

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

20TH SEPTEMBER 2011

SUBJECT:	ADOPTION SERVICE REPORT ON INSPECTION (INCLUDING 6 MONTH REPORT)
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL
REPORT OF:	INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
RESPONSIBLE PORTFOLIO HOLDER:	COUNCILLOR ANN MCLACHLAN
KEY DECISION?	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The report provides Elected Members with information about the outcome of the announced inspection of the Wirral Adoption Service by Ofsted and an update on the work of the Adoption Service since the last report in January 2011. This is the first report and inspection since the publication of new Adoption National Minimum Standards and updated Adoption Statutory Guidance which came into force on 1st April 2011. In addition the Adoption Service is governed by the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) regulations 2003, the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005, the Care Planning, Placement and Case review (England) Regulations 2010 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- 1.2 The overall quality rating by Ofsted for the adoption service was 'good'; with 'outstanding' for protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

2.1 That

- (1) Elected members consider the information in the report and satisfy themselves that the service is being managed effectively and that there are good outcomes for the children and young people being adopted and the adopters.

3.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 3.1 The Adoption National Minimum Standard 25.6 requires the executive side of the local authority to :
- receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the service every 6 months,
 - monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users.

4.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

Ofsted Inspection

- 4.1 This report includes the outcome of the Inspection by Ofsted of the Adoption Service in June 2011. (Ofsted Inspection report in Appendix 1).
- 4.2 The inspection framework enables a judgement to be made about the quality of care provided to children, young people and where appropriate their families. The framework focuses on outcomes according to the national minimum standards. All the standards were assessed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation.
- 4.3 Individual judgements were made as follows:

Overall quality:	Good
Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe	Outstanding
Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do	Good
Helping children make a positive contribution	Good
Organisation	Good

- 4.4 The inspector's comments in her report is that the outcomes for children are good and that safeguarding practice is outstanding, with adoption being considered at a very early stage of proceedings and that children are protected throughout their journey to adoption. Also that adopters and birth families receive good support from the service. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection in 2008 where the service was judged to be satisfactory with some good aspects. In this inspection the inspector made 3 recommendations to make improvements which compares with the last inspection where there were 2 statutory requirements that were judged as not being met that required immediate action and 9 recommendations for improvements.
- 4.5 There were good comments about the views and opinions of children being sought and listened to throughout the journey of adoption, including respecting the children's links with their family of origin. Some of the comments from young people were:

"I asked for a nice mum and they got me a nice Mummy. They listened to me when I said can I change my name". "

“Yes I will sort it out for you and they did” about re-establishing contact with siblings.

- 4.6 Children’s needs were also identified as being at the centre of the process for approving potential adopters. Adopters also commented about how well they were supported through the process saying:

“we felt that the picture painted by social workers of the adoption process was well-balanced and they clearly laid out the benefits and challenges of the process”

“we enjoyed the assessment process because it helped us to dig deeper and really think about things”.

- 4.7 The management of the service received good comments and in particular recognised that senior management work to ensure that children do not experience undue delay in being placed for adoption. Also that the service works well with partners, especially the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The report provides a quote from a stakeholder who noted that

“there is no greater champion for adopted children” about the Adoption Service Manager.

- 4.8 The inspection did identify some areas where improvements could be made and made the following recommendations to improve the quality and standards of care further:

- Actively seek and ensure that in every case children’s wishes and feelings are taken fully into account at all stages of the adoption process (NMS1)
- Ensure adoption panel makes a considered recommendation in each and every case (NMS17.6 – 17.7)
- Address promptly any issues raised by monitoring (NMS 25.2)

Further information about the reasons for this recommendation and the proposed actions to be taken are detailed below.

Child’s wishes and feelings are taken into account

- 4.9 Adoptive parents are given the child’s permanence report which contains important information which will be of benefit to the child in later life. Whilst the inspector recognised that children’s interests were served well with a general overview of child’s experiences in the child permanence reports she did find inconsistency in the way that children’s views are incorporated into the reports. However the evidence from the inspection demonstrated that actions and recommendations from the previous inspection for ensuring that child permanence reports and children’s case records complied with regulations had been met.

4.10 The Adoption Service is addressing the need for children's wishes and feelings being taken into account by practitioner training. A one day training course 'Adoption from the beginning' for social work practitioners is to be included as part of the annual training programme and a lunchtime briefing open to all social care staff is being organised on how to complete a child permanence report. Both are scheduled to take place this autumn.

Adoption Panels

4.11 The Adoption Panel is a group of people who are independent of the adoption process and the composition is stipulated by regulation. The Panel makes recommendations to the Adoption Agency Decision Maker (for Wirral this is the Head of Branch for Children's Social Care) on whether a child is placed for adoption, the suitability of individuals to be adopters, and whether a child should be placed with a specific adopter (called 'matching'). The inspector found that adoption panel protected children by ensuring that only those who are suitable to adopt are recommended for approval and that matching is carefully considered. However there appeared to be some inconsistency in the way the adoption panel made considered recommendations in each case which would have an impact on children later in life being able to fully understand how decisions were made.

4.12 The Adoption Service has ensured that in future all minutes of adoption panels will record all required information and actions for each case considered at the meeting. This will also be further discussed at the next Adoption Panel development day to ensure that each case receives a full discussion at panel.

Monitoring

4.13 The Adoption Service has good processes in place to monitor the journey of individual children through to adoption and to minimise any delay. There are also effective quality assurance systems in place to ensure consistency in the quality of child permanence reports and that the voice of the child is captured. However the identified changes in practice required to make improvements are not always implemented in a timely fashion.

4.14 Further improvements in practice are to be addressed through ensuring that managers within the district social work teams will take responsibility for monitoring the quality of child permanence reports. Currently the Looked After Children Service Manager quality assures all reports to the adoption panel in their role as agency advisor. Whilst feedback is provided a more formal feedback form is being established to support this process.

Performance Information 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011 and from 1st April 2011 to 31st July 2011)

4.15 In addition this report provides the 6 monthly performance information about the numbers of prospective families approved by the adoption panel, the number of children placed for adoption and the number of adoption orders granted, the time taken to approve prospective adoptive families and the timeliness of placing children with an adoptive family once they have had a 'should be placed

for adoption' recommendation from the Adoption Panel. Whilst the time period for the report is 1st January 2011 to 30th June 2011, information is collated for the year 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011 and from 1st April 2011 to date. Therefore the information is presented in this report for the two time periods.

Approval of Prospective Adoptive Families

4.16 Last year (1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011) 18 prospective adopters were recommended for approval as suitable to adopt by the Adoption Panel.

4.17 For this year (1st April 2011 to 31st July 2011) 7 prospective adopters were recommended for approval as suitable to adopt by the Adoption Panel.

Matching children with adopters

4.18 The Wirral Adoption Service continues to ensure that children with a plan for adoption are matched with adoptive families approved by Wirral Adoption Service. Between 1st April 2010 and 31st March 2011 19 children were matched with prospective adopters, and 15 were matched with adopters approved by Wirral Adoption Service. From 1st April 2011 to 31st July 2011 2 children were matched with prospective adopters, and 1 child was matched with adopters approved by Wirral Adoption Service.

4.19 Those children who were not placed with adopters from Wirral Adoption Service were mainly placed through Adoption 22, which is consortium of adoption agencies in the Northwest.

The reasons for placing children outside Wirral are always based on the needs of the individual children. For one sibling group there was a need to place the children outside Wirral for safeguarding reasons and for another sibling group the adopters chosen were best suited to actively promote the children's non white British heritage.

Children who were adopted

4.20 Last year (1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011) 24 children were adopted. For the early part of this year (1st April 2011 to 31st July 2011) 7 children have been adopted so far (one further adopted in August). There were a further 13 children lodged with the courts for adoption as of 31st July 2011, and 7 children are placed with prospective adopters but not lodged, and a further 27 children where the adoption panel have recommended that they should be placed for adoption.

4.21 As a local authority we are measured on the timeliness for adoptions NI 61¹ which measures the percentage of looked after children who have been adopted where they have been placed for adoption within twelve months of having a 'should be placed for adoption' decision and our target is 80%. In the period 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011 the percentage was 70.6% which is a

¹ NI 61 National Indicator: Percentage of looked after children adopted during the year who were placed for adoption within 12 months of the agency deciding that the child should be placed for adoption

poorer performance than the previous year 1st April 2009 to 31st March 2010 when it was 87.5%. This is accounted for by a small number of children (5 out of 21) where there have been particular issues that delayed the placement for adoption progressing. For the period 1st April 11 to 31st July 2011 of the 7 that have been adopted, 3 have been placed for adoption within twelve months of having a 'should be placed for adoption' decision.

- 4.22 The delays in placing children are for a variety of reasons which include a breakdown in introductions, securing a suitable match for sibling group where there is a significant age gap, ethnicity of a sibling group, developmental uncertainty of one sibling, and an appeal by a birth parent.

5.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 5.1 It is important that Wirral Council has an adoption service that is able to recruit, prepare, assess and approve prospective adopters that meet the needs of children that are in the care of the local authority where there is a plan for adoption. The inspection demonstrates that the service meets the requirements of the regulations and national minimum standards and in particular ensures the safety of children during the adoption process. The areas for improvement have been detailed above and the progress on the identified actions will be monitored through an Adoption Task Force. In addition the service recognises that there are further improvements needed in the recruitment of prospective adopters from diverse backgrounds. This is being addressed as an important element of the Looked After Children Change Programme which seeks to reduce, where safe, the number of children in care.

6.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 6.1 There are no proposals for consideration in this report, therefore there are no other options to consider.

7.0 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 During the inspection, questionnaires were sent to children and young people, social workers in adoption and district teams, birth parents and adopters for direct return to Ofsted. The inspector held focus groups with adoption workers, placing social workers and interviewed a district practice manager and an Independent Reviewing Officer. In addition the views of adopters and birth parents were sought directly by telephone conversation. The inspector also met with managers and senior managers of the service as part of the inspection. All of this consultation informed the final outcome of the inspection.

8.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

- 8.1 None required in relation to this report, other than to note that a Voluntary Agency provides support to birth families and adults seeking information about their birth family.

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

- 9.1 The Adoption and Permanence Team has a total budget of £1,586,700 for 2011-12.

Within this total it is likely that the budget for Adoption Allowances of £599,600 will overspend in the current year by £400,000. This reflects both increases in the number of children who are adopted and increases in the number of allowances paid. In addition there are increased financial pressures arising from the payment of legal fees.

The budget for the Adoption Service should become more sustainable in the medium term as plans to safely reduce Looked After Children costs are achieved through the LAC Strategic Change Project.

10.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None

11.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The inspection judged that the promotion of equality and diversity is good. The inspector commented that 'children benefit from intervention which helps them to make sense of their identity and experience' and that 'staff are well informed about the diverse range of the children and adopters they serve'.

11.2 An Equality Impact Assessment for Wirral's Permanency Policy was completed in February 2008. As this report has no recommendation for policy change there is no requirement for a new EIA.

12.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

12.1 There are no implications in relation to this report.

13.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 Adoption offers children the opportunity for permanence and to grow up within a family, thus reducing the risk of anti-social behaviour.

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APPENDICES

Adoption Service Ofsted Inspection report 8/6/2011

REFERENCE MATERIAL

[Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011](#)
[Adoption Statutory Guidance](#)

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee	26 th January 2011
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee	2 nd June 2010
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee	17 September 2009
Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee:	16 March 2009
Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee	11 November 2008