

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CABINET

13TH JUNE 2013

SUBJECT:	<i>ADOPTION REFORM GRANT</i>
WARD/S AFFECTED:	<i>ALL</i>
REPORT OF:	<i>DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES</i>
KEY DECISION?	YES

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report details how the local authority proposes to improve the recruitment and assessment of adopters and reduce delay in adoption in Wirral using the government Adoption Reform Grant for 2013/14.

1.2 The Adoption Reform Grant for 2013/14 is in two parts. Part A is non-ring fenced and not time limited. The purpose of the grant is to provide support to local authorities towards expenditure lawfully incurred or to be incurred by them.

Part B is ring-fenced to addressing recruitment of adopters and has to be spent by 31st March 2014. We are required to spend this one off grant on adoption services. A condition of this grant is that local authorities are required to write to the Department of Education providing details of what the grant was spent on and the impact that this expenditure had.

1.3 It is proposed that part of Wirral's allocation of the ring-fenced grant contributes to a regional collaborative recruitment initiative as well as updating local recruitment material and processes. In addition it is proposed to provide additional social work staff on a fixed term basis to undertake the assessments of the increased number of potential adopters that result from the recruitment campaign, a family finding social worker and an adoption process development officer to embed the delivery of new processes and systems.

1.4. In order to promote a cultural change in social work practice so that plans for permanency including adoption are initiated at the earliest opportunity when a child comes into the care of the local authority it is proposed that Wirral's allocation of the funds provided by Part A of the Adoption Reform Grant, £520,452, are used to procure additional resources to develop social work skills. It is proposed to provide additional time-limited social work capacity to develop concurrent planning and fostering for adoption, reviewing all permanency plans for current children in care and additional assessment capacity in the adoption team.

1.5 In addition to the reform grant this report proposes equalisation of inter-agency and inter-authority fees. In Wirral this will mean increasing inter authority fees to £27,000 which is approximately twice the amount currently paid. This is in line with the

recommendation from SOLACE, ADCS and the LGA in order to promote adoption nationally to being a more realistic cost for the recruitment and assessment of adopters. This also cites as one of the Governments priorities within the grant guidance.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

National picture

- 2.1 The government is focusing on reform of the adoption system in England in order to address the backlog of children awaiting adoption, particularly in developing innovative ways of finding adoptive families for children who traditionally wait longer than average to be adopted. The Government is also supporting wider improvements in the functioning of adoption services. They have identified increasing adopter recruitment and approval capacity as a priority whilst also recognising the need to make the system more supportive and responsive to potential adopters and adoptive families.
- 2.2 The national estimate for the shortfall in adopters as reported in 'Further Action on Adoption' and based on Ofsted national data set returns shows that there is a need nationally for more than 600 additional adopters each year to keep up with the growing number of children waiting to be adopted. In England the number of children with an adoption decision waiting to be placed has increased by 33% from 31 March 2010 to 31 March 2012, of which the proportion of those waiting 21 months or longer to be placed has increased by 7 percentage points.
- 2.3 The government published the 'Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay', followed by 'Further Action on Adoption' which detailed their proposals for seeing "more children being adopted by loving families with less delay". Following the publication of these documents the government introduced the Children and Families Bill which if passed will:-
 - Require local authorities to consider 'fostering for adoption' placement as soon as the local authority thinks that adoption is a possible outcome for the child
 - introduce personal budgets to provide support for adoptive families;
 - create a new power for Ministers to drive an increase in adopter recruitment by requiring outsourcing if necessary.

Wirral Council's allocation of funds

- 2.4 Wirral Council's allocation for the non ring fenced Adoption Reform Grant (Part A) is £520,452. The government allocated the fund using the Sure Start model which is based on a mixture of the population under 5, deprivation and sparsity to allocate the money. 65 per cent of the grant is based on population, 30 per cent on deprivation and 5 per cent on sparsity. An area cost adjustment was also applied to account for the differing costs of inputs in different local authorities.
- 2.5 Wirral Council's allocation for the ring-fenced Adoption Reform Grant (Part B) is £151,420 for 2013/14 and was based on the number of children placed for adoption and the number of children with an adoption decision still waiting to be placed for adoption in Wirral.

Wirral adoption recruitment current position

- 2.6 On Wirral at the 31st March 2013 there were 42 children with an adoption decision for whom an adoptive family is being sought. Of those 42 Wirral children, family finding for 2 children has been ongoing for 1 month, for the majority of children, family finding has been ongoing for between 5 to 10 months and 2 children family finding has taken more than 20 months. The children's ages range from 0 to 9 years, with the oldest children taking the longest to find adopters. Since 31st March 2013, a further 9 of these 42 children have been matched with adoptive families.
- 2.7 6 adopters approved by Wirral Adoption Service are waiting to be matched with Wirral children. During 2012/13, 26 prospective adoptive families were approved as suitable to adopt, with the majority of them being matched with children within a few months of their approval. Currently there are 23 prospective adoptive families at different stages of being assessed as to their suitability.

Wirral Adoption Diagnostic

- 2.8 Following the publication of the adoption scorecard the government awarded local authorities an Adoption Improvement Grant with the objective of improving performance, particularly in relation to the time between a child entering care and being adopted and the linked performance relating to the recruitment of adopters. Within Wirral this grant has been spent between January and March 2013 to fund an adoption diagnostic and related training and staff development.

The diagnostic made a number of suggestions for improvements to reduce delay these suggestions have informed the proposals set out in this report to spend the adoption reform grant.

Plan to spend Adoption Reform Grant (Part B)

- 2.9 A key area for development both locally and nationally is the recruitment of prospective adopters in order to keep pace with the increasing demand. There is a plan that would enhance the existing recruitment work already in place.
- 2.10 It is proposed to develop a marketing campaign regionally to raise the profile of adoption and provide prospective adopters with information on how to contact adoption agencies. The North West has established collaborative working at regional and 'cluster' level to look at developing a pooled budget with a top-slice of between 5% and 15% from each local authority's allocated Adoption Reform Grant (Part B). The pooled budget would provide resources in terms of staffing, marketing materials, out of hours contact centre and website development and maintenance. The details of the activities provided for the top slice are:-
- North West Adoption website to provide basic information, an enquiry point and online profiles of any children (not solely 'hard to place') referred to the website with consent to 'publicise' from parent/court.
 - High profile marketing campaign with television, radio and Facebook delivered with commissioned provider(s). TV, radio and digital advertising would include 'call to action' to regional website, telephone number, text (SMS) service
 - Enquiries and initial visits handled by a social work-led regional 'Adoption Recruitment' team then allocated to a Local Authority or Voluntary Adoption Agency for preparation and assessment.

- Out of hours telephone enquiries handled by a commissioned call centre provider
- Adoption support bonus for each Local Authority or Voluntary Adoption Agency referring adopters to the Charms database who are then matched with North West child/children (not own Local Authority). Each agency will receive £1,500 to facilitate investment in adoption support services locally.

The expected benefits of this collaborative approach are:-

- development of an innovative approach to recruitment across the region
- reduction in competition between local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies
- a central point for initial contact, including out of hours, to ensure potential adopters are not missed
- a regional social work led 'Recruitment Team' that allows for timely and consistent professional judgement at point of enquiry/initial visit.
- a regional allocation system to ensure adopters are able to be allocated to a Local Authority or Voluntary Adoption Agency where capacity exists- linked to their preferences.

- 2.11 In addition to this regional campaign the existing Council adoption recruitment material and website would need to be updated in order that it reflects the current support available to prospective adopters.

In recent years the council has had some success in the area of foster carer recruitment. A part of this success has been based upon the use of the Council Call Centre in taking initial enquiries. This allows for calls to be taken from 8.30am to 5pm and then an answer machine will either take a message or direct callers to an online enquiry form. In order to enhance the adoption recruitment process the department would wish to expand this service to include adoption enquires. This development would provide support for local interest generated as a part of the regional marketing campaign.

- 2.12 The number of prospective adopters will increase due to the additional marketing activity proposed. The diagnostic identified the need to reduce delay in finding adoptive families for children. In order to meet this increase in demand additional capacity in the adoption service is required.

- 2.13 The Adoption Team have also identified a requirement to review the current systems and processes within the team in order to reduce delay and provide clarity regarding specific roles. It is therefore proposed that a fixed term adoption process development officer post be established with the specific remit of reviewing the systems and roles within the team and developing these in order to bring clarity and reduce delay.

Plan to spend Adoption Reform Grant (Part A)

- 2.14 There is a need to change the culture and practice in social work in relation to early identification of plans for permanence, in all its forms including adoption. The high numbers of looked after children in Wirral needs to be reduced and one way of achieving this is by ensuring that children have a plan for permanence with the

minimum delay. There will be a focus on securing permanence through discharge of care orders where there is a clear plan.

- 2.15 It is therefore proposed that the department procure organisational development capacity to help reduce the number of looked after children, strengthen social work practice in this area and develop the skills of fieldwork Social Workers in relation to adoption and permanence. Due to the nature of this work some aspects may continue to be delivered after March 2014, which may require this grant to be spent beyond the year end.
- 2.16 The additional capacity will be provided through commissioning a project that will provide leadership in the reforms required and will include costs of administrative support, equipment and staff.

3.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 3.1 Delay in adoption reduces the likelihood of successful adoptions and has a severe impact on the health and well being of individual children. Nationally, regionally and locally there is a shortfall in the number of potential adopters for the number of children whose plan is adoption. Without immediate action being taken there will be a large number of children who will remain in the care of the local authority unnecessarily rather than securing permanence with a family. A short term investment through the use of the Adoption Reform Grant will reduce the cost longer term of children being in care in both in monetary terms and resources provided in social work time.

4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 The government have made no commitment at this stage for this grant to be continued beyond 2013/14, therefore the focus in the use of the grant is to address the identified immediate need in Wirral to recruit more adopters and have the resources for the assessment and approval process. In addition it is proposed to use the grant to change the culture and practice in social work to promote permanence and to set systems and processes in place to ensure that improvements are embedded for the future. No other options have been considered for the Adoption Reform Grant B as this is ring-fenced to expenditure for addressing adoption recruitment. The local authority does have flexibility for how the Adoption Reform Grant A is spent, however the government's expectation is that the funds are used to transform local adoption services. As Wirral Council's current performance for the adoption scorecard demonstrates that the time taken for adoption is considerably longer than the England average and the national target it is proposed that the Adoption Reform Grant is spent on improving social work practice in planning for adoption.

5.0 CONSULTATION

- 5.1 The government set up an expert working group comprising key partners from across the adoption sector to help redesign and speed up the process from initial enquiry through to assessment which are summarised in [An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay](#) (published in March 2012). The proposals in this report are part of the implementation of the governments action plan on adoption.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

6.1 The regional collaboration includes working with Voluntary Adoption Agencies. Wirral Council has commissioned 'After Adoption' to provide post adoption support which will continue for the period of their contract.

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

7.1 Wirral Council has been awarded £671,900 of Adoption Reform Grant for 2013/14. This is included within the Budget for 2013/14.

7.2 The Grant comprises two parts and the suggested uses for 2013/14 only are:-

Adoption Reform Grant (Part A which is not ring-fenced)

To be used for	£
Reform Project commissioning	250,000
Court costs	65,000
Call Centre to take initial contacts	5,000
Meeting existing spend pressures	200,452
Total	520,452

Adoption Reform Grant (Part B which is ring-fenced)

To be used for	£
Regional Marketing Campaign	22,700
Adoption Recruitment Material and Website Improvement	8,720
Assessment Social Work	47,000
Family Funding Social Work	47,000
Adoption Process Development	26,000
Total	151,420

7.3 All staffing costs would be fixed term one-year contracts with the opportunity for them to be filled through re-deployment within the council. The other costs would also be one-off costs

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Changes are required in the delivery of the adoption service as a result of the implications of the Children and Families Bill.

9.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 An equality assessment was completed on 23rd August 2012 for the impact of actions being taken by Wirral Adoption Service to address delay in adoption, see link [EIA Adoption Scorecard](#) . The proposals in this cabinet report are a continuation of the previous proposed actions and therefore there is no requirement for a further equality impact assessment.

10.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None

11.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There is a need to have a clear strategy to recruit sufficient adopters for the children who need an adoptive family.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

12.1 Members agree the proposals as detailed in the report to develop adoption recruitment and family finding to be funded from the Department for Education Adoption Reform Grant 2013/14 Part B.

12.2 Members agreed the proposals as detailed in the report to improve social work practice in securing permanence for looked after children to be funded from the Department for Education Adoption Reform grant 2013/14 Part A.

12.3 The inter-agency adoption fee charged to other agencies is increased to the national recommendation of £27,000.

13.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

13.1 All local authority adoption services are required by government to make improvements in the recruitment of adopters and generally reduce delay in adoption. This report proposes to provide additional resources in terms of staff and marketing both internally and through regional collaboration using the funds from the Adoption Reform Grant.

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APPENDICES

None

REFERENCE MATERIAL

[Further Action on Adoption](#) (published January 2013), Department for Education

[An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay](#) (published in March 2012), Department for Education

[Adoption Scorecards](#), Department for Education, November 2012

[Children in care and adoption performance tables](#) Department for Education, November 2012

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	11 th September 2012
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	6 th June 2012
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	21 st March 2012
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	20th September 2011
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	26th January 2011
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	2nd June 2010
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny	17 September 2009

Equality Impact Assessment Toolkit (from May 2012)

Section 1: Your details

EIA lead Officer: Ann Bannister

Email address: annbannister@wirral.gov.uk

Head of Section: Simon Garner

Chief Officer: Julia Hassall

Department: Children and Young People

Date: 8th May 2013

Section 2: What Council proposal is being assessed?

Adoption Reform Grant proposed expenditure.

Section 2b: Will this EIA be submitted to a Cabinet or Overview & Scrutiny Committee?

Yes Children and Young People's Cabinet 13th June 2013

The proposals in the report to Cabinet are a continuation of the actions to reduce delay in adoption as detailed in the previously published EIA for [Adoption Scorecard](#)

Section 3: Does the proposal have the potential to affect..... (please tick relevant boxes)

- Services**
- The workforce**
- Communities**
- Other** (please state eg: Partners, Private Sector, Voluntary & Community Sector)

If you have ticked one or more of above, please go to section 4.

- None** (please stop here and email this form to your Chief Officer who needs to email it to equalitywatch@wirral.gov.uk for publishing)

Section 4: Does the proposal have the potential to maintain or enhance the way the Council (please tick relevant boxes)

- Eliminates unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation
- Advances equality of opportunity
- Fosters good relations between groups of people

If you have ticked one or more of above, please go to section 5.

- No** (please stop here and email this form to your Chief Officer who needs to email it to equalitywatch@wirral.gov.uk for publishing)

Section 5:

Could the proposal have a positive or negative impact on any of the protected groups (race, gender, disability, gender reassignment, age, pregnancy and maternity, religion and belief, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership)?

You may also want to consider socio-economic status of individuals.

Please list in the table below and include actions required to mitigate any potential negative impact.

Which group(s) of people could be affected	Potential positive or negative impact	Action required to mitigate any potential negative impact	Lead person	Timescale	Resource implications

Section 5a: Where and how will the above actions be monitored?

Through a CYPD adoption task force of key stakeholders

Section 5b: If you think there is no negative impact, what is your reasoning behind this?

Section 6: What research / data / information have you used in support of this process?

National publications and performance data.

[An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay](#) (published in March 12), Department for Education

[Adoption Scorecards](#), Department for Education, May 12

[Children in care and adoption performance tables](#) Department for Education, May 2012

Section 7: Are you intending to carry out any consultation with regard to this Council proposal?

Yes

If 'yes' please continue to section 8.

If 'no' please state your reason(s) why:

(please stop here and email this form to your Chief Officer who needs to email it to equalitywatch@wirral.gov.uk for publishing)

Section 8: How will consultation take place and by when?

Before you complete your consultation, please email your preliminary EIA to equalitywatch@wirral.gov.uk via your Chief Officer in order for the Council to ensure it is meeting it's legal requirements. The EIA will be published with a note saying we are awaiting outcomes from a consultation exercise.

Once you have completed your consultation, please review your actions in section 5. Then email this form to your Chief Officer who needs to email it to equalitywatch@wirral.gov.uk for re-publishing.

Section 9: Have you remembered to:

- a) **Include any potential positive impacts as well as negative impacts? (section 5)**
- b) **Send this EIA to your Head of Service for approval.**
- c) **Review section 5 once consultation has taken place and sent your completed EIA to your Head of Service for approval then to your Chief Officer for re-publishing?**