

Children's Services Committee

Report title:	Norfolk County Council Adoption Agency Annual Review
Date of meeting:	13 November 2018
Responsible Chief Officer:	Phil Watson Assistant Director Social Work
Strategic impact Every adoption agency has a statutory requirement to publish, and regularly update, a document which describes the ethos, core aims and objectives, what services it offers along with its management and oversight arrangements. The following pages detail the performance of the adoption service and include the following information; <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performance in recruiting adopters• Performance in finding adoptive families for children• Performance providing post adoption support• Complaints• Service-User Engagement 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. This Statement of Purpose (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.	

Executive summary

The key strengths:

- The adoption service was graded as Outstanding by Ofsted November 2017
Ofsted told us our adoption service is outstanding and that the service delivers positive and timely outcomes for our children who have a plan for adoption
 - Our adoption performance is in the top 10% of England
 - Foster to Adopt is making a real difference to children's lives
 - Family finding profiles are thoughtful and well written
 - The quality of transition has been transformed by our moving to adoption project in conjunction the with University of East Anglia
 - Post adoption support packages are comprehensive and individualised
- As an outstanding Adoption Service, we have partnered with Bromley Children's Services to assist them in being their improvement partner in driving performance and practice within their Adoption Service. This has started and will become a focus of work over the coming year to promote the excellent adoption service we have in Norfolk in sharing best practice in the field of adoption and celebrate our achievements.

- The number of adopters approved in 2017/18 was 45 (rounded down to nearest 5); compared to 35 in 2016/17 (also rounded down).
- The number of children matched with adoptive families in 2017/18 was 45; compared to 40 in 2016/17. (both numbers rounded down)
- The number of adoption orders granted in 2017/18 was 40 compared to 50 in 2016/17.
- 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
- Over the last year, we have worked with two voluntary adoption agencies and 6 local authorities as part of Adopt East Alliance to prepare a regionalisation approach 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 18 foster to adopt placements compared with 11 placements the year before and 7 in 2015/16

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.
- Recruiting enough adopters to be matched with the children with a plan for adoption
- 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 permanence 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 and review our commissioning arrangements as part of the Adopt East Alliance.
- Further develop attachment friendly schools project.
- Continue to work with partners within Adopt East Alliance and progress this work.
- Work with colleagues to improve the quality of life story work
- Work with Bromley as their Improvement Partner

Recommendations:

Committee is being invited to endorse the Statement of Purpose for the Norfolk Adoption Service for year 2018/19.

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

	31/03/2016	31/03/2017	31/03/2018
No. of children waiting with a decision but not yet placed as at 31 March 2018	40	55	60
No. of children waiting with a placement order but not yet placed as at 31 March 2018	30	30	40
Average length of time spent waiting (since entering care) for those with a placement order not yet placed (days)	370*	402	441
*note different definition in 2016 -			
Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. Where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days). 3-year average 2013-16			

Our performance in relation to the number of children with a Placement Order waiting to be matched has increased, despite proactive family finding, linking children with potential adopters prior to the making of the Placement Order, enabling the matching and introduction process to take place without delay. The reduction in the numbers of adopters being assessed both Locally and Nationally has been the main contributory factor.

2.2.3 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 2018, plus additional Norfolk data for 2017/18:

Area	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
England	4,100	5,550	5,360	4,690	4,370	3,840
East of England	370	510	530	430	490	440
Norfolk	58	81	100	74	86	65

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

2017/18 Source – ASGLB data for 2017/18

In the three years to 31st March 2018, 225 children in Norfolk were adopted, compared with 260 in the 3 years to 31st March 2017.

In 2017/18 17% 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 On average, Norfolk receives more enquiries and applications from prospective adopters and approves more adopters than local authorities across England as a whole. In 2017/18 we had 50 applications which mirrors the data for 2016/17. The ASGLB data shows there was an increase in prospective adopters being approved in 2017/18 compared to last year.

2.3.2 National data shows that the number of children in Norfolk with a placement order, so they can be matched with adopters mirrors national figures in 2017/18.

2.3.3 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. Over the past two years nationally there has been a reduction in the number of prospective adopters coming forward for assessment.

2.4 Finding adoptive families outside Norfolk

3.3 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 18 children were placed with families from other local authorities or voluntary agencies – a decrease of 2 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. Year to date (April – September 2018) we have placed 9 children with families from other local authorities and voluntary agencies.

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:

- In 2017/18 the average number of days between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family was 326 for Norfolk and 420 for England
- In 2016/17 the average number of days between Norfolk Children’s Services receiving authority to place a child for adoption and the child being placed with their adoptive family was 243 for Norfolk compared with the England average of 190 days.
- In 2017/18 the average number of days was 148 for Norfolk and 171 for England

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 As most children have experienced developmental trauma, the intensive casework often involves therapeutic services including Therapy and Developmental re-parenting and we have also started to commission in-depth multi-disciplinary assessments to help develop on-going support plans.

3.3 In 2017-18 the Adoption Service worked with 249 families (312 children), including 76 new referrals this year (87 children) and this amounted to 273 post adoption support for individual children over this year.

3.4 Although as 3.8 details, where therapeutic intervention is required of a specialist nature (complex need), we seek funding from the Adoption Support Fund in order

that such a need can be met. For those children and young people who do not require such specialist therapeutic support and where such a need can be met within the Adoption Support Team, such work is delivered directly to families from skilled and experienced adoption support workers within the Norfolk Adoption Service.

- 3.5 Another area of adoption support provided by the Norfolk Adoption Service is the Letterbox contact service where adopters and birth families can exchange messages. Between April 2017 and March 2018, over 3,000 exchanges were made between parties facilitated by the Adoption Support Letterbox service.
- 3.6 Many queries arise from these exchanges and some have to be reviewed or have direct contacts supervised as a consequence. Where required, birth parents are also given support to write their contact messages for children who have been adopted.
- 3.7 The Adoption Support Team provides access to information and intermediary services for adopted adults. In 2017/18, 272 cases were open. Intermediary services are also provided for birth relatives and in 2017/18 the Adoption Support Team handled 89 of these cases.
- 3.8 The Department for Education (DfE) has continued to provide financial assistance to adoptive families via the adoption support fund. Since 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018 we have successfully bid for £955,918.67 worth of therapy for 250 adopted children/192 adopted families in Norfolk

4 The regionalisation of adoption services

- 4.1 The Adoption Service is fully engaged with the Adoption Change Agenda, as set out in 'Regionalising adoption' DfE June 2015 and 'Adoption: a vision for change' DfE, March 2016.
- 4.2 Norfolk was part of the Central East Regional Adoption Agency project, but the decision was taken for Norfolk to step away from this project as it was no longer meeting Norfolk's adoption requirements. The Central East RAA is no longer in operation.
- 4.3 Norfolk County Council is part of Adopt East, an alliance of Adoption Services (partners) and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (Essex, Suffolk, Southend, Luton, Thurrock AdoptionPlus and Barnardo's). Being a partner of the Adopt East will provide opportunity to share best practice, join up marketing and recruitment material, identify efficiencies in relation to provision of adoption support services. The priorities of the Alliance are: -
 - Decisions about placements are always made in the child's best interests
 - Service delivery has at its heart innovation and practice excellence
 - Social Workers are highly skilled professionals who make high quality evidence-based decisions and do not tolerate damaging delay for children in their care
 - Matches are made without unnecessary delay
 - Fostering for Adoption to offer children early permanence placements
 - Every adoptive family has access to an ongoing package of appropriate support with a high-quality specialist assessment of need
 - The voice of adopters and their children is at the heart of national and local policy making and delivery of services

5 Complaints

- 5.1 Between April 2017 and March 2018, Norfolk County Council received 15 complaints relating to the adoption service, all of which were resolved at an early stage compared with 16 the year before. The 15 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 Only 1 Adoption case was presented to the Independent Review Mechanism.
- 5.2 Norfolk Adoption Service is four times larger than the average English adoption agency. A review of all complaints evidences that there are no systemic issues were highlighted within the service. The Adoption Service has taken the learning from the issues raised to improve its service delivery and quality of practice.

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:

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