
Meeting: Corporate Parenting Panel
Date: 02 December 2013
Subject: Six Monthly Report on the Adoption Service
April to September 2013

Report of: Gerard Jones, Assistant Director Children's Services Operations
Summary: The report outlines the activity in the adoption service during April to September 2013

Contact Officer: Neil Wood, Interim 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. Adoption and Fostering within Children's Services has an annual budget of £6.6 million, including costs of Other Adoption Agency placements and provision on behalf of Bedford Borough Council under the Shared Service arrangement. There are no new financial considerations arising from the Annual Reports.

Legal:

2. Regulations, associated Statutory Guidance and National Minimum Standards outlines the requirement to report to Members on the management and outcomes of the Adoption Agency, in order that they can satisfy themselves that the services are effective and achieving good outcomes for children.

Risk Management:

3. Regulatory Risks: Failure to report to Members would be a breach of National Minimum Standard.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

4. Not Applicable.

Equalities/Human Rights:

5. Adoption services provided to Looked after Children affects all sectors of communities.

Community Safety:

6. Not Applicable.

Sustainability:

7. Not Applicable.

Procurement:

8. Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATION:

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

Background

9. The Children Act 2004, Care Standards Act 2000 and associated Relevant Regulations and National Minimum Standards require Local Authority Adoption Agencies to report to Members at six monthly intervals. This will be achieved by presentation of a six monthly update to the Corporate Parenting Panel and a full year Annual Report to this Panel and the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee each year.
10. The Adoption and Fostering service is a shared service hosted by Central Bedfordshire Council (until end of December 2013). Annual and six monthly reports contain information activity in respect of both Councils. This report will be provided to Bedford Borough.
11. This report covers activity in the period April to September 2013.

Recruitment of Adopters

12. The national Adoption Reform agenda has led to significant changes in process this year, with emphasis on improving timescales for both children and adopters. Therefore, the recruitment process has been reconfigured. Previously, the process offered information evenings as a first step for adopters to explore the idea of adoption. New adoption regulations were enforced in this period (Q1 & Q2 of 2013) which required a two stage process for adopter recruitment:
- Stage 1: adopter led – agency enabled: Self preparation through preliminary training, and research; 2 months
 - Stage 2: agency led – applicant enabled: Agency assessment phase, culminating in panel presentation

13. Sum effect is that some applicants were in previous process and in latter part of this period applicants were engaged in the new two stage process. 16 households attended adoption information evenings. 4 of those households attended a subsequent in-depth interview to explore adoption further with an adoption Social Worker. As of 30th September, 24 households were in stage one of the process and 4 in stage two. This is the first cohort of applicants in new process. These figures reflect a start-up of a new process that will build up over time. Future reports will be more indicative of flow rate through this new system.
14. 17 assessments of new adopters commenced in the period. 12 new adoptive households completed their assessment and were approved to adopt. We will see an increase in rate of assessments, as the new process settles-in. For the joint service with Bedford Borough led by Central Bedfordshire, the target for the whole year 2013-14 was set at 55 new adoptive households. Central Bedfordshire as a single service from January 2014, will have a smaller number of children to place for adoption (though trend overall is upward). At this stage, it is reasonable to assume approximately 50/50 split of activity between Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough.

Adoption Planning and Placements for Children

15. The total number of family finding cases (as of 30 September 2013) was 70; 25 for CBC and 45 for BBC. Although this will seem disproportionate, in fact there is a high degree of change in this aspect of work. The higher number of BBC cases in this period is affected by a number of large sibling groups. Generally the distribution between CBC and BBC is more even.
16. Since an earlier change to Adoption Regulations in 2011, most cases where adoption is the plan for a child are no longer presented to the Adoption Panel. (There are a few exceptions such as relinquished children). The new mechanism is that 'adoption as the plan' is presented directly to the Agency Decision Maker for a decision. There were no cases of 'adoption as the plan' presented to the Adoption Panel in this period. 42 cases of 'adoption as the plan' were presented to the Agency Decision Maker. 18 were BBC children and 24 were CBC children.
17. 13 children were placed with adopters during the period. 8 were from CBC and 5 were from BBC. This took the total number of children placed with adopters and awaiting adoption order to 22 children. (This comprises 17 adoption households, given that some are siblings in same placement). 12 were from CBC and 10 from BBC. As of 30 September 2013 there had been 4 adoption orders granted; 4 were CBC and 1 was BBC.

Special Guardianship and Adoption Support

18. At the end of September, the team were providing adoption support for 41 families; 18 CBC and 23 BBC. The team also provided special guardianship support for 33 families; 15 CBC and 18 BBC.
19. Support was also offered through 202 'Letterbox' arrangements; 89 CBC and 113 BBC. Letterbox contact (sometimes referred to as indirect contact) is identified as part of the permanence planning for each individual child. It seeks to ensure a

secure and consistent record of contact between birth family and adoptive family. This often includes letters, occasional photographs and other ephemera that is often of high significance to the adoptee later in life.

Adult Adoption Work

20. Over the period there were 62 referrals from adopted adults or their birth relatives seeking support to trace records or for intermediary services to facilitate contact. Of these, 40 were CBC and 22 were BBC.

Key Events

21. This period has seen a raft of changes in Adoption Legislation, Regulations and Guidance. The Adoption Agency has disseminated knowledge and training about these changes as well as having continued to embed these in practice. For example, the adoption team has adapted the approval process in line with new two-stage process required by Adoption Regulations 2013, which came into force 01 July 2013.
22. Disaggregation of the Adoption and Fostering Service is nearing conclusion, with separate services for Adoption (for purposes of this report) being provided by Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council. From 01 January 2014, these will be two Adoption Agencies where formerly Central Bedfordshire provided majority of services for this function on behalf of Bedford Borough Council.
23. It had been proposed that the Adoption panel would continue as a joint panel. However, significant increase of adoption activity for both Councils has led to conclusion that it will be necessary to form a separate Adoption panel in Borough Council. As an interim measure, the programme board has agreed that the adoption panel functions should remain joint until end of this financial year.
24. In conjunction with the increased volume of adoption work, there has been a need to increase medical advice time. This has been achieved as part of the Adoption Reform Grant for 2013-14.

Adoption Reform Grant

25. Central Bedfordshire Adoption Agency and Bedford Borough Council each obtained an Adoption Reform Grant for 2013-14. This comprised two parts; Part A is non-ring-fenced and has been utilised for a range of initiatives to influence the permanence planning of the whole system. Part B is ring-fenced to '*spend on adoption services*'. The Government's priorities are:
 - Structural reform of adopter recruitment to increase the supply of adopters, including equalisation of the inter-agency fee
 - Reducing the backlog of children waiting for adoption, particularly by developing innovative ways of finding adoptive families for children who traditionally wait longer than average to be adopted.
26. In order to balance fact that first 9 months of this year are as a joint service, there are mechanisms in place to recharge Bedford Borough Council for a suitable proportion of those activities that are joint enterprise, using part B of the grant.

Some of the planned grant spend is Central Bedfordshire specific. The monies have been allocated to a range of activities associated with achieving improvements in adoption outcomes. This is a whole system approach and is not exclusively targeted at the Adoption Service. In this respect, the whole Looked-After system is part of the Adoption Agency.

27. Central Bedfordshire has organised the Adoption Reform Grant in the following areas:
- Additional medical advisor time for adoption cases
 - Family Finding project – SLA with St Francis Children’s Society
 - Implementing new adopter recruitment process – training and material update
 - E-learning for Stage 1 applicants to adopt
 - Scoping for *Foster to Adopt* project
 - Training on new assessment format and timescales
 - Increase legal services time for adoption cases
 - Increase social worker assessment capacity
 - Life story workers in LAC team
 - Tracking adoption recruitment
 - Tracking cases in proceedings where adoption the plan
 - Contribution to increased inter-agency fee rate
28. A 6 monthly report on Adoption Reform Grant (part B) spend to date has been returned to government as required. This details the range of activity, it is intended impact on achieving improvements in recruitment of adopters, tighter timescales and better matching etc. This is fully informed by the Adoption Reform agenda.

Appendices:

None

Background Papers: (open to public inspection)

None