

6 March 2014		ITEM: 5
Report to 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: Carmel Littleton 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 updates the report previously presented in September 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 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 have advertised this remaining post, with the intention to use these hours to fulfil our responsibility to previously adopted adults who wish to trace birth families. Unfortunately we have received no suitable applications, and will therefore have to rethink this approach.
- 3.2 The existing staff available has now been reduced by one worker starting Maternity Leave in January 2014. However we have created an additional post, using money from the Adoption Reform Grant allocation. After initial failure to recruit externally to this post, we have now secured an experienced worker from another team as a Temporary Secondment. This will begin shortly, and should help reduce workload pressures within the team.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 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. In response to a number of new government initiatives in the summer of 2013 it was acknowledged that the workload had become unmanageable for one individual and a second part time post has been created on a temporary basis, also using the Adoption Reform Grant.

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 there was still some uncertainty about whether the Adoption Service would be separately inspected in the future. From late 2013 Ofsted has launched a new framework for inspection of Children's Services, and the new arrangement is that there will be a specific sub-judgement within this on the effectiveness of the local adoption service. We are therefore reviewing our relative readiness to meet this challenge.
- 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 stated intention is to raise these thresholds incrementally over a four year cycle. Local Authorities are 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 current targets are as follows:

- A1: average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted. The target for the 2013 to 2016 average (as measured during the 3 years 2013 to 2016) is 14 months
- A2: average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family. The target for the 2013 to 2016 average (as measured during the 3 years 2013 to 2016) is 4 months

These are calculated as average times. A third measure (A3) of performance is the percentage of children who wait less than 20 months from entering into care and moving in with their adoptive family.

4.6 In January 2014 the most recent set of data was released, covering the three year period to March 31st 2013. Unfortunately Thurrock's reported figures against the two targets did not appear very good, as we exceeded both targets by a considerable margin. Our performance against A1 was 784 days (or approximately 25 months) and against A2 it was 323 days (or approximately 10 months). However these figures were distorted significantly by the inclusion of some historic cases which fell into the cohort.

4.7 One case in particular featured two siblings who were initially placed for adoption in 2008. Unfortunately this broke down prior to the Adoption Order, and they were subsequently placed back with their previous foster carers four months later. There was nevertheless a positive outcome, as after a period of seeking further adopters, they were finally adopted by their foster carers in 2011. However this means that their period of care in total prior to the decision that this would be their permanent home was 1448 days, and their whole period in care 1652.

4.8 The published figures therefore did not reflect current or recent performance against either criterion. Against A1, twelve children have been placed with their adoptive families since 1.4.13, though some would have been on Placement Orders at 31.3.13. The average duration from entering care and moving in for these children was 477 days. However this was distorted by one particular child, for whom the process was 1536 days, as a consequence of protracted periods of trying to achieve rehabilitation to birth family, which delayed the outcome of the Care Proceedings.

Without including this child the average against the indicator was 381.5 days, i.e. well within the 14 months target, and this included one child with significant health difficulties, without whom the average would have been 356.7 days.

Against A2 Thurrock has successfully sought Placement Orders on 24 children since 1.4.13. Of these 8 have been matched with adoptive families, and for these children the average timescale was 109.8 days.

- 4.9 These figures confirm that our reported figures did not really reflect current performance. This is to a degree verified by our performance against the third indicator (A3), which is currently “Children who wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family”, where we achieved 55%. This was in line with the National average, and above the average of our statistical neighbours (52%).
- 4.10 In common with all authorities who did not meet the timescales Thurrock received a visit from the DfE in February, where the explanation behind our reported figures was explored. Whilst there are no grounds for complacency, the meeting appears to have gone well, and our position was understood. The critical feature moving forward is to ensure that, allowing for the fact that all aspects may not be within our control, the kind of cases which impacted on our figures this time are pursued as vigorously as possible

5. BUDGETS:

- 5.1 The Adoption and Permanence Team had a dedicated budget of just over £1.3 million for the financial year 2012-13, 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 The overall budget was reduced to just over £1 million for 2013-14, with the aim that the reduced expenditure would be achieved by cutting the number and duration of Special Guardianship Allowances. Unfortunately we have been unable to resist the pressure for new payments to be agreed, with very high expectations being created in Courts by Children’s Guardians from CAFCASS. However whilst we are unlikely to be able to reduce our level of existing commitments, we have been willing to explain to the Court that we are unable to commit initially beyond a three year period, and will then need to review in the light of competing demands and existing resources. This should give us a “permissive” platform from which to contain costs in future years, with our written policy adjusted accordingly. However we also 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 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 previous reports, and the Panel has continued to function effectively in ensuring that Approval of new Adopters and Matching recommendations for children with carers receives appropriate scrutiny
- 6.2 However we are facing a period of change, in that our existing Panel Adviser and Independent Chair have both indicated, for different personal reasons, a wish to retire from their roles. We have been fortunate enough to have identified possible options for successors, and hope to have these in place shortly. Nevertheless we recognise this will be a period of change, and there will need to be careful planning by the Adoption Team Manager of what work needs to go before Panel over the next couple of months to ensure no slippage occurs in individual cases.

7. TRAINING:

- 7.1 For the current financial year we 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 was in the region of £37k.
- 7.2 We recognised that to achieve significant change in the timescales for children we needed to adopt a "whole system approach", and 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

This core of the programme has now been successfully delivered and we are now in the process of evaluating the impact it has had.

8. ISSUES FOR DEVELOPMENT:

- 8.1 In addition to the Adoption Reform Grant 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.
- 8.2 As indicated under “Staffing” our intention in Thurrock is to use some of this money to create an additional temporary post to avoid any delays in the assessment of prospective adopters. However we also need to ensure that we have a sufficient supply of new applicants to become adopters, and hence a significant proportion of this funding (in line with the Guidelines for how it should be used) is going to be used to refresh our advertising strategy and materials to attract more applicants. We will also be engaging in some specific advertising for children for whom we foresee difficulties in finding suitable adopters, for example by using BAAF’s “Be My Parent” publication.
- 8.3 An Action Plan for the development of the service will be developed shortly to cover what we hope to achieve in 2014-2015, and this will be presented to the Committee as an Appendix to the next six monthly report.

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

N/A

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

N/A

11. IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**
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The report provides an update on the work of the Adoption Team fulfilling obligations under National Minimum Standard 25.6, and as such, there are no direct financial implications associated with the report.

However, it is worth noting that 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. There is currently insufficient capacity within In house Foster parents to meet demand, and therefore there is a need to utilise Independent Foster Care agencies, which are charged at a significant premium.

When there is a reduction in the time taken between placement to Adoption, this has the potential of reducing future placement costs.

11.2 **Legal**

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
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There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report, although in order to meet the authority's legal obligations it is essential that the process to the transition to a new Independent Chair for the Adoption Panel is managed to enable business to be conducted in accordance with the Regulations.

11.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Teresa Evans**
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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.

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

N/A

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

N/A

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