
Meeting: Corporate Parenting Panel
Date: 4 February 2013
Subject: Adoption Improvement Grant
Report of: Edwina Grant, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Children's Services
Summary: This report outlines the proposed options for the spend of the Adoption Improvement Grant

Contact Officer: Fiona Mackirdy, Head of Adoption and Fostering
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

Central Bedfordshire Council's Medium Term Plan Priority C Promote Health and Well-being.

The Children and Young People's Plan 2011-2014 Priority 2 – Protecting children and keeping them safe.

Adoption is a key statutory service to Looked After Children.

Financial:

1. There are no further financial implications other than those detailed in the main body of the report.

Legal:

2. There are no legal implications if compliance with the grant conditions is met.

Risk Management:

3. There are no significant risks as current practice in the service is considered to be good and there is positive feedback from customers and stakeholders.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

4. No staffing implications.

Equalities/Human Rights:

5. A key part of the national reform includes numbers and timeliness of adoption for children from Black, Minority, Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. With this in mind, practice has to demonstrate that proper account is taken of the needs of children in relation to their heritage and identity.
6. The Council successfully recruits carers who are gay or lesbian, and those from a range of ethnic backgrounds. It is anticipated that the national reform programme will address the issues these adopters face in being matched with a child in a timely way. This has not yet proved to be an issue for this service.

Community Safety:

7. Not Applicable.

Sustainability:

8. There are no sustainability implications.

Procurement:

9. Not Applicable.

RECOMMENDATION:

that the Corporate Parenting Panel comment on the content of the report.

Background

10. The Department for Education published 'An Action Plan for Adoption; Tackling Delay' in March 2012 as a blueprint for Government intentions to accelerate the adoption process so that more children benefit from adoption and more rapidly.
11. Changes to adoption law and practice through publication of new regulations and Statutory guidance were been made during Summer 2012; these affected the practice of the Adoption Panel and Agency Decision Making function. Further amendments were proposed as detailed in the consultation which finished on 5 December 2012. These included radical changes to the recruitment process for adopters, implementation of 'fostering for adoption' and changes to the constitution of adoption panels.
12. On 4 October 2012 each Council, acting in its role as the local authority, was advised of the allocation of an Adoption Improvement Grant to assist with implementation of the reforms. Grants have to be allocated within the 2012-13 financial year with clear reporting deadlines to the Department for Education (DfE) of 18 January and 15 April 2013.
13. Central Bedfordshire Council allocation is £37,010. As a shared service with Bedford Borough Council, the Adoption Service is with Bedford Borough Council, also calling on some of their allocation of £34,786.

An Action Plan for Adoption

14. An 'Action Plan for Adoption' outlines several key proposals to speed up adoption:
 - i. Provide a framework to support swift decision making and which avoids duplication with court scrutiny and decisions – changes to role of adoption panels
 - ii. Tackling delay in matching children to adopters and specifically in finding families for black children and increasing use of the National Adoption Register.
 - iii. Considering 'fostering for adoption' – placing children as early as possible with carers likely to become their adoptive parents.
 - iv. Changing adopter recruitment and assessment – six month process in two parts, new national 'front-door', improvements in adoption support – national 'passport' and national consistency.
 - v. New adoption scorecard including new indicators, and incrementally increasing performance thresholds. Improvement notices and ultimately intervention where performance remains poor.

Context for Central Bedfordshire Council

15. The latest Adoption Scorecard was published on 30 November 2012. Performance in Central Bedfordshire Council in terms of timeliness is within Government targets. The number of children being adopted is below statistical neighbours and national averages.
16. The Adoption tracking system implemented in September 2012 has identified approximately 40 children who have a plan or who are likely to have a plan for adoption. Within this group of children there are a small cohort for whom it may be difficult to find adoptive parents, due to their age, their needs by virtue of being part of a sibling group
17. As a result of increases in numbers of looked after children, more proactive planning for children and changes in regulations, there are pressures on the capacity of the Agency Decision Maker, Adoption Panel Adviser and Medical Advisor. These pressures increase the risk of delays in cases being considered and decisions being made.

Proposals for the use of the Central Bedfordshire Council Grant

18. The first proposal is to pilot a specialist Family Finding Project concentrating on good quality publicity and follow up for children difficult to place. If successful, consideration would be given as to whether this could be funded by future grant allocations or core funding. This would consist of a Senior Social Work Assistant post to focus on ensuring material sent to the Consortium and other local authorities is of high quality, including photographs and DVDs and that there is prompt follow up of enquiries. The cost of this is estimated at £10,360 for a 3 month agency filled post plus £2,000 for materials and printing.

19. The second proposal is a short time-limited project to consider the feasibility of implementing a fostering for adoption model. This would consider the number of children that could be suitable for such placements based on the previous case data and those children we know are looked after with a likely plan for adoption.
20. The second part of the study would be the changes to recruitment, training, assessment and support needed to recruit adopters to such a project. The project would consist of:
 - 2 days work researching outcomes and factors for success of similar concurrent planning projects by other adoption agencies
 - 2 days identifying possible cohort of children
 - 6 days looking at changes to adopter recruitment
 - 2 days report writing
21. The cost to the Council would be 12 days at £280 per day, totalling £3,360. One further day would be needed if Bedford Borough Council children were also to be considered. The project would report mid February and if proposals were taken forward then further project time to amend training and recruitment materials could be commissioned.
22. The third suggestion is a short term increase in capacity for the panel Medical Advisor. A source of delay in adoption planning is the adoption medical; there are issues in securing appointments for medicals to take place and then the Medical Advisor has to consider the information and advise the Agency Decision Maker. At present demand for medical advice is exceeding the time afforded by the three sessions per week which is contracted. The proposal is for January to March to secure additional session of Panel Advisor time per week. This is subject to final confirmation from Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and is estimated at £4,000. Further discussion is needed with the CCG to ensure that Medical Advisor capacity is sufficient to meet demand.
23. A further risk of delay at present is Adoption Panel Advisor capacity – all plans for children and assessments of adopters have to be quality assured. It is suggested that short term capacity is increased through recruitment of a locum adoption advisor for 3 months to quality assure plans and provide more proactive advice to Agency Decision Makers and to teams. The cost would be 3 months salary at £40 per hour, total cost £14,000.
24. The local adoption consortium, comprising 5 councils and a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) have suggested that an administrator be appointed to organise consortium events whereby children and adopters' profiles are shared to maximise opportunities for cross-authority local working. The suggested contribution is £3,000.
25. The total of the five proposals is £36,720.

Outcomes

26. The Adoption and Fostering Service will build on current good practice in relation to individual cases and performance overall.

Governance and Consultation

27. There are clear rules governing the allocation and spend of the grant. Payment will be made in full in February 2013 following the submission of a statement of how the funding is intended to be used no later than 18 January 2013. Failure to submit evidence by this date will result in a delay in payment.
28. Further evidence will need to be submitted by 15 April 2013 to confirm how the funding has been used. Failure to do so will result in the return of all or part of the Adoption Improvement Grant

Conclusions and Next Steps

29. The work to spend this Grant is on going.

Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

None