

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**PEOPLE
CABINET MEMBER**

**ADOPTION SERVICE 6 MONTHLY BUSINESS REPORT
OCTOBER 2011 – MARCH 2012**

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To provide Cabinet Member with a business report summarising the work of the Adoption Service between 1 October 2011 and 31 March 2012.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The Adoption Service operates under the regulatory framework of The Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards 2011 (Adoption) which came into force in April 2011. The service is inspected by Ofsted under these standards every three years. The last statutory inspection of service took place in June 2009. The outcome of the inspection was very positive with the service receiving a rating of 'Good' with no requirements or recommendations.
- 2.2 There is an expectation within the regulatory framework that a business report is presented to Cabinet Member for information. Until this year, this was required annually. The new National Minimum Standards now require this report to be provided every six months. This is the second 6 monthly report and covers the period 1 October 2011 to 31 March 2012.
- 2.3 The main responsibilities of the Adoption Service are to:
- Recruit, assess and train adoptive families.
 - Provide ongoing support, training and monitoring to adoptive families.
 - Provide a Family Finding and Matching Service for children requiring an adoption placement.
 - Provide Adoption Support Services to adopted children and their families to maintain adoption placements including support groups.
 - Provide an assessment for adoption support to persons prescribed in ASR4.
 - Provide Birth Record Counselling to adopted adults.
 - Provide advice, counselling and support to birth parents and other significant birth family members affected by adoption.

- Provide a 'letter box' contact system between adopted children and members of their birth families, which is used by approximately 142 families at any one time.
 - Regular consultation with adopters, the children of adopters and the children who are adopted.
- 2.5 As previously reported, the service was selected to be included in Ofsted's programme of pilot inspections. This took place as planned, and the view taken by inspectors was that the Adoption Service was providing a good service, with some aspects close to outstanding. This view does not constitute a formal grading, however, and we await a full Ofsted inspection of the service.
- 2.6 The Adoption Service comprises a Team Manager and 5 Adoption Social Workers. This was increased during the period from 4 to 5 whole time equivalent Adoption Social Workers with the additional worker commencing in post in September 2011. She has subsequently successfully completed a six month probationary period and undertaken mandatory training.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The service has continued to progress in a number of areas. These include:

- 3.1 6 individual children were presented to the Adoption Panel and received a 'Should be placed for adoption' decision between October 2011 and March 2012. Although this figure was less than the for the previous period (17) the total number of 23 for the year ending 31 March 2012, represents an increase of 64% compared with 14 children in the 12 months between April 2010 and March 2011.
- 3.2 Between 1 September 2011 and 31 March 2012, 6 children were adopted from the care of the local authority meaning a total of 14 for the year - an increase on last year. 5 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) were granted, a total of 11 for the year, also a rise on the previous year. Of the children adopted from care 64% were within timescales. The others were placed with their adoptive families in previous years and / or had complex needs.
- 3.3 Six sets of prospective adopters have been approved during the calendar year representing a decrease of two on the previous year. However, predictions show that there will be a significant increase during 2012/13. This is due to the additional capacity within the team to undertake assessments and improvements in the team's recruitment strategy. There are currently 13 adoptive families in the assessment process - 7 assessments on-going and 6 further families attending the preparation to adopt course in July. There are no assessments awaiting allocation.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Adoption Service 6 Monthly Business report October 2011-March 2012 is attached for information only (appendix 1). The structure of this (and future) business report covers the following core aspects:

- Introduction
- Service management,
- Service Activity
- Finance
- Consultation and Feedback
- Plan for Excellence - Future Service Developments
- Conclusion

4.2 The business report supports the Adoption Service Statement of Purpose, as revised April 2011, which comprehensively describes the aims and objectives of the Adoption Service and what facilities and services are provided.

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

5.1 Nationally there is a shortage of adoptive placements, particularly for children with complex needs or within sibling groups. In order for the Adoption Service to meet the future needs of the North Lincolnshire care population, it is vital that the ongoing investment in the service continues and we continue to take the lead in the region through developing business and partnership arrangements with regional partners.

5.2 We currently have 55 adopted children whose families are in receipt of financial support at a total cost of £6,794.10 per week, a slight reduction on the previous period.

6. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 - CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)

6.1 Statutory - The Adoption Service operates under the regulatory framework of The Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005, the National Minimum Standards 2011 (Adoption) and revised statutory guidance implemented in April 2011.

6.2 In order to ensure the Adoption Service continues to meet statutory requirements it needs to ensure it achieves these revised standards. The service is inspected by Ofsted and will be measured against the new standards under revised inspection evaluation processes.

6.3 There are clear expectations within the Ofsted inspection framework, and a strong focus from national drivers and key messages, that adoption services need to be robust, provide sufficient placements and achieve positive matches for children. The Service is inspected by Ofsted under these standards every three years

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

7.1 Routine feedback from adopters regarding the service they receive from the Adoption Team has been positive indicating that they feel fully supported throughout the process. For example, one set of adopters rated both the child's social worker and adoption social worker as 'excellent' in relation to the quality of post placement support provided, adding that they 'could not

have asked for better people'. Another set of adopters chose to express their views in a letter to the adoption manager, referring to their adoption social worker's 'professionalism', 'vast knowledge', and as an 'outstanding individual who deserves to be recognised'.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 That the Cabinet Member notes the report and supports the continued development of our work in Adoption.

DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE

Civic Centre
Ashby Road
Scunthorpe
North Lincolnshire
DN16 1AB

Author: Paul Cowling
Date: June 2012

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

Adoption Service Business Plan Oct 2011- March 2012

Business Report on North Lincolnshire Adoption Service

October 2011 – March 2012

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Adoption Service operates under the regulatory framework of The Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards 2011 (Adoption) which came into force in April 2011. The service is inspected by Ofsted under these standards every three years. The last statutory inspection of service took place in June 2009. The outcome of the inspection was very positive with the service receiving a rating of 'Good' with no requirements or recommendations.

1.2 The main responsibilities of the Adoption Service are to:

- Recruit, assess and train adoptive families.
- Provide ongoing support, training and monitoring to adoptive families.
- Provide a Family Finding and Matching Service for children requiring an adoption placement.
- Provide Adoption Support Services to adopted children and their families to maintain adoption placements including support groups.
- Provide an assessment for adoption support to persons prescribed in ASR4.
- Provide Birth Record Counselling to adopted adults.
- Provide advice, counselling and support to birth parents and other significant birth family members affected by adoption.
- Provide a 'letter box' contact system between adopted children and members of their birth families, which is used by approximately 142 families at any one time.
- Regular consultation with adopters, the children of adopters and the children who are adopted.

1.3 This report follows on from the April – September 2011 Business Report and details the business of the Adoption Service during the period October 1st 2011 – 31st 2012.

2. SERVICE MANAGEMENT

- 2.1 The Adoption Service comprises a Team Manager and 5 Adoption Social Workers. The increase in capacity from 4 to 5 whole time equivalent Adoption Social Workers took place during the period, the additional worker was recruited and started 1st September 2011. She has subsequently successfully completed a six month probationary period and undertaken mandatory training.
- 2.2 During the period members of the team have attended training on Risk Analysis & Safeguarding and Managing allegations.
- 2.3 The service has been very successful in its retention of skilled, experienced staff. The four adoption established social workers have continued to remain in post with no turnover of staff other than the addition of the new post. The experienced Team Manager was in post throughout the period. The post has since become vacant and temporary arrangements are in place whilst a permanent manager is established.
- 2.4 Following the self assessment, the service has ensured it is compliant with the New National Minimum Standards (NMS) that came into force at the end of the period in April 2011, the service action plan is progressing to further enhance practice in line with the revised standards. Adoption remains in the public and political spotlight so we can expect to have to respond to a number of changes or requirements in the near future, particularly to do with the adoption process as it affects children and people who want to adopt.
- 2.5 The updated Statement of Purpose was agreed by Cabinet Member in April 2011, the service has subsequently been working to this revised document.
- 2.6 The service was subject to a pilot Ofsted inspection during November / December. Although this was not a statutory inspection, it was a full inspection undertaken in line with the new Ofsted inspection framework. It found the service to be good with outstanding features.

3. SERVICE ACTIVITY – October 2011 to March 2012.

The Adoption Panel

- 3.1 The adoption panel meets monthly to make independent recommendations on the approval of new adoptive carers, matching of children to carers and plans for adoption for individual children.

- 3.2 6 individual children were presented to the Adoption Panel and received a 'Should be placed for adoption' decision between October 2011 and March 2012. Although this figure was less than the for the previous period (17) the total number of 23 for the year ending 31st March 2012, represents an increase of 64% compared with 14 children in the 12 months between April 2010 and March 2011.
- Of the 23 children, matches have since been presented to the panel and formally approved for 10 children.
 - 9 children were placed with adoptive families during the period, meaning a total of 14 children were placed for adoption during the year. All but one met timescales in terms of being placed within twelve months of a 'Should be placed for adoption' This equates to a percentage of 93% and indicates that our performance is moving in the right direction.
 - Of the remaining children about half are subject to placement orders enabling us to undertake intensive family finding. Potential placements have been identified for an additional 3 children and placement orders have yet to be made by the Court in respect of 8 children.
- 3.3 Between 1st Sept 2011 and 31st March 2012, 6 children were adopted from the care of the local authority meaning a total of 14 for the year - an increase on last year. 5 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) were granted, a total of 11 for the year, also a rise on the previous year.
- 3.4 Of the children adopted from care 64% were within timescales. The others were placed with their adoptive families in previous years and / or had complex needs.
- 3.5 We expect the number of adoption orders to continue to increase over the next few years given the significant rise in children with a 'Should be placed for adoption' decision.
- 3.6 The period showed the continuing trend over the year demonstrating that effective interventions and planning is leading to improvements in achieving permanence in a timely effective manner. The implementation of the process for the early identification of, planning for and monitoring of harder to place children led by the Adoption Team Manager, as detailed in the previous business report, is also contributing towards reducing delay in children being placed for adoption.
- 3.7 Six sets of prospective adopters have been approved during the calendar year representing a decrease of two on the previous year. However, predictions show that there will be a significant increase during 2012/13. This is due to the additional capacity

within the team to undertake assessments detailed above. Secondly, improvements in the teams recruitment strategy have resulted in an increase in enquiries and applications. There are currently 13 adoptive families in the assessment process - 7 assessments on-going and 6 further families attending the preparation to adopt course in July. There are no assessments awaiting allocation.

- 3.8 It is also expected that the new business model approach adopted by the Yorkshire & Humber consortium managed and co-ordinated by North Lincolnshire will have a positive effect not only with regard to family finding, but also in terms of greater collaboration between member authorities on the recruitment of carers. It is projected that there will be 15 new adopter approvals for the coming year which is a significant increase.
- 3.8 The central list of panel members has increased with the addition of another psychologist, an Independent adoption social worker and an educational psychologist and another adoptive parent. We are still seeking someone with knowledge and expertise regarding BME issues. Two elected members are due to join the central list in the near future.

Pilot Ofsted Inspection of the Adoption Service

- 3.9 As reported above, a pilot Ofsted Inspection of the Adoption Service took place at the end of November. This inspection was undertaken by Ofsted as part of their development of a revised framework for inspecting adoption services. North Lincolnshire was chosen to pilot the new inspection process and a full inspection was carried out in the context of the 'bar having been raised' for adoption services by government and Ofsted.
- 3.10 The key changes in the draft inspection framework were:
- A significant reduction in notice given before an Inspection to 10 working days. This is aimed at giving inspectors 'as true a picture as possible of the provision'.
 - Ofsted making judgements under five headings: *outcomes for children; safety of children; quality of provision; leadership and management; and overall effectiveness*. Consideration of how well a service promotes equality and values diversity is also key in each area.
 - Involving children directly and routinely in the inspection of adoption services and continuing, where possible to meet with birth parents.
 - Ofsted will also report on how well agencies do in ensuring the timely and effective identification of children for whom adoption is the right option and the approval and placement of children with adoptive families, helping

make sure the process is as smooth and quick as possible.

3.11 Although this was not a statutory inspection, it was undertaken following the full process and was undertaken by 2 inspectors to measure the authority against newly developed framework. The service was judged to be 'Good' with some features close to outstanding. Among the comments made in their report, the inspectors described the adoption service as: '..a flexible service which places the child at the centre of decision- making', '..Efficiency in early identification of children whose plan may be adoption, robust planning and monitoring of plans', 'robust family finding and matching ensures that children are placed without delay'.

3.12 The inspectors made no requirements. They made 3 recommendations to further enhance practice. These recommendations have been implemented and inform the on-going children in care action plan. Ofsted inspectors at the recent inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children confirmed that the recommendations have been fully addressed and incorporated into practice.

3.13 A number of actions have been taken in response to these recommendations and to ensure the service continues to develop and improve. The recommendation and actions taken during the period are as follows:

- *Ensure that feedback is sought from service users and partner agencies, on the success of the service provision (NMS 15.6)*

As a result of consultation and participation events in September the service has developed a list of experienced adopters who are available to act as mentors or 'buddies' for new adopters.

The service has also produced a newsletter and developed activity sessions for adopted children.

The service has a number of processes in place to gather feedback, it now ensures that this information is routinely collated and will be reported into the Quarterly Performance Review.

- *Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency (NMS 25.1).*

Feedback from the inspectors was that the service effectively gathered performance information, but that

greater analysis would enable the information to be used more effectively.

A full analysis of the care population was undertaken in January 2012. This enabled an analysis of entrants to care, an enhanced understanding of the progression of strategies in achieving permanence planning and helped in a clear understanding of the newly developed adoption scorecard.

The information team now publishes a monthly analysis of adoption information and indicators. This provides a full analysis of the key information relating to adoption and achieving permanence for children. It helps inform service developments and provides a clear picture of the service in comparison to previous periods, national comparators and like authorities.

- *Ensure that entries in records are appropriate, up to date and contribute to an understanding of the child's life (NMS 27)*

This was in relation to a specific record. The information has been fed back to the relevant teams and is now incorporated into management oversight and quality assurance processes for all reports relating to adoption.

4 FINANCE

- 4.1 The service level agreement continues to be in place with After Adoption, Yorkshire, to provide birth parent and adoptee counselling as required. This provides birth families with access to a service that is Independent of North Lincolnshire. During the period, new individual services were provided in 8 cases including adoptees and birth family members.

This comprised the following:

- Adoptees - 6
- Birth Relative/Sibling - 2

Referred by:

- NLC - 5
- Self –1
- Other – 2

In total at the end of the period there were a total of 22 open cases through the agreement.

- 4.2 North Lincolnshire Council has been at the forefront of developing a business model in relation to the operation of the Yorkshire & Humber adoption consortium which includes 15 Local Authorities and 3 independent adoption agencies and will become the provider authority responsible for managing and co-

ordinating the business and activities of the consortium on behalf of all of the member local authorities and agencies. This was finalised during the period with the consortium manager post established from April 2012.

4.3 Adoption Financial Support

At the end of the period there were 55 adopted children in receipt of financial support at a total cost of £6,794.10 per week (a slight reduction on the previous period).

5 CONSULTATION AND FEEDBACK

5.1 Routine feedback from adopters regarding the service they receive from the Adoption Team has been positive indicating that they feel fully supported throughout the process. For example, one set of adopters rated both the child's social worker and adoption social worker as 'excellent' in relation to the quality of post placement support provided, adding that they 'could not have asked for better people'. Another set of adopters chose to express their views in a letter to the adoption manager, referring to their adoption social worker's 'professionalism', 'vast knowledge', and as an 'outstanding individual who deserves to be recognised'.

5.2 Prior to the pilot inspection surveys were sent out to service users affected by adoption, including adopters. Completed surveys were then sent to Ofsted. The inspectors reported that the rate of return was good providing valuable information from service users and partner agencies. When the inspectors then visited North Lincolnshire they had the opportunity to meet and speak with some adopters which reinforced their view that adopters are well served and supported.

5.3 As reported above, in response to feedback from adopters, the service has developed a process whereby experienced adopters act as mentors or 'buddies' to new adopters.

6 PLAN FOR EXCELLENCE – UPDATE ON SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS

6.1 Training for panel members will continue to focus upon Child Protection training. This is part of the on-going training and support programme for panel members. All panel members receive this as part of their induction and refresher training.

6.2 The first edition of the adoption newsletter providing information about the service to adoptive carers, children and relevant others was sent out during March 2012.

- 6.3 The service is developing an activity based group for adopted children to provide the opportunity for them to meet with other adopted children, share experiences and discuss any issues they wish. The first of these took place during November 2011.
- 6.4 The service has developed a children's guide to adoption support in different versions for varying age groups. This was distributed in October 2011.
- 6.5 Through developing regional partnership arrangements, the service is seeking to share excellence, develop joint approaches and pool resources. The service has jointly commissioned training with NE Lincs aimed at increasing the skills set of adoption social workers in the often challenging and complex area of post adoption support delivered to adoptive families. The main focus of is equipping adoption social workers with more re-parenting strategies which they can pass on to adoptive families who are struggling to understand and manage the behaviours of their children. This is incorporated into the training programme for 2012/13.
- 6.6 Under partnership arrangements with NE Lincolnshire to provide inter-country adoption services, a jointly commissioned service level agreement is now in place with Yorkshire Adoption Agency to provide this service.

7 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 Following the review of the Children and Young Peoples Service a further investment in the North Lincolnshire Adoption Service took place, the additional staff member started in September. This added capacity to the team helps ensure the service meets its statutory duties and has the capacity to recruit and assess prospective adopters.
- 7.2 Following the implementation of the new NMS, in April 2011 the central list of panel members was put in place. We are continuing to recruit to the new list to increase from the current 10 members. There is a dedicated training package for panel members in line with the NMS and a programme of induction, appraisal and review of panel members to ensure the panel is fully equipped to meet its responsibilities under the standards and regulations. New members of the central list will receive an appraisal within a year of their appointment. In its feedback to North Lincolnshire in March 2012, panel members were satisfied that regulatory requirements regarding the preparation of adoption reports were being met. They also expressed the view that reports were consistently of a very high quality.

- 7.3 As part of the overall sufficiency strategy and in line with our ambition to achieve safe, stable and permanent placements for children as well as the newly developed adoption consortium business model. The service will focus on substantially increasing the number of assessments of new carers. This has already doubled over the previous 12 months and the target of the service is to completing a further 20 assessments of new carers over the next 12 months. This will provide greater choice of placements, enabling the authority to successfully place children in a timely manner and enable any additional carers to contribute to the adoption business consortium. This will generate income enabling further recruitment and assessment of carers to take place.
- 7.4 At the last statutory inspection of the service in 2009, the service was judged to be 'good' with no recommendations or requirements. The positive outcome from the pilot inspection provides evidence that it has continued to build on this success and meet the needs of the children and their families in North Lincolnshire. The number of children adopted or moving to Special Guardianship arrangements remains consistently high as a proportion of those in care and trends continue to show an improvement in the timescales in achieving adoptive placements.
- 7.5 There is a good platform for further developments in preparation for the next statutory inspection and addressing the requirements of the governments 'Action Plan on Adoption' published on the March 2012, key areas include:
- Plans to legislate to reduce the number of adoptions delayed in order to achieve a perfect or near ethnic match between adoptive parents and the adoptive child;
 - Emphasis on swifter use of the national Adoption Register
 - New adoption scorecards
 - Expectation that local authorities to seek to place children with their potential adopters in anticipation of the court's placement order;
 - Plans to speed up the adopter assessment process - two months training and information gathering - four months of full assessment;
 - "fast-track" process for those who have adopted before or are foster carers
 - Developing a National Gateway to adoption
- 7.6 The recently published adoption scorecard demonstrates that all our adoption timescales continue to improve, with 2011/12 being our most successful year to date in placing children for adoption within minimum timescales (78% being placed within 21 months

of first coming into care in 11/12 - compared to 56% over the previous 3 years and the England average of 58%)

Adoptions from care have increased from a 3 year average of 12% (in line with the national average) to 19.7% this year

Paul Cowling
May 2012