2010 and March 2011, and were therefore placed, most likely in September 2009 to September 2010.

Based on the children adopted 2011-12, 62.8% were placed within 12 months. This year to date, 67% were placed within 12 months.

- b) The Adoption Scorecard for matching children with families which has a target of matching children with adopters within 7 months of obtaining Placement Order. This target will reduce to 4 months within the next 4 years.

When the scorecard was released in May this year, this showed Nottinghamshire's performance to be above average, at 163 days (national average 171 days), approximately 5-6 months. This is based on an average of the 3 years 2008-2011.

Of the children adopted 2011-12, 65% achieved this 7 month timescale, and 37% met the 4 month timescale. However, scorecard performance is recorded in days, not percentages, and it takes a 3 year average.

- c) The Adoption Scorecard for the length of time children spend being looked after prior to being placed for adoption. The target for this is 21 months.

Between 2008-11, 56% of our children were placed within 21 months; the national average was 58%. Of the children adopted 2011-12, 65% achieved this 21 month timescale.

3. Clearly, Nottinghamshire's performance is improving in our timeliness of placing children, however some children continue to experience delay.
4. We are beginning to experience a push from courts to complete care proceedings in a timely manner, and this is impacting positively on very young children, who are ready to place within months of birth.
5. In order to reduce delay within the adoption processes, we have a monthly home finding meeting to consider children and matches.
6. Supply of adopters does not keep pace with children needing families, and we do now discuss children with some families prior to their approval. In some cases we present approval and match to panel. This is a change in practice, as previously only foster carer matches were considered in this way.
7. However, it means there is no delay for children in waiting for adopters to be approved, and then returning to panel in subsequent weeks with a match. The risk is borne by adopters.
8. The Government Action Plan for Adoption, released earlier this year, makes it clear that the adoption assessment/approval process is viewed as bureaucratic and slow.
9. The action plan talks of approvals of adopters being achieved within 6 months – 2 months of pre-selection work, self-assessment, statutory checks, own reflection, followed by 4 months after an application is accepted of assessment, and matching. This is now detailed in consultation documents and it is clear that matching is expected to take place during approval processes, and increased involvement of adopters in matching is to be encouraged.
10. In the home finding meetings we discuss children as soon as the agency decision is made. We do not feature children without a Placement Order but we complete all tasks, so we are immediately ready.
11. Our commitment to placing children in a timely manner is not at the expense of careful consideration. All steps previously taken remain in place; what has been removed are various periods of 'waiting time' within our own systems. This also applies to adult assessments.

12. We will continue to seek to reduce delay for children, in all ways possible, and expect to look at other changes to practice in future, such as adopters being approved as foster carers for children to enable earlier placement.

Numbers in the adoption process

13. We have taken a very proactive approach to home finding, with great success. In recent months we have placed or matched 4 sibling groups of 3, which bucks the national trend.
14. We have placed/matched many sibling pairs; however the biggest challenge currently is to find adopters for single boys who are less than 5 years of age.
15. We have had an increase in relinquished babies this year and are ready to place them at 12 weeks of age; one was placed aged 105 days.
16. We have vastly improved our home finding activity, with excellent profiles of children and committed involvement to national events. As a result we expect to place around 70 children this year, up to 20 of whom may be placed with adopters who are approved by other agencies.
17. In addition, Nottinghamshire maintains its reputation with adopters, and we expect 48 approvals this year, up on last year's 31.
18. We expect to consider 120 plans this year, up by 50% on last year's figure of 81. The number of Looked After Children continues to grow and was 809 in June 2012, compared to 739 in July 2011.

Home finding for children

19. Nottinghamshire now participates in a range of home finding activities, some of which are entirely new. One of the new initiatives is the Adoption Activity Days which is an innovative approach to home finding in this country.
20. Adoption Activity Days are a new home finding initiative for harder to place children, being run as a pilot project for two years by the British Agency for Fostering and Adoption. It is based on principles of empowerment of children waiting for a new family and adopter-led linking. The project is based in the East Midlands Adoption Consortium, which embraces 9 local Authorities, although initially only 5 were willing to take part.
21. Nottinghamshire is one of the lead Authorities in the pilot project steering group, and has been well regarded both locally and nationally for the commitment to developing practice and placement of children in this area. Staff from the Authority have been involved in well-received radio and newspaper broadcasts as well as being a part of a video of the first event, which is used for national training purposes, and securing additional sponsorship for the project.
22. There have now been three Adoption Activity Days with two more planned for October 2012 and March 2013. As expertise has developed and children have been matched and placed, so Government interest and support for the days has grown. Martin Narey, adoption champion for the Government, is planning to attend the event in October 2012.

23. So far the Adoption Activity Days have offered 128 places to children, several of whom have attended twice. Between 23 and 27 adoptive families have attended each event. Each day has given the children a memorable day of activities. Each child has a trusted carer with them, as well as their social worker and activities are geared around age and interest. The event finishes with food and singing for the children, a buffet for all the adults, and the children all go home with a small bag of toys. The event has been held in different large venues with the capacity for about 180 people. General feedback from the children has been that they have had a great day out.
24. Specifically, Nottinghamshire had places for 23 (out of 39) children at the first day, 13 (out of 41) children at the second day, and 9 (out of 48) children at the third day. As more Authorities witnessed the success of the days, so more East Midlands Agencies signed up to take part, giving less child places per Authority.
25. Our children included a range of children with additional needs, some had profound disabilities, others were older, and some were brothers and sisters wanting to stay together. Many were boys. Although the children were predominantly white, a few Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children also attended. We have also sent two sets of Nottinghamshire adopters to the events, as they had been waiting a long time to find the right child for them.
26. Feedback from all participants has been balanced, constructive and largely very positive. One of the positive spin offs has been children being pleased to see so many children waiting for families, like them, which makes it feel more normal.
27. However, this event has to deal with children who will not find an adoptive family at this kind of day, or at all. The work done by the steering group to provide detailed written guidance to social workers preparing the children, for their foster carers and for the prospective adopters is critical in this respect. All the prospective adopters are asked to write some positive comments on every child who attends before they leave the event which becomes part of the child's life story. Also a number of children do attract follow up interest which does not result in a match. Given the complex nature of the children's needs and histories, this is not surprising, as we are asking prospective adopters to make a lifelong commitment to our child which goes far beyond the initial attraction. However, all interest is logged for the child so that they take away some positives about themselves, their talents and personalities.
28. In terms of matching children, 22 children have found families from the three events. Specifically, Nottinghamshire will have matched 5 children, representing 23% of children placed so far in the pilot. Nottinghamshire children consisted of 2 sibling groups and a single child, 3 boys and 2 girls in the age range 3 to 6 years, and with a range of different additional needs.
29. Many of the 22 children matched had been waiting for over a year for an adoptive family, and one child in particular, who had been featured on GMTV last autumn as part of national adoption week and received not a single enquiry because of her learning and physical disabilities, has been successfully placed. Children matched also include 2 nine year olds, and 8 older sibling pairs.

30. Adoption Activity Days are one part of a wide range of home finding activities in Nottinghamshire as follows:

- we have a comprehensive child's profile, the information from which is used for the adoption register and referrals to the regional consortium
- the profile includes professional photographs which show our children in the best possible light
- we have a system to respond to register enquiries which is efficient and professional which means that we do not lose potential carers at the enquiry stage
- we hold local profile exchange events to share our children's profiles with locally approved adopters
- we have attended national register exchange days in London, Leeds and Cardiff
- we have close working relationships with the local Voluntary Adoption Agencies and expect to place several children with them throughout the year
- we have made a DVD of a range of children which we can show adopters
- we have had extensive media campaigns this year involving experienced adopters and maintaining our profile to potential adopters.

Other Options Considered

31. As this is a report for noting, it is not necessary to consider other options.

Statutory and Policy Implications

32. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, 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

That:

- 1) the developments and progress that Nottinghamshire is making in ensuring that children with a plan for adoption are placed in a timely and safe way be noted.
- 2) the development and progress that Nottinghamshire is making to attract potential adopters to Nottinghamshire be noted.

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Constitutional Comments

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

Financial Comments (NDR 25/09/12)

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

Background Papers

None.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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