

**CORORATE PARENTING BOARD - 15 MARCH 2010**

<b>Title of paper:</b>	ADOPTION CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES	
<b>Director(s)/ Corporate Director(s):</b>	Satinder Gautam Director of Specialist Services	<b>Wards affected:</b> ALL
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<b>Other officers who have provided input:</b>	Sonia Cain – Service Manager Adoption	
<b>Relevant Council Plan theme(s):</b>		
World Class Nottingham		
Work in Nottingham		
Safer Nottingham		
Neighbourhood Nottingham		
Family Nottingham		
Healthy Nottingham		
Serving Nottingham Better		
<b>Summary of issues (including benefits to customers/service users):</b>		
<p>The number of children who are adopted in the city remains within the top performance of all local authorities. However, The Annual Performance Assessment letter of December 2008 identified that too many children in the city wait too long for their adoptions to be completed.</p> <p>A number of initiatives have been tried to improve on this national indicator.</p> <p>It is considered that a dedicated adoption casework team will overcome many of the obstacles to improvement, as adoption casework is currently located in generic child care teams which have a number of competing demands.</p> <p>The Adoption Service was inspected last year by Ofsted. The service was judged “good” with outstanding qualities. A dedicated adoption casework team would improve on the work of the team, would avoid delays, make financial savings and deliver better outcomes for children who have an adoption plan.</p>		
<b>Recommendation:</b>		
1	That the Corporate Parenting Board note and discuss the contents of the report.	

# 1 **BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 Nottingham City's Adoption Service has continued to maintain its performance over the years in relation to the number of children that are adopted as a proportion of the total children looked after. This year 40 children will leave care by the route of adoption. The group of children adopted will include older children, sibling groups, BME children and children known to the Disabled Children's Team. This is a challenging group of children to place for adoption but adoption in the city is not regarded solely as an outcome for white single children under five, which is a far easier group of children to place for adoption. (See Appendix 1).
- 1.2 Since the City Adoption Service is a founder member of the East Midlands Adoption Consortium, a group of local authorities and a smaller group of voluntary adoption agencies work together collaboratively to increase the pool of adopters available for children to be placed with.
- 1.3 In October last year the City Adoption Service was subject to a 3 yearly inspection by Ofsted. The adoption agency was judged to provide a good, safe service to children and families and had some "outstanding" qualities.

The agency has a thorough and targeted approach to the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters which ensures they are appropriate to meet the needs of the children placed with them. Assessments are analytical and address equality and diversity issues extremely well. The promotion of equality and diversity was judged outstanding. Adopters receive full information about the children who will be placed with them, including a meeting with the medical advisor which is now routine, which enables them to make an informed decision about whether the proposed child is right for them.

Life Appreciation Days are also now routine, which adds further depth to the information which families receive.

- 1.4 The safeguarding procedures make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are clear about their roles and have appropriate training. This promotes a workforce which is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

An impressive number of training courses are provided for adoptive parents.

The support to adopters, including the post order support to adopters, was judged to be outstanding. The good use of partner agencies ensure that there is a range of services available to support adoptive families in caring for their children. We have worked hard to develop our partnership working with our colleagues in health, sports and leisure, the Targeted Support Team. Support to birth families has been delivered to the parents and extended families of children being adopted by means of a contract with a local voluntary adoption agency.

- 1.5 Adoption places are the most secure of placement outcomes. Few adoption disruptions come to the attention of the Post Adoption Team
- 1.6 Adoption has continued to be a popular service to work within. We have been able to recruit experienced staff who remain with the service and share their experience and expertise with adopters, birth families they work with and colleagues.

## 1.7 Challenges

In spite of some of the successes of the adoption service, there are some serious concerns and weaknesses in relation to the delivery of the adoption service in the City. If the service wishes to achieve another successful Ofsted inspection, then it will need to address the concerns and put systems in place to overcome the inherent weaknesses in how the service is delivered, which has been longstanding. Without the necessary action being taken soon, it will delay improvements to the situation before the next inspection due to longer timescales it takes to achieve a turnaround in adoption. One of our challenges is the length of time it takes for an adoption to be completed. The Annual Performance Assessment letter of December 2008 stated that an important weakness and area for development is that:-

**“too many looked after children are waiting too long for their agreed adoptions to take place”**

At that time placements made within 12 months of the Best Interest Decision = 30%. The latest figure to December 2009 = 33.3%. It has been over 80%. However, if we are to avoid these fluctuations and deliver constantly good performance, then action does need to be taken soon.

- 1.8 The Adoption Service over the years has attempted to resolve the difficulties. The Service has organised training for fieldworkers to increase their knowledge in adoption. Adoption Panel briefings and training have been open to everyone. Mentors are provided by the Adoption Service for staff to be mentored in relation to all parts of the adoption process. Link meetings between team managers in fieldwork and adoption to progress the adoption work take place 3 times a year. Adoption Practice Meetings occur twice a year when staff in both adoption and fostering meet to share, discuss and resolve practice issues.

Performance monitoring information in relation to adoption is shared on a quarterly basis. This report tracks all the children (over 100) who have an adoption plan and their progress towards their adoption order. All team managers know clearly the progress of the children that they are responsible for and can take any necessary action that they may need to avoid delays.

- 1.9 For over a year the Vale for Money Project team has looked at the issue of timescales in adoption, we have identified where the difficulties arise, and the cost to the Department in increased placement costs and the effects on children's lives when we are unable to secure the stability in terms of placement, that all children need. Delays in permanency does have an effect on a child's social and emotional well-being, the quality of the attachments that they are able to make in the future and their educational progress.

- 1.10 However, in spite of the initiatives that we have introduced and the formal meetings, there continues to be difficulties in improving on the delays. There are legal delays, some of which are outside of our control and the introduction of the Public Law Outline which should have led to legal proceedings being concluded in a timely way has not resolved this issue. Care proceedings can take 18 months – 2 years to be concluded. However, there are delays in the process which the department can have an impact.

Firstly, delays occur in the context of adoption casework being located in generic child care teams, where it is locally and nationally agreed there is a significant and long standing problem in respect of the recruitment and retention of social workers. The

impact of this on adoption work is that the progression of casework is delayed as a consequence of staff leaving the Department and their replacements having to understand their caseload and catch up on outstanding tasks. It is indeed quite unusual for an adoption case to have been managed throughout by one consistent social worker (and one case audited last year had 8 changes of social worker in a year).

Secondly, there is a heightened anxiety around child protection and children in need cases vis-à-vis children in public care and children with adoption plans. This means that child protection cases are invariably prioritised in the allocation of scarce resources and adoption work is delayed.

Thirdly, and linked to the above, adoption work is often progressed by social workers and team managers inexperienced in adoption work. These social workers often work extremely hard to understand and learn the adoption task, however it is a complex, time consuming and developing field of work, where the value of “experience” is acknowledged in the “qualification to report” requirement. (The Restriction of the Preparation of Adoption Reports). Social workers need to have three years post qualifying experience in order to satisfy the requirements.

There is a significant monetary cost to the local authority when children’s adoption plans are delayed. Some children become “unadoptable” by virtue of their age and lack of preparation, and as such will remain in public care permanently.

There are other “costs” ... emotional costs to foster carers who live with the uncertainties of not knowing when a child will be moved on to their new family; to the child who will be forming attachments to the foster families and with foster siblings, should a child have a number of moves in foster care they may struggle to make another attachment; to birth families who struggle to accept that their child will be adopted and finally to our prospective adopters who move on to provide a resource to another agency, because we have not progressed a match for them in-house. We do not recoup all the cost of approving them when we “sell” them.

Most crucially, research evidence suggests that there is a significant correlation between early adoption and positive outcomes in adoption. To delay an adoption is to put at risk that positive outcome.

- 1.11 It is considered that a small dedicated adoption casework team led by a team manager skilled in adoption with social workers experienced in adoption would overcome some of the structural difficulties that impede our progress in this area.

It is a fact that the Adoption Service has not faced the same recruitment and retention problems as evidenced in field work.

The adoption workers to be recruited would have chosen to specialise in this area and would bring their professional skill and interest to this area. The adoption caseload would sit within the same service as the adoption homefinders and the recruitment team, as well as the Post Adoption Team and would thereby provide a joined up and team approach to matching children with adopters. Such an adoption service would be cost effective by reducing delays in the progression of adoption cases, but also would provide a qualitatively and quantitatively improved service to children and adoptive families. We are currently seeking additional resources for such a team.

## 1.12 Other Challenges

We successfully matched 40 children this year. Many of these children are our “harder to place” children, older children, sibling groups, BME children, children with special needs and disabilities. We have had to look at innovative ways of matching these children with adopters.

Last year the homefinders trialled the use of “Adoption Matching Evening”, where approved adopters with this agency and the voluntary adoption agencies are presented with the DVD, video and profile of the “harder to place” children we wish to profile. We ran two such events last year and would aim to do two or possibly three this year. They are demanding of homefinding time and resources, but two older children age 6 and 12 years were placed last year as a result of such evenings.

- 1.13 The Post Adoption Team has had to respond to new statutory responsibilities as a result of new legislation, the introduction of Special Guardianship Order and Intermediary Services without any additional resources to the team.

Special Guardianship Orders have been available to the courts since January 2006. Once an order has been made, the child ceases to be looked after and the Special Guardian shares the parental responsibility with the birth parents, but does not have to consult with them about most day-to-day decisions in a child’s life. The Special Guardianship Orders is an increasingly popular outcome at the conclusion of care proceedings and there have been 65 orders to date:-

April 2006 – March 2007	=	4
April 2007 – March 2008	=	20
April 2008 – March 2009	=	15
April 2008 – to date	=	26

The post order support for all these cases resides within this team.

### Intermediary services

New legislation brought in new rights for birth relatives to request an intermediary service, but they cannot do the tracing themselves due to the confidential nature of adoption. We do this. We undertake access to records and birth records counselling for adoptees. Working with birth relatives immediately increased the workload of the team. Once the person has been found, the team will make the first contact and negotiate between the parties for an outcome as acceptable as possible to all parties.

- 1.14 Responding to new legislation, innovative ways of working have been favourably commented on by colleagues in other authorities and agencies and by Ofsted inspectors, but they are demanding in staff time and resources. There has been little investment in adoption since the last inspection and if we are to continue with the initiatives already in place, respond to the increase in Special Guardianship Orders, intermediary services, and homefinding and prepare for the next Ofsted inspection, the Service will need:-

0.5 Post Adoption Team Manager  
0.5 Special Guardianship  
0.5 Homefinding.

## **2 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS (INCLUDING OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION)**

- 2.1 The Annual Performance Acceptance letter of 2008 identified the delays in adoption timescales.

This implementation of these recommendations will improve timescales and deliver better outcomes for children.

## **3 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED IN MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 Contact has been made with a number of other local authorities in the preparation of this report.

## **4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING VALUE FOR MONEY)**

- 4.1 The cost of additional staff is currently being investigated.

The additional team will produce savings in time saved, placement costs, etc.

## **5 RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES (INCLUDING LEGAL IMPLICATIONS, CRIME AND DISORDER ACT IMPLICATIONS AND EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS)**

- 5.1 NI61

The national indicator that measures adoption timescales has fluctuated this year.

In order to improve and maintain on timescales then concerted action needs to be take to address structural difficulties. Should we not do this then there is the real risk that we would continue not to meet this target and this information would be submitted to Dept. Children Schools and Families and reported on during audits and inspections.

## **6 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS OTHER THAN PUBLISHED WORKS OR THOSE DISCLOSING CONFIDENTIAL OR EXEMPT INFORMATION**

- 6.1 None.

## **7 PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS REFERRED TO IN COMPILING THIS REPORT**

- 7.1 None

## APPENDIX 1

### Children looked after who were adopted during the years ending 31 March by Local Authority<sup>1,2</sup>

Year ending 31 March  
2005 - 2009  
Coverage: England

numbers

	2005 <sup>2</sup>	2006	2007	2008	2009
<b>England</b>	<b>3,800</b>	<b>3,700</b>	<b>3,300</b>	<b>3,200</b>	<b>3,300</b>
Birmingham	110	105	65	70	85
Manchester	80	60	55	40	65
Liverpool	70	30	20	35	45
Kingston Upon Hull, City of	45	30	30	35	40
Nottingham	35	55	30	30	40
Salford	35	40	20	25	30
Sandwell	20	25	30	35	30
Wolverhampton	25	25	40	20	25
Barking and Dagenham	15	20	15	15	25
Middlesbrough	30	20	15	10	20
Southampton	25	15	20	25	20

Source: SSDA 903

(1) Historical data may differ from older publications. This is mainly due to the implementation of amendments and corrections sent by some local authorities after the publication date of previous materials.

(2) Special guardianship orders came into force on 30th December 2005.