

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

21ST MARCH 2012

SUBJECT:	COUNCIL MOTION ON ADOPTION – BEING THE BEST CORPORATE PARENTS
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL
REPORT OF:	ACTING DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
KEY DECISION	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report is produced in response to a motion to Cabinet on 12th December 2011 which identified this work programme for the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

1.2 This report has no exempt sections.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

2.1 The recent release in 2011 of the Children in Care Performance tables from the DfE show that, as an average for the 3 year period 2008-2010, Wirral Council was ranked 105th out of 143 authorities in terms of the percentage of children (69%) who were adopted, who were placed within 12 months of the decision being taken that adoption is in their best interests. These tables were subsequently updated in December 2011 when Wirral was ranked 74th with 76%.

How decisions around the adoption system are made (including the approval processes for prospective adoptive parents) and how they might be speeded up and improved for those children in care where adoption is likely to be the best outcome for providing a stable, permanent home.

When children become looked after they are subject to a regular review chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO); this Review is attended by key professionals, carers, and the child or young person as appropriate. Reviews take place within statutorily prescribed timescales, so at one month, then three months, and six monthly thereafter, if the child remains in the same placement. At the 4 month review of the care plan, it is a requirement that the plan for the child to achieve permanence is established. Assessments of parents and family members will be taking place during this early period after a child has become looked after, and if the child is subject to Care Proceedings there will be scrutiny by the Family Court. Occasionally very young children are relinquished by their parents for adoption, in these instances the Court do not become involved in the early planning.

Once the assessments are completed and if it is clear that there are no family members that the child can permanently live with safely; consideration is given to adoption. The child's needs, contact with family, school, health and development and family relationships are all considered in order to determine whether adoption is appropriate. A Looked After Children's Review will then consider all this information, and if appropriate endorse a plan for adoption. The child's case then must be presented to Adoption Panel within six weeks of this review and the Panel will then consider the case and make a recommendation regarding this plan to the Agency Decision Maker (Acting Deputy Director of Social Care, Children and Young People's Department). The Adoption Panel monitors this six week timescale (new Standard 2011). The Agency Decision Maker makes their decision within 7 working days of receipt of the recommendation and the final set of the Panel minutes (new Standard 2011). Once this decision is made the timescale starts for the child to be placed for adoption within the national target of twelve months.

The Adoption Service are ambitious in working with older children and in such cases the family finding, matching and placing can take more time, particularly where the focus is on moving at the child's pace. It could be argued that there should be an alternative target for these older children. In Wirral there is already excellent support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the form of partnership arrangements to provide support for these children with a plan for adoption and post adoption, and this was recognised as Outstanding in the Ofsted Inspection of the Adoption Service in 2011. The Team has the child at the centre of what they do, with both the social worker for the prospective adopters and the child's social worker being based in one team and working under one leader. The Adoption Task Force in Wirral meets regularly to review performance and consider strategies to reduce delay in adoption; this is a multi agency group. The service also reports regularly to this Overview and Scrutiny Committee on performance. The Wirral service is also part of the regional Adoption 22 Group that shares good practice. There is also a Court User Group for Adoption where issues around Court timescales are raised.

In terms of improvement, the new Standards and revised regulation for Adoption are already providing a greater focus on reducing delay in adoption. There has also been a workshop held recently with all the relevant managers on supporting social workers to complete one of the key documents for adoption, the Child Permanence Report.

There are 2 Senior Practitioners who work with social workers in the Districts to tighten their care planning for these children. They will go out to Teams and discuss cases on a regular basis. Senior Practitioners consider the relevant case information and form a view about the suitability of adoption as a plan for children at an early stage. This includes identifying when other professionals are required to assist in reaching this judgement, in particular colleagues from the CAMHS partnership.

Decisions about adoption for children can be speeded up by accurate assessment of children's needs (in partnership with others), as soon as possible, including the early assessment of whether the child/children can return home, or live with family members. A good quality Child Permanence Report which fully captures the child's background information and the planning for them whilst they have been in care; supports the Adoption Panel to make confident and timely decisions. Good quality Child Permanence Reports assist with the early identification of prospective adopters to meet children's needs. This is the work plan which is overseen by the Adoption

Task Force; timeliness of Adoption is afforded a high priority within the Children and Young People's Department.

An explanation of the relational link between the Fostering and Adoption team, the support provided by foster carers when children move from foster care to adoption and any weaknesses in process highlighted, with recommendations to improve any issues.

The Adoption and Fostering Teams are based together in Conway Buildings in Birkenhead which facilitates their working relationship. The Fostering Service is facing high demands at present and a report is due at a future Committee on the service. In recent times the two services have lacked the additional management oversight of the Looked After Children's Service Manager; this post has been vacant since August 2011. An appointment has now been made to this post.

The move of children from a fostering placement to an adoption placement is a complex area of work; it frequently involves, very young children who foster carers have become attached to, moving to an adopter. It involves quite an intense period of interaction between sets of carers and this process has been described as the adopters almost moving in to the foster carers home. This presents a number of challenges, as the role of parenting transfers, quite literally, from the current foster carers to the prospective adopters. With this understanding, the teams work together to support both sets of carers equally, but the prospective adopters have a greater degree of input from their social worker at this stage. The Service is looking at how support plans for both sets of carers can be enhanced, and that this is covered in further detail in the matching meeting which is held in every instance prior to a child moving to live with an adopter.

The model of concurrent planning (American Model) is also being considered. This is where prospective adopters are recruited to foster children initially with a view to adoption. This is a difficult model to implement and there has been limited success with it in this country

An explanation of the impact of the Family Courts on the adoption process, with suggestions given as to how to better work with and strengthen the existing approach by the Merseyside Family Court Justice Council (MFCJC) to improve the likelihood of appropriate and timely adoptions, taking account of the recommendations and proposals set out in the Family Justice Review.

The Family Courts relationship with the Local Authority is significant in the child's journey to adoption. There is a concern that the numbers of children nationally and locally subject to care proceedings is causing delay in the Courts. The local authority has a Looked After Children Project, one aspect of which is focused on the plans for children in Care Proceedings being closely monitored at a senior level, in order to reduce delay wherever possible. Delays are identified at an early stage and if this is specific to the Court this will be raised with the Borough Solicitors. There is currently work in progress with the Merseyside Family Courts to reduce delay in Care Proceedings, training took place across 10 regional authorities on 21 February 2012, and a Pre Proceedings Protocol is being developed to reduce the timescale children's cases are before the Court. The Acting Deputy Director is working on this with the Senior Family Court Judge for Merseyside. The Family Justice Review does recommend that the Adoption Panel is not required, in future, to consider whether

children should be placed for adoption. It should be noted that in Wirral delays in considering children at an Adoption Panel is not an issue; Adoption Panels are held on a monthly basis, and more frequently, dependent on the volume of work, or the urgency of the need for a child to be considered.

The potential for further development of a peer mentoring scheme for new adoptive parents to provide more support in the early days of adoption and further reduce the risk of placement failure.

The Service already offers opportunity for prospective adopters to meet and have advice and support from parents who have adopted themselves. This is usually identified in the support plan and discussed at the Adoption Panel. There is a parent and tots group run by people with experience of adoption. There is a scheme for peer mentoring in fostering and consideration will be given to how this relatively new scheme can have an application in adoption. Each training group attended by prospective adopters then becomes a support group for the participants through to adoption and post adoption.

3.0 RELEVANT RISKS

3.1 The outcomes for children adopted may be affected adversely by delay.

4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1 No other options relevant to be considered.

5.0 CONSULTATION

5.1 There is no consultation planned in relation to this motion.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

6.1 There are no implications for Voluntary, Community and Faith Groups.

7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

7.1 There are none arising from this report.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are none arising from this report.

9.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The recommendations seek to increase the opportunity for children and young people from diverse backgrounds to be adopted in a timescale that is appropriate for each child or young person.

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

(a) Is an EIA required? No as this is a report and is not proposing a change in policy.

10.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are none arising from this report.

11.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no planning and community safety implications linked to this report.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

12.1 The Committee is asked to note the report and consider its recommendations.

13.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

13.1 To consider and respond to the motion to Cabinet on the matter of performance in relation to adoption.

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APPENDICES

REFERENCE MATERIAL

None

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date: 12 December 2011