

<b>5 September 2013</b>		<b>ITEM: 5</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Adoption Report Outlining Process and Performance</b>		
<b>Report of:</b> Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non-Key	
<b>Accountable Head of Service</b> Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Carmel Littleton, Director of Children’s Services		
<b>This report is public</b>		
<b>Purpose of Report:</b> 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 updates the report previously presented in March 2013, and updates members on the Committee on activity over the last six months.

**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 have more complex needs, or be part of a sibling group, resulting in increased support packages. Nationally the average age of a child at the point of adoption in 2011-2012 was 3 years and 8 months, and 74% of adopted children were between 1 and 4 years old.
- 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 have been necessitated one significant innovation has occurred, in that we have a formal agreement to affiliate Barnados Adoption Service within the Consortium. This is in response to a clear message from central government that they wish to see greater cooperation between Local Authorities and Independent Adoption Agencies.
- 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. 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 Unfortunately the previous administrator, who had been in post for approximately three years resigned earlier in the year. This post is recruited to by Serco, and fortunately they were able to appoint promptly, but there has inevitably been some minor disruption as the new administrator settles into her role.
- 3.5 The full staffing resource of the team has been slightly depleted over the last few months by one unforeseeable period of illness, which caused some disruption to the service but fortunately the individual is now back at work.

#### **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.
- 4.2 At the time of the previous report to this Committee it appeared unlikely that Thurrock Adoption Service would be separately inspected in the future, as there was a proposal that from April 2013 Local Authorities would 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. The proposal however was that there would be a specific sub-judgement within this on the effectiveness of the local adoption service. Ofsted has now abandoned its original proposal, and launched a further consultation which closed in July 2013. The definitive shape of future Adoption Inspections therefore remains unclear at this stage.
- 4.3 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.

4.4 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.

4.5 The most recent performance figures against these criteria were reported previously, and we await the release of the next set of comparative statistics.

4.6 However we can report the following statistics

- At 31.3.13, 21 children had a plan for adoption (out of 54 looked after children below the age of 5).
- Final Adoption Orders were granted on 8 children in 2012-13
- Seven children were placed for Adoption, awaiting application for orders at 31.3.13
- Four children had Placement Orders, but had not been matched to carers
- 5 children have been placed with adopters since 1.4.13, with another two matched with adopters but not yet placed.

## **5. BUDGETS:**

5.1 The Adoption and Permanence Team had a dedicated budget of just over £1.3 million for the last financial year, of which over £1 million was allocated to a range of support payments to carers, with most pressure arising from the increased use of Special Guardianship as a means for children to cease to be looked after. This has created problems for many authorities as these have increased nationally by 88% since 2008, often being seen as the preferred option by the Courts.

5.2 Discussions are continuing to take place 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. Recent government statements have implicitly criticised any authority which declines to explore this option on financial grounds. Fortunately in Thurrock we have usually been able to avoid 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. One key change has been that government have insisted on an equalisation of the fees for interagency placements between those negotiated between local authorities and those arranged with Voluntary Adoption Agencies. At present it is difficult to know whether this will place significant additional strain on the budget.
- 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 it will be a major challenge to 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 March report. The one development, previously reported, which occurred last September was the removal of recommendations for “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. In Thurrock the process has worked reasonably smoothly, and after a relatively slow start no less than 24 children have been presented to the Agency Decision Maker, of whom 15 have subsequently been subject to a successful application for a Placement Order, whilst another became subject of a Residence Order. We do believe that more children are being assisted through the process more quickly, but whether this is attributable specifically to this procedural change or whether it is linked to the more generally higher profile of adoption is difficult to state with certainty.
- 6.3 However there is no doubt that the obligation to accelerate these cases through the process does require significant coordination between the Panel Administrator, the Team Manager and the Agency Decision Maker and we are particularly 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.

6.4 One key change affecting Panel is that we have been renegotiating the best means to ensure the provision of Medical Adviser to the Panel, and anticipate having new arrangements in place in the autumn of 2013.

**7. ISSUES FOR DEVELOPMENT:**

7.1 The government’s high profile for adoption has created a number of developmental challenges for all authorities. Revised statutory guidance from 1<sup>st</sup> July has introduced a new two-stage assessment process for prospective adopters, aimed at reducing the timescales for presenting completed assessments to Panel. Social workers in the team have begun to implement this approach, and support the changes, but inevitably there will be a period of identifying how best to implement the new process in practice.

Similarly more work is required on the practical application of the concept of “Fostering to Adopt”. This is the notion of simultaneous approval of carers as both foster carers and potential adopters, aimed at minimising the need for additional moves for very young children. There are however a number of legal, practical and ethical difficulties, to which all authorities are seeking solutions.

7.2 For the current financial year we have received 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 allocation is in the region of £37k.

7.3 We recognise that to achieve significant change in the timescales for children we need to adopt a “whole system approach”, and have therefore commissioned a series of training events beginning in September 2013 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 Child Permanence Reports and Adoption Placement Reports
- 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.

7.4 In addition there is a block allocation of funding under the Adoption Reform Grant, which is to ring-fenced for increasing the number of children placed for adoption, in particular by increasing the placement options for children waiting for adoption.

7.5 Our intention in Thurrock is to use this money to create an additional temporary post to avoid any delays in the assessment of prospective adopters, and also to refresh our advertising strategy to attract more applicants to adopt.

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

8.1 Not applicable

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

**10. IMPLICATIONS**

**10.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652466**  
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Thurrock has been facing significant increases in the number of Children in the care of the Local Authority, which in turn produce significant cost Pressure on Council budgets. As there are not enough In house Foster Parents to place these Children with, there is a need to utilise Independent Foster Care agencies, which are charged at a significant premium.

If the time from placement to Adoption is reduced, this has the potential of reducing future placement costs.

**10.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
 Telephone and email: **01375 652054**  
[Lindsey.marks@BDTLegal.org.uk](mailto:Lindsey.marks@BDTLegal.org.uk)

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.

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**

Not applicable

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

- Not applicable

**APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:**

- None

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