

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

ADOPTION REFORM

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Cabinet of 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' and 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes' documents, published by the DfE.
- 1.2 To seek support for local implementation.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' (the 'Action Plan') was launched by the DfE in March 2012 that set out ways of tackling delay in the adoption system in England, as follows:
 - speed up the process for children; overhaul the service for prospective adopters and make better use of the National Adoption Register;
 - speed up the adopter assessment process including the introduction of a 'fast-track' for those who have adopted before; and
 - strengthen local accountability for the timeliness of adoption services
- 2.1.1 Three main sections looked at:
 - Finding homes for children without delay
 - Valuing prospective adopters
 - System improvement
- 2.1.2 The 'Action Plan' also set out how the DfE would measure improvements in tackling delay using a new performance tool, the "Adoption Scorecard".
- 2.2 In January 2013, the DfE built on the Action Plan and launched 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes' ('Further Action on Adoption') which set out its proposals for the next steps in tackling delay so that more children can benefit more quickly from being adopted in to a loving home.

- 2.2.1 Actions include the publishing of an adoption map with the intention of informing potential adopters of where in the country children are waiting to be adopted. It is envisaged that potential adopters would then apply to those local authorities to be assessed as adopters or to be matched with children if they are already approved as adopters.
- 2.2.2 The aim is to create a better system of recruiting and supporting adopters including the creation of staff mutuals to make a bigger contribution to the system as a whole and where all recruitment organisations would need to register as voluntary adoption agencies and operate under existing regulatory arrangements.
- 2.2.3 The vision is to have a system of fewer adoption agencies operating at larger scale with clear incentives to respond to the needs of all children waiting for adoption. This will involve legislating to shape the new system. One of the recommendations is the equalisation of fees to source placements between Voluntary Agencies and Local Authorities. This is to counteract Local Authorities losing out financially if they sell adopters they have recruited making them reluctant to risk recruiting more adopters than are needed locally.
- 2.2.4 Under the auspices of "Further Action on Adoption" the DfE is providing financial support for greater investment in adoption in the form of a one off 150 million adoption reform grant. The specific focus being securing adoption reform. This additional funding is intended to help Local Authorities to:
- provide more support to adoptive families to ensure the best possible outcomes and prevent disruption and break down which can give rise to more costly interventions in the future
 - Recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the large and growing numbers of children waiting to be placed in permanent loving homes
- 2.2.5 Two thirds of the monies will be available to support Local Authorities in supporting adoption reform and enable them to target funding at the entire adoption process and the specialist support that children need. The remaining third to help Local Authorities address structural challenges with adopter recruitment and any back log of children who are waiting for adoption. Therefore, the DfE will provide one off funding to support Local Authorities in the equalisation of the interagency fee and to help address the needs of those children who have been waiting the longest.
- 2.3 The local response is to continue to prioritise proactive family finding so that all of our children are placed and as quickly as possible. This will mean targeted fast track assessments, flexibility in adoption panels, swift court action & conclusion as well as timely agency decision.
- 2.4 North Lincolnshire Council continues to prioritise front line social work practice. The targets set by DfE and the adoption scorecard have been met and continue to be on target for 2013/14.

- 2.5 North Lincolnshire Council leads the regional adoption contract which includes fifteen Local Authorities in Yorkshire and Humber and two Voluntary Adoption agencies. In the first year the consortium increased available adoption placements through the consortium by 30%.
- 2.6 North Lincolnshire Council is committed to a family first policy wherever this is safe for the child and to support parents to ensure where ever possible they make the positive change to be able to care for their children.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 The Cabinet is asked to support the implementation of local action to ensure adoption reform, this includes:
- Continued support to prioritise front line services and a family first policy.
 - Development of the workforce to intervene earlier with children who do require adoption.
 - Investment in social work case management specialism to focus on specialist social work skills, i.e. pre court preparation (in order to minimise delay in the court process to reduce the length of time it takes to legally secure moving children through to adoption); and high quality assessments in court (reducing the need for experts that are both costly in terms of finance and causing delay).
 - Expenditure to enable the equalisation of fees to source placements.
 - Additional social work capacity to recruit, assess and approve adopters.
 - Development of a cross authority partnership, recruitment activity and best practice.
 - Continuation of North Lincolnshire Council as the host authority for the regional consortium
 - Investment in developing skills to ensure we identify, assess and intervene with the right children at the right time
 - Development of an enhanced programme of marketing and promotion to publicise fostering and adoption and promote recruitment

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 We are required to respond to the DfE proposals through local implementation and through innovative use of the adoption reform grant monies as detailed above, the Local Authority is able to secure permanence through adoption in a timely manner and increase the number of available adopters.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

- 5.1 The adoption reform grant allocated to North Lincolnshire is £502,674 (for one year). Any financial implications of local implementation are met within the grant.

6. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

- 6.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken. Any issues raised have been considered as part of the planning process.

6.2 Democratic Services will review how we can ensure all Integrated Impact Assessments consider the responsibilities within the Council and strategy development.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

7.1 Staff have been consulted from across the service areas and have been involved in the identification of the proposals set out above.

7.2 No conflicts of interest have been identified

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 That Cabinet supports the local implementation of the DfE outlined in 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes' document, published by the DfE in January 2013

DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report - An Action Plan for Adoption – Tackling Delay' - March 2012; and 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes' - January 2013