

7 March 2013		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Adoption Report Outlining Process and Performance		
Report of: Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Accountable Head of Service Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
Accountable Director: Jo Olsson Director Peoples Services		
This report is public		
Purpose of Report: to provide an updated Report on the work of the Adoption Team fulfilling obligations under National Minimum Standard 25.6		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is for information only and fulfils the requirements of 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2011, which is:

25.6 The executive side of the local authority, the voluntary adoption agency's/Adoption Support Agency's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members:

- a. receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every 6 months;*
- b. monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users;*
- c. satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.*

This report supplements the report previously presented in September 2012, and updates members on the Committee on activity across the current financial year.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1.1 The members of the Corporate Parenting Committee are asked to consider this report and their level of satisfaction with the above criteria on management, outcomes and conditions of registration.**

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

- 2.1 The work of the team is central to the provision offered to Thurrock’s Looked After Children, and operates to deliver one of the key objectives of the Children and Young Peoples Plan, “Objective CYPP (PWN) 3.3. Deliver outstanding fostering, private fostering & adoption; develop & maintain excellent services for children in care”.

The work of the team helps to meet a fundamental requirement for fulfilling our Corporate Parenting responsibilities, namely wherever possible to seek a permanent substitute family home for Looked After Children for whom there is no potential for reunification with their birth family.

- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 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. The overall direction of the Consortium’s work is kept under review by senior managers, and whilst no major changes of approach are indicated, some areas for sharing of resources and improving practice have been identified for the coming year.
- 2.5 Line management of Adoption falls within the remit of the Service Manager – Placements and Support.
- 2.6 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (the Act) is the principal piece of legislation governing adoption in England and Wales. It has been in force since 30 December 2005, and has been amended by other legislation since 2002.

3. STAFFING:

- 3.1 The full staffing complement of the Adoption Team consists of one Team Manager, and four full time equivalent Social Worker/Senior Practitioner posts. Through successful recruitment and extending the hours of one part-time social worker, the Team is almost up to full strength, with a vacancy of effectively one day. We intend to advertise this remaining post shortly, and will

be hoping to use these hours to fulfil our responsibility to previously adopted adults who wish to trace birth families.

- 3.2 The Adoption Team Manager has been in post since February 2010, and he continues to maintain a stable base to take forward the work of the team.
- 3.3 There is one full-time adoption administrator, who provides both day to day admin support to the team, as well as being the administrator for the Adoption Panel. Adoption work is very heavily regulated, and adherence to timescales is critical. The administrator's role is therefore a crucial one.
- 3.4 We have been fortunate to have a very capable individual in this role for the last year or so, but unfortunately she has informed us of her intention to resign imminently, due to family circumstances. Work is already under way to recruit a replacement; although this is a Serco appointment, there has been good dialogue with the Team Manager about the timing and selection process, and we are hopeful to have at least a brief overlap to allow a reasonably smooth transition.

4. EXTERNAL SCRUTINY, CHALLENGE AND PERFORMANCE:

- 4.1 As reported previously, Thurrock Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted in February 2012, and received an overall judgement of Good. Nevertheless a number of recommendations were made to improve the service, and an Action Plan was developed to address these. This has been reviewed at regular intervals by the Service Manager and Team Manager, and an updated version is attached as Appendix 1.
- 4.2 It is unlikely that Thurrock Adoption Service will be separately inspected in the future, as there is a proposal that from April 2013 Local Authorities will be subject to a joint inspection of services for children looked after and care leavers, thus ending the specific inspection of Adoption and Fostering Services. There will however be a specific sub-judgement within this on the effectiveness of the local adoption service.
- 4.3 As reported previously, in 2011 Thurrock agreed to be one of a group of authorities engaged in Coram's Partnership to Promote Permanency for Children project. This was a centrally funded government initiative to look at how performance can be improved nationally. It involved providing a researcher with key information about the progress of children towards adoption, and opens us up to external scrutiny in an attempt to identify whether there are avoidable and harmful delays. When this was reported to Corporate Parenting Committee previously we had just received the draft report, and had one meeting to explore the findings. Further discussions have taken place to analyse these in more detail to identify what changes may help speed children's progress through the system towards a positive adoption outcome.
- 4.4 The report highlighted the following strengths:

- faster timescales for the majority of children than achieved nationally
- young children in care achieve permanency reasonably quickly
- strong Consortium arrangements
- successful family finding for most children for whom adoption was planned
- low level of disruption

4.5 It also highlighted the following opportunities to improve and learn further:

- lower levels of adoption than in statistical neighbour authorities
- questions as to whether ethnic minority children were less likely to have a plan of adoption
- challenges in the care planning for sibling groups
- a suggestion of reviewing our recruitment strategy for adopters
- slower timescales for adopters between approval and placement of a child
- relatively low productivity rates within the team

4.6 Taking part in this exercise did not reveal significant findings that we would not have anticipated, but did serve to confirm some perceptions about our existing strengths and weaknesses. However it does need to be understood that the research covered the period 2008-2011, and does not necessarily reflect upon current practice. We also believe that the issue of ethnic minority children is overstated because of a misreading of the proportion of ethnic minority children within our looked after children population.

4.7 The current government has maintained its intention to heighten the profile of adoption as a means to provide permanent care since the publication of “An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay” in March 2012, which introduced the concept of “Adoption Scorecards”. These set out specific thresholds against two indicators, with clear minimum expectations for timeliness of actions in the adoption system.

4.8 The key thresholds set by the Government are namely:-

- 21 months or 625 days from entry into care to adoption
- 7 months or 171 days from granting of Placement Order to matching with prospective adopters

These are calculated as average times. A third measure of performance is the percentage of children who wait less than 21 months from entering into care and moving in with their adoptive family.

The stated intention is to raise these thresholds incrementally over a four year cycle. Local Authorities will be expected to return key performance data to the Department of Education on a quarterly basis which will then be consolidated into comparative national data on an annual basis. Local authorities who fail to meet the thresholds will be expected to explain their performance to central government.

- 4.9 An initial release of data against these criteria was released in May 2012, and reported previously. There was a further release of statistics against these criteria in November 2012, covering the three year period to March 2012.
- 4.10 In general terms Thurrock has performed reasonably well against the first and third of these measures, and slightly below the expected performance threshold on the second:
- Thurrock’s performance was 636 days, which was in line with the England average, and compares favourably with the average of our statistical neighbours which was 658 days. Delays in adoption are often related to the geographic availability of possible adoptive placements, so a geographic comparison with neighbours is also relevant. Essex and Havering, our adjoining authorities, averaged 689 and 716 days respectively.
 - Thurrock’s performance was 221 days, which unfortunately exceeded the threshold by 7 days, and was also above our statistical neighbours at 199 days, and the England average at 195 days. However we again performed better than Essex and Havering, at 263 and 256 days respectively. Our performance is partly explicable by some specific characteristics of children for whom we had difficulty in finding appropriate matching placements, and in particular the challenge of trying to place some siblings (in one case a group of three) together.
 - Against the third measurement Thurrock achieved 59%, which compares favourably with both the England (56%) and Statistical Neighbour ((52%) averages, and also the geographic ones (Essex 55% and Havering 51%)
- 4.11 Whilst most professionals working in the field believe the “Scorecard” is a somewhat crude and blunt tool with which to analyse local performance, particularly for a smaller authority where one or two problematic cases can significantly skew overall figures, the heightened focus that government scrutiny brings to this area is to be welcomed. In Thurrock we accept that external scrutiny is here to stay, and close attention must be paid to performance against a whole range of timescales.
- 4.12 At the time of writing we are confident that end of year figures will reflect a more successful year in performance terms. Some key current statistics are as follows:
- Adopters approved by Panel – 8 (1 inter-country)
 - Approved adopters with placement awaiting Adoption Order – 8 (of which 2 have Thurrock children, and 6 have children from other authorities)
 - Approved Adopters awaiting child placement - 10 (of which 6 have been “linked” awaiting possible matching
 - Children on Placement Orders awaiting placement - 7 (of which 4 have plans for matching with identified Adopters in March or April)

- Children Placed for Adoption (on Placement Orders) – 5
- Adoption Orders granted - 8

Some of the apparent contradictions in these figures are explained by the fact that placements of children for adoption are generally across authorities (usually with or from Consortium partners).

5. BUDGETS:

- 5.1 The Adoption and Permanence Team has a dedicated budget of just over £1.3 million for the current financial year, of which over £1 million is allocated to a range of support payments to carers. Many of the complexities around managing changing levels of demand were outlined in the September report to Committee. This remains a challenging area, with most pressure arising from the increased use of Special Guardianship as a means for children to cease to be looked after.
- 5.2 Discussions are currently taking place both within Care and Targeted Outcomes, and with Legal, to identify ways to control future growth of these payments. This may entail some revision of our existing policy. However we are unlikely to be able to reduce our level of existing commitments, and we need to balance the demands on this budget against the alternative costs that would accrue for the authority if these children remain looked after.
- 5.3 One area of potential year on year fluctuation in this Cost Centre is the use or receipt of Inter-Agency fees when local authorities “purchase” adopters for their children. Thurrock usually avoids great use of these through our reciprocal Consortium arrangements, but there will always be exceptions to this and it is never possible to be certain in advance whether we may be “net gainers” or “losers” in the year ahead.
- 5.4 The remainder of the budget remains largely taken up by salary costs, with some additional expenditure required for the provision of the Adoption Panel, Medical Reports, CRB checks, post-adoption support groups, Ofsted fees, etc. Our most recent forecast across the whole budget cost centre indicates we should remain within our overall budget for the service area this year.

6. PANEL:

- 6.1 The functioning of Thurrock’s Adoption Panel remains largely as outlined in the September report. The one development which has occurred has been the initial implementation of the removal of “should be placed” decisions as a legal responsibility of Panel, and replacement with direct consideration by the Agency Decision Maker (in our case the Head of Service.)
- 6.2 Working out effective means to do this has been a challenge for all local authorities. To date only a small number of children have been taken through this route, and the process has worked reasonably smoothly. We are however grateful for the support of our independent Panel Adviser, Alan Johnstone,

who has continued to play a vital role in the quality assurance of relevant paperwork.

7. ISSUES FOR DEVELOPMENT:

7.1 One area of future development will need to be in response to the government's promotion of "Fostering to Adopt" as a route through which to remove delay. Local discussions have begun to explore how we may promote this agenda, although we do believe we need to resolve significant legal, practical and ethical challenges before this will have a significant impact on the numbers of children that can be adopted this way.

7.2 We are currently expecting confirmation that we will be receiving some additional funding from central government in the form of an Adoption Improvement Grant. This is a one-off funding opportunity available to all local authorities, to be used within fairly specific boundaries. Our potential allocation, if successful, is in the region on £37k.

7.3 We recognise that to achieve significant change in the timescales for children we need to adopt a "whole system approach", and are therefore currently consulting appropriate training providers with whom we can design a series of events throughout the 2013 calendar year to ensure that input is aimed a range of audiences, including:

- Work with Initial Response and Family Support Teams, to ensure that early opportunities are not missed in progressing cases swiftly through Care Proceedings
- Work with Social Workers from our Permanency, Throughcare and Adoption Teams to focus on the quality of CPRs and APRs
- Work with Social Workers on producing Annex A reports
- Training for Service Managers on the Chairing of Legal Planning Meetings
- Work with Adoption Team Social Workers on effective Family Finding
- Developing practice in Lifestory Work and Later Life Letters

The intention is to avoid "one off" events but to build in review sessions during the course of the year to monitor the impact of what has been delivered and to leave scope to plan in additional input if this seems required.

We are hopeful that if we are able to implement this programme it will make a major contribution towards our ability to meet future government expectations.

8. CONSULTATION (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

8.1 click this box once - type this section of your report, which should include details of any consultation that has been undertaken in respect of the report.

9. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

9.1

10. IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Michael Jones**
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There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

10.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
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There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report.

10.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**
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The significant Diversity and Equality implications arising from the report relate to the on-going difficulty of finding adoptive placements for “hard to place” children, such as children with developmental delay, sibling groups and some Black and Ethnic Minority Children. We also recognise that older children may also benefit from adoptive placements, but overwhelmingly prospective adopters wish to adopt younger children. We therefore need always to balance the rights of children to have us pursue any possible options, with the need to avoid raising false expectations by persisting with plans that have no realistic prospect of success. These are challenges for all local authorities, and are not particular to Thurrock.

One issue cited in the Report, namely the query raised by the Coram diagnostic exercise, arises from a misperception of the ethnic composition of our Looked After Children population. Whilst we do currently have a significant proportion of Looked After Children from Black and Ethnic Minority groups, the overwhelming majority of these are older teenagers, and hence highly unlikely to be adopted. This does not reflect any less willingness to try to find permanent homes for ethnic minority children.

However we do recognise that Thurrock has a changing ethnic profile, and we need to be alert to the need to ensure that our future recruitment of adopters takes this into account.

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

click this box once - type any other implications that are relevant to this report

BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT (include their location and identify whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

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APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:

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