

# Children's Services Committee

<b>Report title:</b>	<b>Norfolk County Council Adoption Agency Annual Review</b>
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	<b>12 September 2017</b>
<b>Responsible Chief Officer:</b>	<b>Matt Dunkley Interim Executive Director of Children's Services</b>
<p><b>Strategic impact</b></p> <p>Every adoption agency has a statutory requirement to publish, and regularly update, a document which describes the ethos and goals of the adoption service, its management and oversight arrangements and the experience of its staff.</p> <p>The following pages detail the performance of the adoption service and include the following information;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance in recruiting adopters</li> <li>• Performance in finding adoptive families for children</li> <li>• Performance providing post adoption support</li> <li>• Complaints</li> <li>• Service-User Engagement</li> </ul> <p>It is important to remember that the purpose of the adoption service is to approve prospective adopters, prepare children for adoption, and match adopters with children and to provide appropriate post adoption support. This supports the overarching outcome which is to ensure that children and young people are brought up in secure and permanent homes.</p> <p>This <b>Statement of Purpose</b> (appendix 1) is a public document, approved by the County Council each year before being made available to adoptive families, adopted children, their birth parents and guardians and staff working in the field of adoption. It is also inspected by OFSTED (Office of Standards in Education). This committee paper will focus on a performance review of Norfolk Adoption Service.</p>	

## Executive summary

The key strengths:

- The number of adopters approved has decreased this year after 4 years of rising numbers mirroring national trends there also has been a reduction in numbers of children with a plan for adoption.
- The number of children matched with adoptive families, in 2015/16 was 73 compared with 85 the previous year. This decline follows a national trend and is likely to be linked to Case Law (Re BS Case).
- The number of adoption orders granted was 86 which is the largest number to date.
- Norfolk children, on average, are waiting for a shorter period between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.
- Prospective adopters assessments are of a good standard
- The number of social workers in the Adoption Support Team have been increased by one FTE.
- We worked with three voluntary adoption agencies and 6 local authorities to prepare for regionalisation of adoption services.

- Early permanence decisions are being made quicker and with greater senior management oversight to ensure that children are placed swiftly and experience minimal delay including robust arrangements to track cases in public law.
- We achieved 9 foster to adopt placements compared with 7 placements the year before.

#### **The Key areas of challenge:**

- The number of children with a plan for adoption has slightly increased. This is a trend reflected locally and nationally.
- Variability in the quality of child permanence reports.
- Some children with complex needs or large sibling groups remain difficult to place.
- To ensure all children with adoption as a plan have good quality life story books.

#### **Next year we will:**

- Target recruitment on BME groups, those with an offer to large sibling groups and children with a disability.
- Continue to recruit and champion foster to adopt placements.
- Embed procurement process around adoption support applications.
- Further develop attachment friendly schools project.
- Continue to work with partners to create a regional adoption agency.
- Work with colleagues to improve the quality of life story work
- Re launch our magazine for adopters side by side

#### **Recommendations:**

To recommend approval of the statement of purpose to full council and provide scrutiny and challenge to the adoption service.

## **1. Proposal**

- 1.1 Members are asked to scrutinise the information within the report and provide challenge to the service to ensure continued improved outcomes for Norfolk children and families along with internal performance improvement.
- 1.2 Members are asked to recommend approval to Full Council of the Statement of Purpose and Functions for the Local Authority Adoption Service to comply with the Care Standards Act 2000.

## **2. Evidence**

### **2.1. What is Adoption?**

Adoption is a way of providing a new and permanent family for children who cannot be brought up by their own parents. It's a legal procedure in which parental responsibility is awarded to the adopters who become the only adults with parental responsibility. Once an adoption order has been granted it can't be reversed except in extremely rare circumstances.

### **2.2 Performance & Benchmarking**

#### **2.2.1 Children Awaiting Adoption**

The Department for Education produced two “heat maps” showing the number of children awaiting adoption (as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013) for each local authority. Norfolk was shown as having 85 children awaiting for adoption a reduction from 110 at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012. As of March 2014 this had further reduced to 80 of which 12 were matched but not placed 23 were awaiting placement orders from the courts. As of July 2015 there were 39 children waiting adoption in Norfolk of which 24 had a potential match identified. On 31 March 2016 this had fallen to 35 children and as of August 2017 we have 32 children waiting to be matched with adopters.

### 2.2.2 Number of children being adopted.

The latest national figures report that had been a decrease in the number of children being adopted and this trend is reflected in the East of England and Norfolk.

The table below shows the numbers of adoption orders granted for England, the East of England and Norfolk from April 2012 to March 2016, plus additional Norfolk data for 2016/17:

Area	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
England	4,100	5,550	5,360	4,690	-
East of England	370	510	530	430	-
Norfolk	58	81	100	74	86

[Source: Office of National Statistics (Adoption Orders Granted) and CareFirst Norfolk Data]

In the three years to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017, 260 children in Norfolk were adopted, compared with 255 in the 3 years to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016.

In 2015/16 18% of the children that stopped being looked after in Norfolk were adopted this compares to an average across England of 15% and the East of England is also 15%.

## 2.3 Recruiting Norfolk adoptive families

- 2.3.1 Since 2013 Norfolk Adoption Service significantly increased the annual marketing budget to attract prospective adopters in Norfolk, which has led to an increase in the number of initial enquiries year on year, till last year.
- 2.3.2 On average, Norfolk receives more enquiries and applications from prospective adopters and approves more adopters than local authorities across England as a whole. Last year we received 311 enquiries compared with 296 the year before. In 2016/17 we had 60 applications compared with 59 the year before. 43 perspective adopters were approved in 2016/17 the same figure as last year
- 2.3.3 National data shows that the number of children with a placement order so they can be matched with adopters fell by 34/% this fall was 15% in Norfolk.
- 2.3.4 An emerging trend seems to be that prospective adopters are contacting us earlier and after attending an open evening they are choosing to spend more time preparing to become adopters. The conversion rate of enquiries to adopters is similar to other authorities. As a result of open evenings which explain the legal and emotional commitment adoption involves, the majority of prospective applicants decide not to take their intent further.

## **2.4 Finding adoptive families outside Norfolk**

- 2.4.1 As highlighted earlier in this paper, the last 2 years saw a decrease in the number of children placed for adoption mirroring a national trend and resulting from case law RE BS.
- 2.4.2 Last year 20 children were placed with families from other local authorities or voluntary agencies – a decrease of 9 on the year before. These are the most complex children awaiting adoption in Norfolk and will have special needs or developmental uncertainty. If not adopted it is highly likely that most or all of these children would have spent their childhood in care.
- 2.4.3 As part of the government reforms the inter agency fee increased to £27,000 for local authorities, to bring in line with the fee paid to voluntary adoption agencies. This has resulted in an increase in the budget required to pay for inter-agency fees. We have been able to claim £356,000 rebate from central government. In this financial year there will be no rebate from central government in 2017/18.

## **2.5 Matching Children with Adopters**

- 2.5.1 Adoption is a key area of focus for the Government. The Department for Education (DfE) publication “An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay” (2012) has the key objectives of reducing the time it takes to recruit adopters and reducing the amount of time children wait to be adopted. Performance against these objectives is measured nationally through the Department for Education (DfE) Adoption Scorecard. The two key measures are:
- The 3 year average number of days between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family 2013 to 2016 is 496 for Norfolk compares with and England average of 593 days ranking Norfolk 18 in England out of 152 local authorities with responsibility for adoption.
  - The 3 year average number of days between a Norfolk receiving authority to place a child for adoption and the child being placed with their adoptive family 2013 to 2016 is 201 for Norfolk compares with and England average of 223 days ranking Norfolk 57 in England out of 152 local authorities with responsibility for adoption.
- 2.5.2 These figures do come with a caveat that the average timescales could increase if Norfolk find adoptive placements for those children who have waited the longest for adoption which can lead to much improved outcomes for children.

## **3 Post adoption support**

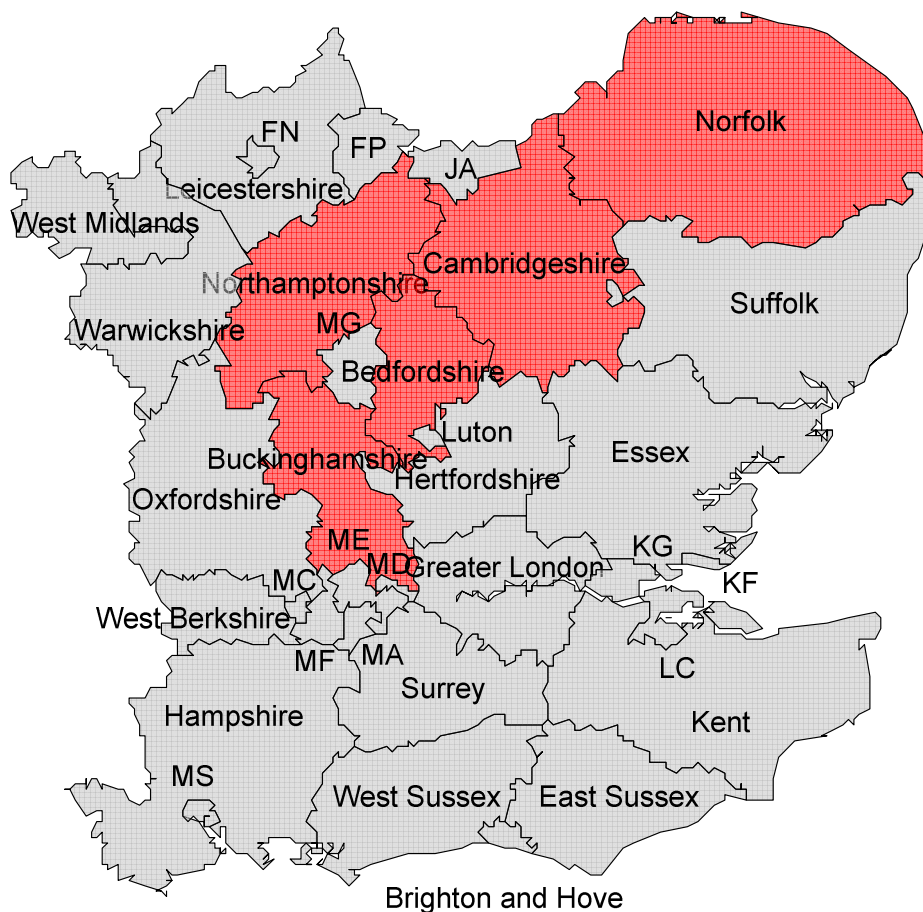
- 3.1 The Adoption Support team works with adopted children and their families after the adoption order.
- 3.2 In addition there is also a specialist Advice line and Consultation service twice a month for parents to meet with two social workers. If families want an on-going service from us then they are entitled to an Assessment of Need and a plan of intervention. As the majority of children have experienced developmental trauma, the intensive casework often involves therapeutic services including Therapy and

Developmental Re-parenting. In 2016-17 the Adoption Service worked with 170 post adoption support packages which included 108 new referrals.

- 3.3 Another area of adoption support provided by Norfolk Adoption Service is the Letterbox contact service where adopters and birth families can exchange messages. Between April 2016 and March 2017, over 3,000 exchanges were made.
- 3.4 Many queries arise from these exchanges and some have to be reviewed or have direct contacts supervised. Where required, birth parents are also given support to write their contact messages for children who have been adopted.
- 3.5 The Adoption Support Team provides access to information and intermediary services for adopted adults. In 2016/17, 240 cases were open. Intermediary services are also provided for birth relatives and in 2015/16 the Adoption Support Team handled over 30 cases.
- 3.6 The Department for Education (DfE) has stated that the support families receive after adoption should be improved and since June 2015 introduced the adoption support fund.  
Since April 2016 to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 we have successfully bid for over £827,485 worth of therapy for 182 adopted children/ 138 adopted families in Norfolk.

## **4 The regionalisation of adoption services**

- 4.1 In 2015 central government announced its intention that all local authorities should form into Regional adoption agencies taking powers to compel local authorities to regionalise by 2020. Central government is clear that they expect greater efficiencies and benefits from regionalisation particularly as they expect the voluntary sector to be a key partner. Norfolk is working with 6 local authorities: Cambridge, Northampton, Bedford borough, Central Bedfordshire, Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire and 4 charities Coram I, Coram Cambridge, adoption plus and St Francis Children's society.



- 4.2 The regionalisation project is being led by central Bedfordshire who have successfully applied for grant money to allow project time to implement the regionalisation agenda.

## 5 Complaints

- 5.1 Between April 2015 and March 2016, Norfolk County Council received 16 complaints relating to the adoption service, all of which were resolved at an early stage compared with 13 the year before. The 16 complaints are above the average for local authorities in England which is 3, but this is to be expected due to the far higher numbers of enquiries and applications we process in Norfolk compared to the England average for local authorities. Norfolk Adoption Service is four times larger than the average English adoption agency. All complaints related to single, isolated incidents, and no systemic issues were highlighted within the service.

## 6 Finance Implications

- 6.1 There are no financial implications from recommending this report

## 7 Issues, risks and innovation

- 7.1 It is critical in performing its duty as a corporate parent that the committee scrutinises the functioning of its adoption service.

## 8. Background

8.1 Please see the attached Statement of Purpose (appendix 1)

### **Officer Contact**

If you have any questions about matters contained or want to see copies of any assessments, e.g. equality impact assessment, please get in touch with:

If you have any questions about matters contained in this paper please get in touch with:

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