

Corporate Parenting Board - 23 September 2013

Title of paper:	Commissioned services and the reform agenda in the Fostering and Adoption service.	
Director(s)/ Corporate Director(s):	Helen Blackman, Acting Director Children's Safeguarding Candida Brudenell, Acting Corporate Director	Wards affected: ALL
Report author(s) and contact details:	Jon Dudley, Service Manager, Fostering and Adoption. Jonathan.dudley@nottinghamcity.gov.uk Paulette Thompson-Omenka, Head of Service, Looked After Children. Paulette.thompson-omenka@nottinghamcity.gov.uk 0115 915 87 65023	
Other colleagues who have provided input:	Simon Stubbs, Managing Director, Social Work Choices Paul Wilkinson, Business Manager, Children in Care Sarah Furby, Advice and Mediation Worker, Fostering Network	
Relevant Council Plan Strategic Priority:		
World Class Nottingham		
Work in Nottingham		•
Safer Nottingham		
Neighbourhood Nottingham		
Family Nottingham		•
Healthy Nottingham		•
Leading Nottingham		
Summary of issues (including benefits to citizens/service users):		
<p>The report summarises the impact of two current contracts for commissioned work between Nottingham City Council and two of its partners, setting them within the context of the government's adoption and fostering reform agenda.</p> <p>Social Work Choices provide assessments of applicants to become foster and adoptive parents.</p> <p>Fostering Network Advice and Mediation Service provides independent support and advice to foster carers.</p>		
Recommendation(s):		
1	To note the steps being taken locally to address the challenging Adoption Reform agenda and meet our national and local strategic priorities.	
2	To note the work undertaken by our commissioned partners to support this task.	
3	To continue to offer to our foster carers the benefits of individual membership of the Fostering Network	
4	To review work commissioned through Social Work Choices at the end of the second year of the contract with particular reference to quality and value.	

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Adoption reform

In March 2012 the government published An Action Plan for Adoption aimed at tackling delay and bringing the unique benefits of an adoptive family to a larger number of children currently looked after by local authorities. It seeks to increase the number of adopters available and reduce the period of time that children wait for adoptive placements, encouraging early decision making and planning.

1.2 There is a new emphasis on adoption agencies, the great majority of which are local authorities, providing a service to local people who wish to adopt. They should have regard to national demand rather than simply the needs of local children awaiting adoption and value prospective adopters throughout the process. This is reflected in revised guidance which came into effect in July 2013.

1.3 A key element of the national reform is the creation of a new “front door” for enquirers, the First4Adoption website. This provides information and advice as well as details of adoption agencies. A two-stage application process has been introduced with the intention of containing the assessment and approval process within a six month timescale in most cases.

1.4 An Adoption Reform Grant has been made available to support the work of 152 local authority adoption agencies. Funds have also been made available to the 30 or so voluntary adoption agencies in England that also recruit and prepare adopters, to increase these numbers. Closer monitoring of timescales and outcomes has also been introduced with an “Adoption Scorecard”. Revisions to the practices of courts are also underway to ensure timely and effective decision making. Nottingham City Council is using the grant money to reduce delay and create more and better placement options for children.

1.5 Alongside the focus on adoption, the government has set out a similar two-stage process for the approval of foster carers. It is also considering the merits of long-term fostering and reviewing the appropriate and effective use of residential care for children.

1.6 Local recruitment of adoptive and foster carers

The recruitment of adoptive and foster carers for Nottingham City Council is undertaken in-house, with regular events, training and monthly information meetings for enquirers. Assessments are then allocated to our commissioned partners, Social Work Choices, for preparation and presentation to Panel for approval. This arrangement is now at the conclusion of the second year of a three year contract. On approval, the fostering and adoption service allocates a supervising social worker. In the case of fostering, carers also benefit from membership of the Fostering Network, which provides, in addition, access to local independent advice and assistance in relation to their role as foster carers.

1.7 Nottingham City foster carers currently provide placements to a total of 218 children, a figure which has not changed significantly over the course of the last two years. New approvals of foster carers have kept pace with those retiring or otherwise ceasing to foster. However, in the same period the overall number of children looked after by the city has risen, though neither as far or as fast as many similar authorities. Most of these children also require family based care. There has been an increase in the use of placements with Independent Fostering Agencies during

that time.

- 1.8 There has been a surge in numbers of Independent Fostering Agency placements in England since regulations were amended in 2000 to allow “for profit” organisations to operate in this area. It remains illegal in this country and internationally to make profits from the activities of Adoption Agencies, to prevent the trafficking of children. The government is keen to use the expertise of voluntary adoption agencies to promote good practice.

2. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS (INCLUDING OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION)

2.1 Social Work Choices performance outcomes:

During the period 1 September 2012 to 31 August 2013, 297 information packs for Adoption have been sent, a modest reduction on the same period in the previous year when it was 335. The number of enquirers attending adoption information evenings was up from 130 to 144. Social Work Choices (SWC) completed and presented 28 new applications to Adoption Panel, all of which were approved. This compares with 14 in the first year of the contract. Feedback from applicants has indicated that there have been some issues in the overall length of time taken to deal with applications and this will be addressed in a forthcoming contract review. Use of the nationally prescribed two-stage application process should help deal with this as many of the initial checks and references will be addressed at an earlier stage. Likewise in relation to assessments for Foster Care, which are also set out in the table below. Figures for the year 2010-2011 are for Nottingham City assessments, the later figures reflecting the Social Work Choices contract. The figures for fostering do not include figures for assessments of Connected Persons, who are relatives or friends approved to foster specific children known to them. Social Work Choices has picked up some, but not all, of these assessments over the year. Whilst the current contract does not provide for a specific target for assessments, SWC will handle whatever additional enquiries we can direct to them. We aim to double such numbers with the additional marketing and recruitment efforts over the next six months.

Adopters approved	01/09/2010-31/08/2011	01/09/2011-31/08/2012	01/09/2012-31/08/2013	01/09/2013-31/08/2014
	19	14	28	
Foster carers approved	NCC	SWC year 1	SWC year 2	No specific targets set
	18	14	19	

Applications to foster or adopt are booked on to Panel for approval at an early stage of the process. Some of these applications do not get to Panel, for a variety of reasons, many due to changes in the personal circumstances of the applicants which results in them withdrawing. Cases are also deferred from panel also for a range of reasons. Over the last year these have included issues with medicals, international checks and Criminal Records Bureau checks. In future, these issues will be dealt with at an earlier point in the application process and hence delays close to the Panel date should be avoided. However, further analysis is required to pinpoint other areas of avoidable delay that are extending the timescale for some assessments. A great deal of attention has been focussed on reducing all areas of delay in the planning and placement of children and a similar level of effort must also be directed towards ensuring that adults who wish to adopt or foster are dealt with in a timely fashion. This matter will be addressed with the current contractor and other significant parties in the approval process. This includes health colleagues where

capacity issues have arisen in providing medical advice to Panels, particularly in relation to fostering applicants. Where challenges have presented themselves, these have been addressed robustly and effectively. Close and regularly liaison has built sound working relationships, a shared understanding of the demands of the reform agenda and a clear vision as to how this can be addressed jointly over the next year.

2.2 Local response to the adoption reform agenda

The number of looked after children from Nottingham city who were adopted in 2012/13 was 40, compared with 29 the previous year. It is anticipated that 55 children will be adopted in the current year. Some of these children will be placed with adopters approved by Nottingham City, but the search for suitable placements is a national one, to give the best opportunity to meet the varied needs of children is as short a time as possible. In support of this task and to reduce delay for the 153 looked after children who are currently at some stage of the adoption process, we are using grant funding to engage a number of additional staff. These are:

- A communications and marketing officer to double the number of enquiries we receive from people wanting to foster or adopt
- A customer service officer to act as a link between applicants and ourselves as an agency and help guide them through the process and increase the conversion rate from enquiry to approval.
- Fast track adoption social workers to speed children's plans through the process
- Two additional Adoption Support Advisors to seek appropriate families to match with children who require adoptive placements
- A Practice Manager to increase the capacity of adoption and fostering panels to make timely decisions regarding applicants and matches
- Enhancement to Post Order support to ensure adopters have access to the services they need to care for children effectively.
- An Innovation and Change Manager to promote the changes, stimulate development, monitor improvements and report on the impact of additional investment.

The carer recruitment strategy recognises that most enquiries now come through the internet and our website. This will be revamped and revitalised as part of the role of the communications and marketing officer, who will also review the effectiveness of the current programme of monthly public profile raising events. These have met with varying success over the summer period. As "word of mouth" continues to be an effective recruiter for fostering and adoption, there is also scope to develop the use of online social networking for this purpose.

2.3 Reducing delay in adoption

Nationally, the number of children adopted from care remains a small proportion of the overall care population at any one time, at around 3500 per year. Although that number is rising, the number of children where courts agree that adoption is the best plan for children has increased at a faster rate. Some 4600 children are awaiting adoptive placements at any one time. The government has introduced an Adoption Scorecard that enables local authorities to judge their efforts on progressing these plans. As indicated above, Nottingham is successfully ensuring an increasing number of children receive the unique benefits that only adoption can provide. Many of these children have some degree of additional needs and creative ways to match them with prospective adopters are used extensively by Nottingham. These include our active participation in regional Adoption Activity Days where approved adopters have the opportunity to meet children requiring adoption in a child-friendly setting

along with their current foster carers. We also hold monthly local Matching Evenings where adopters can discuss children's profiles with the social workers who are responsible for them.

2.4 Adoption scorecard

The Adoption Scorecard looks at two key indicators. Firstly is the length of time between the point at which children enter care and the point at which they are placed for adoption. The guidance is that this should occur within 91 weeks. Secondly is the period from the court agreeing a plan for adoption and making a Placement Order and the point at which children are matched to adoptive parents. Here the guidance is that this should take place within 30 weeks. During the last full year (2012/13) the figures for Nottingham City were 95 weeks and 36 weeks respectively. In both cases, this was an improvement over performance in the preceding year. Closer monitoring of processes and timescales is being undertaken to ensure that these figures are improved on, bearing in mind the large number of variable factors, including the limited availability of adopters nationally.

2.5 Fostering Network Advice and Mediation Service

Foster carers play a vital role in moving children on to adoption and indeed work towards returning children to their birth parents where this is the plan. This is a challenging and complex task. It is a statutory requirement to ensure that such carers can access independent advice. The Fostering Network provides independent advice to Nottingham City foster carers in addition to other membership benefits. The latest annual report from Fostering Network shows that in the course of 2012-2013 there were 31 requests from foster carers for such support, as against 26 in the previous year. There are a number of learning points to be had from this activity, including the importance of open communication with foster carers. Areas that remain contentious from a foster carers perspective include ensuring full and complete information on children is available to carers at the start of each placement and providing ongoing support and information to foster carers who are subject to allegations. Regular meetings take place between the Service Manager for Adoption and Fostering and the local advice and mediation worker, who also attends Foster Carer Business Meetings. Both these provide opportunities to identify and address common issues and concerns to improve the service and ensure the best possible outcomes for children.

3. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED IN MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 The pilot project with Social Work Choices will cease on 31st August 2014. Work will be undertaken during October 2013 to provide a clear analysis of the value for money outcomes of the work undertaken to date. This will include an assessment of the quantity, quality and timeliness of assessments provided.
- 3.2 Fostering Network continues to provide a valuable locally based service which is appreciated by foster carers. Although other providers would be able to help us meet our statutory obligations in this respect, Fostering Network is able to offer considerable added value through individual membership and access to national resources.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING VALUE FOR MONEY)

- 4.1 The budgeted amount for Social Work Choices in 2012/13 was £281330 and the actual expenditure was £266798. There remains further work to be done to assess

the volume of work produced against the quality and this will form a key element of the contract review to be undertaken in the autumn of this year. Of particular importance to this consideration will be the flexibility of the organisation to respond to the upturn in numbers of assessments anticipated as a result of increased recruitment activity.

- 4.2 The annual cost of the contract with Fostering Network to provide individual membership plus independent advice and mediation to foster carers is £14626 per annum. This remains on a rolling annual contract. Feedback suggests that the service continues to be widely appreciated by carers and offers good value for money. During the coming year we will continue to work closely together to reduce areas of concern for foster carers and take a joint approach to further improving their assessment, preparation and training.
- 4.3 The total amount of the Adoption Reform Grant to Nottingham City is £1.1m. Of this, £667000 has been allocated to the posts listed at 2.2.

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

- 5.1 In addressing the government's challenging agenda for increasing the volume and speed of assessments for adoption and fostering the risks are:
- Poor quality assessments
 - Underperformance
 - Financial overspend
 - Failure to meet timescales

So far, these risks have been mitigated by close and regular liaison and review.

6. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

No equality impact assessment has been carried out as this report does not propose changes to policy or procedures.

7. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS OTHER THAN PUBLISHED WORKS OR THOSE DISCLOSING CONFIDENTIAL OR EXEMPT INFORMATION

- 7.1 East Midlands Advice and Mediation Service Annual Report April 2012- March 2013, Fostering Network, June 2013.

8. PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS REFERRED TO IN COMPILING THIS REPORT

- 8.1 An Action Plan for Adoption – Tackling Delay. Department for Education , March 2012
- 8.2 Statutory Guidance on Adoption, Department for Education, July 2013.