

REPORT TITLE	SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS
REPORT OF	SUE LEEDHAM GROUP MANAGER – ADOPTION & FOSTERING

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides an update of the progress achieved since the previous report in January 2016, regarding the *Assessment of potential Special Guardians and Post Special Guardianship support offered throughout childhood*.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children Sub-Committee is requested to note and comment upon the contents of this report. This is to provide evidence there continues to be scrutiny of Safeguarding Children in Wirral.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

It is clear that there needs to be ongoing scrutiny and reassurance that children subject to Special Guardianship Orders in Wirral are safeguarded throughout their childhood and enabled to reach their full potential.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

N/A

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3.1 The Scrutiny Review, sighted research into Special Guardianship, '*Investigating, Special Guardianship: Experiences, Outcomes and Challenges*' 2014 Department for Education. The research highlighted the positive contribution that Special Guardianship can make to children unable to remain in the care of their birth parents. This is especially significant for those children who have existing relationships with extended family members whose preservation would benefit the child rather than being severed as is often the case in adoption outside of the family.

The research also identified that for some very young children who have siblings living with family members, Special Guardianship would enable them to establish and maintain those relationships.

3.2 The two main areas that the Scrutiny Report Recommendations addressed in relation to Special Guardianship were, i) Assessment of potential Special Guardians in line with regulations and procedures and ii) Post Special Guardianship support offered throughout a child's lifetime.

UPDATE & PROGRESS

3.3 The recently published Special Guardianship (amendment) regulations 2016 set out the requirement for a stronger evidence base for the assessment, stating an assessment of the prospective special guardian's parenting capacity, including:

- (i) *Their understanding of, and ability to meet the child's current and likely future needs, particularly, an needs the child may have arising from harm that the child has suffered;*
- (ii) *Their understanding of, and ability to protect the child from any current or future risk of harm posed by the child's parents, relatives or any other person the local authority consider relevant, particularly in relation to contact between said person and child;*
- (iii) *Their ability and sustainability to bring up the child until the child reaches the age of eighteen;*

- 3.4 In June 2016 an updated report to the Court was published, to be used where there has been an application for a Special Guardianship Order. These amendments to the report require the social worker to explicitly address each of the amendments to the 2016 regulations as sighted above.
- 3.5 The report to Court also requires an assessment of the nature of the prospective Special Guardian's current and past relationship with the child.
- 3.6 Children's Services have embedded the updated report within the processes and procedures in light of the new regulations and supporting court reports. There has been a programme of training for social work staff to enable them to better evidence to Court the suitability of potential Special Guardians and to identify and address any safeguarding concerns.
- 3.7 Since September 2016, Permanence Panel has had 30 cases presented for a recommendation regarding applications for Special Guardianship Orders. Of those 30 cases 29 of the applicants had been approved as foster carers prior to being presented to Permanence Panel. There was 1 case where the applicant did not meet the fostering standards due to her previous criminal convictions and lifestyle choices and was therefore not recommended to be a foster carer. The Fostering panel were clear that their recommendation was not a reflection on the excellent care that the applicant was providing as a Nan for her granddaughter or on her ability to safeguard her now and in the future. In making their positive recommendation, Permanence Panel also recommended that a Supervision Order be applied for in order for the local authority to continue to support the family and for the support plan to reflect the ongoing advice and support recommended.
- 3.8 As reported previously to committee, as a means to support the transition towards Special Guardianship Children's Services may recommend to the court that a Supervision Order is issued in addition to a Special Guardianship Order, to strengthen the authority's responsibilities and duties to support the placement. This is particularly important regarding issues of supervising contact with birth parents and supporting carers to be able to identify and risks.
- 3.9 The Department for Education has recently brought in requirements of all local authorities to report on the numbers of Special Guardianship Orders granted on a quarterly basis. Within this report local authorities have to provide details such as the relationship the special guardian has with the child, if a supervision order was also granted and if the local authority is supporting the special guardian financially. This reporting when published will allow for analysis of the use of special guardianship as a permanence option for children, nationally and on a local level.

Support

- 3.10.1 In the Spring of 2016 the Government extended access to the Adoption Support Fund, to include children subject to a Special Guardianship Order who have previously been 'Looked After' by the local authority. This has greatly enhanced the therapeutic support which can be offered to children and their Special Guardians. A 'Newsletter' was sent to all of Wirral's Special Guardians explaining the changes to the Adoption Support Fund, with details of how to apply. The feedback from those

who have received therapeutic intervention has been excellent, with families seeing a real difference this can make to their children's lives.

- 3.11 Within each support plan the Adoption Support Fund offer is address both for any therapeutic need which is current and also for potential future need. This support plan is presented to Permanence Panel at the time of making a recommendation for Special Guardianship and an annual update the plan by assessing any changes to support needs of the Special Guardians is offered.
- 3.12 The response nationally to the use of the Adoption Support Fund to extend to Special Guardianship exceeded expectations and concerns were raise regarding the Governments budget for the fund not being able to meet the needs of all those making applications. In October 2016 the Government introduced a 'Fair Access Limit' of £5000 per child per year, with a 'Match' funding offer to local authorities for therapeutic services over £5000. Locally the fair access limit has not proved to disadvantage any applications, as they have been within the limit and match funding has not been required.
- 3.13 Wirral Grandcare (formally known as Bringing up Grandchildren), an independent support group and network, has developed to include all connected carers, rather than grandparents alone. The group meet social workers from the Adoption and Permanence service regularly and their groups provide support, advice, newsletters, training and signposting. Those who attend find it to be an invaluable service.
- 3.14 Two members of the group have accessed the adoption support fund to attend the therapeutic training course, SafeBase and have passed on their learning to other carers through the support groups. One carer wrote:

'The course was amazing and I was able to put into practice straight away the things I had learned, little tips that are so useful for children who are hyper vigilant and struggling to cope with their attachment issues, but most of all it's helped me look at the behaviours and understand why the do what they do, This has led to a calmer more understanding me.'

The group also has a small library of books which cover a variety of subjects pertinent to caring for children who have suffered trauma and loss. Some of these books were recommended and provided by the adoption team.

4 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None

5 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

None

7 RELEVANT RISKS

None

8 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

None

9 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

No because there is no relevance to equality.

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APPENDICES

REFERENCE MATERIAL

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date