

<b>19 November 2009</b>		<b>ITEM 8</b>
<b>Children's Services Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committee Panel</b>		
<b>Adoption Report Outlining Process and Performance</b>		
<b>Portfolio Holder:</b> Cllr Sue MacPherson, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Not Applicable	
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Jean Imray Head Children's Health & Social Care		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Jo Olsson Director Children Education and Families		
This report is public		
<b>Purpose of Report:</b> to outline Adoption systems and processes as undertaken by the Council's Adoption Service		

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report was requested by the Committee and is for information only. This report sets out the different elements of the purpose and function of the Adoption Service and makes comment on current levels of activity.

A separate report covering the work of the Fostering Service is also being presented.

#### **1. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**1.1 Committee are asked to note contents and consider a further report that looks in detail at current policy and allowances in the near future.**

#### **2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:**

**2.1** Prior to October 2007 the functions of the Adoption and Fostering Services were undertaken by one team, overseen by one team manager. However, in recognition of the specialist nature of both functions, and the need to strengthen managerial capacity at Team Manager level, two distinct teams were created. This was in line with the proposal put before Cabinet in April 2007.

- 2.2 The Adoption Team now consists of three full time qualified social workers, and two qualified staff each working 18.5 hours. There is one full-time adoption administrator, although it has recently been necessary to bring in additional admin support to ensure the smooth running of the service. The work of the team is central to the provision offered to Thurrock's Looked After Children. Without an appropriate placement (a safe and nurturing place in which to live) children and young people cannot hope to meet their potential and the Council will not fully meet its Corporate Parenting responsibilities.
- 2.3 In the main, children who are recommended for adoption will have been removed from their birth parents as a result of likely or actual significant harm. They will have been made the subject of Care Orders. During the legal process, a Care Plan, ratified by the Court, will have determined that it is in the child's best interests to be placed for adoption. As part of the court process the court also review the Adoption Support Plan agreed by the Local Authority to ensure that it will meet the child's needs. Children placed for adoption are increasingly likely to be older and have more complex needs, or be part of a sibling group, resulting in increased support packages.
- 2.4 Occasionally, babies are 'relinquished' by their parents at birth for adoption, when they (with counselling and help) come to the conclusion that they are unable to offer a stable home to that child.
- 2.5 Thurrock is part of an Adoption Consortium with Southend and Havering. This is a partnership first formed in 1999, which significantly extended the capacity of all three agencies to provide adoptive parents to children who need adoption.
- 2.6 From October 2007 a post of Team Manager was created to jointly manage the work of both the Thurrock and Southend Adoption Teams. However in the context of increased demand for services it has not been possible to sustain this arrangement and the existing post holder assumed full time responsibility for the Southend service in the summer of 2009. Recruitment is therefore in progress to fill this key vacancy at Team Manager level.
- 2.7 Following recent restructuring of managerial accountabilities within Children's Social Care, line management of Adoption falls within the remit of the Service Manager – Placements and Support.

### **3. ISSUES AND/OR OPTIONS:**

- 3.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (implemented from 2005) brought in new and fundamental provision that changed the face of adoption law. This has had significant impact on the service in terms of workload and financial burden. The law now:
- encourages more people to adopt looked after children by helping to ensure that the support they need is available.
  - allows unmarried couples to be able to apply to adopt a child jointly after they have been subjected to rigorous assessment processes that will also apply to married couples and single people wishing to adopt.

- tightens up controls and safeguards on inter-country adoption.
- helps to cut harmful delays in the adoption process through an Adoption and Children Act Register to suggest links between children and approved adopters and measures to speed up court cases.
- provides for access to information and help tracing adoption records so that adopted adults and their adult birth relatives may apply for information which could be disclosed if consent is given
- places duty on Local Authorities to arrange advocacy services for looked after children in the context of complaints.
- creates the additional legal option of Special Guardianship Orders
- changes the basis on which financial support is offered to prospective adopters

3.2 In particular the consequences of these changes within Thurrock have been:

- an increase in the number of children with adoption as either their primary or parallel care plan, with a consequential growth in family finding activity
- the replacement of the previous Adoption Allowances system by a system of Adoption Support Payments has left a combination of pre- and post 2005 agreements, which will be consolidated into one system over time
- the growth in the use Special Guardianship has created an additional financial category of Special Guardianship payments, for which no specific budget was originally allocated. In 2008/2009 actual expenditure was £83,388, with a projected cost for this financial year of £183,120. However these payments are currently spread across 22 children. Compared to a minimum annual cost of maintaining a child in a foster placement in excess of £500 per week (£26,000 per year), coupled with the on costs associated with a looked after child, supporting a successful Special Guardianship placement represents good value for money, as well as (more importantly) providing a more secure base for the child
- although difficult to quantify, Special Guardianship has probably reduced the number of children who would otherwise have been placed for adoption
- a substantial growth of “Letterbox” activity. This is the mechanism through which adopted children may safely maintain a degree of communication with their birth parents or other family members. There are currently 81 active letterbox files
- a growth across the range of post adoption activity, some of which is coordinated across the consortium

3.3 Thurrock currently has five children placed for adoption, i.e. living with their prospective adoptive parents, pending the final legal decision.

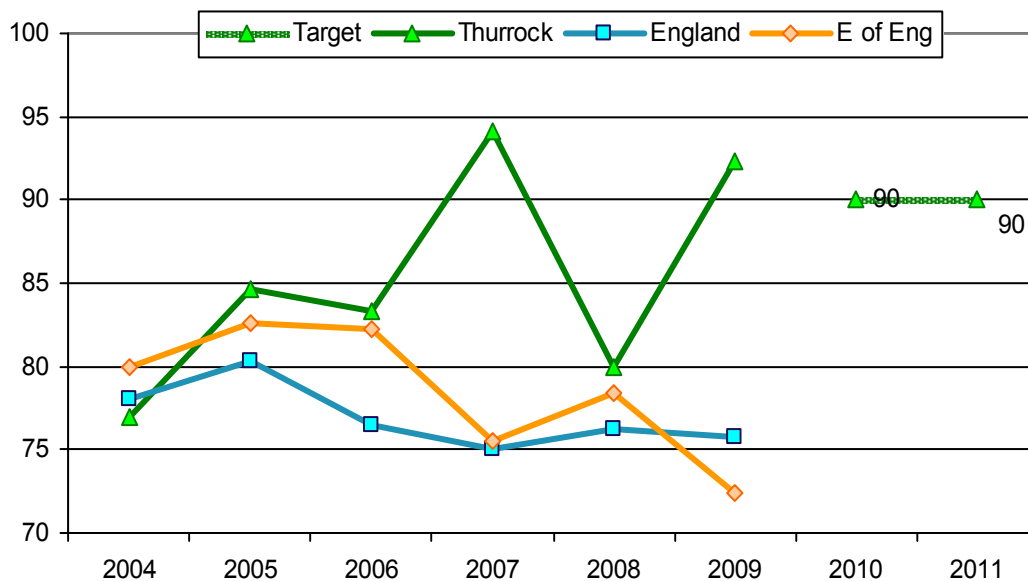
- 3.4 There are currently 30 children subject to an adoption allowance pre 2005. In 2008/09 the actual expenditure was £249,577 with projected spend for 2009/10 of £230,642. There are 15 children subject to an adoption support plan since the change in regulations in 2005. The actual expenditure for 2008/09 was £43,687 with projected spend for 2009/10 of £34,157.
- 3.5 Decisions to place a child for adoption, to approve adults as adoptive parents or to agree to place a particular child with a particular family are overseen by an independent panel. This Panel consists of a number of different key stakeholders (including a Member) and is independently chaired. Its recommendations are then sent to the Executive Head of Service for final agreement. The Adoption Panel meets on a monthly basis and activity includes:
- approval of new adopters
  - approval of existing foster carers seeking to adopt children already placed within their homes.
  - presentation for advice of the cases of children for whom adoption is the plan
  - presentation of children's case for preferred option
  - matching children with adoptive families.
- 3.6 The Thurrock Adoption panel has had a number of changes over the past year. The tenure of the panel chair sadly came to an end and it was therefore necessary to appoint a new chair. The Consortium agreed on a new panel chair, Andy Quin, who took up post in the summer of 2008. Alan Johnstone, the previous chair has been appointed as Agency Advisor to the panel, as it was recognised that the wealth of knowledge that he held was invaluable to Thurrock.
- 3.7 A number of panel members also reached the end of their tenure for panel in 2008 and as such we have worked hard to appoint new panel members. We have been fortunate to appoint a number of experienced panel members who have previously sat elsewhere within the Consortium as well as some new members.
- 3.8 The Adoption Agency is formally subject to a rigorous inspection at a minimum of once every three years. In April 2007 this responsibility passed from CSCI to Ofsted. The last inspection visit was in January 2008. The overall judgement was Satisfactory, indicating that the service is "sound", with Good judgements on three of the four outcome areas assessed. Action has been taken to address issues identified, and work will be continuing to ensure compliance with Regulations and National Minimum Standards.
- The Head of Service, as recommended in audit, signs off all adoption support plans and authorisations are held on files.

- 3.9 In addition to the payments already mentioned, the team manager also maintains the overview for payments to former foster carers who have offered more stability to children by seeking Residence Orders.
- 3.10 Thirty three children received Residence Order allowances during the current financial year. The actual spend for 2008/09 was £228,428 with a forecast for 2009/10 of £208,872. The budget allocated this year for Residence allowances is £123,400, a significant shortfall on the current spends in this area.
- 3.11 As can be seen in the tables below, current performance for Thurrock Council against the relevant National Indicator (NI61) shows good progress in meeting the target of 90% for "The percentage of looked after children adopted during the year who were placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption, and who remained in that placement on adoption."

	Mar-06	Mar-07	Mar-08	Mar-09	Mar-10
Target:	x	x	x	x	90
Thurrock:	83.3	94.1	80.0	92.3	0.0
England:	76.5	75.0	76.3	75.8	
East of England:	82.3	75.5	78.4	72.4	

Rank (/114):	38	4	50	16	
Quartile:	2	1	2	1	
Rank SN (/11):	2	1	5	3	

Dif from National:	6.8	19.1	3.7	16.5	
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However it should be noted that the small absolute numbers involved make this percentage vulnerable to change based on relatively minor changes in performance data. For example there were 13 children placed for adoption in 2008/09 and 5 in the previous reporting year 2007/08

3.12 Key activity for the service in the short term will be:

- to ensure successful recruitment to the Team Manager post
- a review of the interface between the work of the Adoption Team and Panel with the work carried out by case holding social workers
- a review of the longer term admin needs of the team
- an examination of the process for reviewing the different types of payment, to ensure these are all reviewed in a consistent and timely fashion

**4. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT**

4.1 The management of the Adoption service raises no specific issues in relation to Section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act

**5. IMPLICATIONS**

**5.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Yannick Stupples-Whyley**  
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**ystupples-whyley@thurrock.gov.uk**

The figures within the report highlight that there are some budgets that are forecast to over spend in 2009/10. The Directorate have implemented a recovery plan to mitigate the position.

**5.2 Legal**

There are no legal implications arising from the report.

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
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**lmarks@thurrock.gov.uk**

### 5.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**  
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**sdealyn@thurrock.gov.uk**

There are no direct diversity implications arising from this report, as it is for information only.

### 5.4 **Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental**

The management of the Adoption service raises no specific issues in relation to Section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act

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