

WIRRAL COUNCIL

FAMILIES & WELBEING COMMITTEE

5TH DECEMBER 2013

SUBJECT:	ANNUAL ADOPTION REPORT
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
KEY DECISION?	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update on developments and performance in Wirral Adoption Service in accordance with the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013. These have been issued to amend the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 by substituting a new Part 4 (Duties of Adoption Agencies in Respect of a Prospective Adopter). Part 4 makes provision for the assessment of prospective adopters and is amended to introduce a new two-stage approval process. One of the aims of this amendment is to 'fast track' adoption assessments for particular children and to enable 'fostering to adopt' and 'concurrent' adoption placements for children to reduce delay.

The report will also provide an update on Adoption activity and outcomes across the borough following the Government's approach to addressing delays in the adoption system which is detailed in *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* (published by the Department for Education in March 2012).

2.0 BACKGROUND AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES

2.1 Adoption is a way of providing a new family for children who cannot be brought up by their own parents. It's a legal procedure in which all the parental responsibility is transferred to the adopters. Once an adoption order has been granted it can't be reversed except in extremely rare circumstances. An adopted child loses all legal ties with their first mother and father (the "birth parents") and becomes a full member of the new family, usually taking the family's name.

2.2 The Local Authority has been awarded an Adoption Grant to improve the number of children placed with adopters, to increase the pool of prospective adopters and to reduce delay throughout all aspects of the adoption journey. There was a report to Cabinet earlier in the year setting out proposals to spend the grant.

2.3 The method for measuring performance nationally is the balance scorecard for adoption. Performance thresholds for the first and second indicators in the scorecard make clear the Government's minimum expectations for timeliness in the adoption system. The performance thresholds will rise incrementally over the next three years until they reflect the levels set out in statutory guidance.

The adoption scorecard shows, against three key indicators, how swiftly children in need of adoption are placed for adoption, in each local authority area. These scorecards allow local authorities and other adoption agencies to monitor their own performance and compare it with that of others. In the future the scorecard will also include data on how swiftly local authorities and adoption agencies deal with prospective adopters.

The measures include the time it takes for a child from becoming looked after to being placed for adoption and the time to find a family for a child once the court has issued a placement order. The placement order allows the Local Authority to proceed to identify a family and place a child for adoption. The first indicator measures the average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family and the threshold will be set at 21 months (639 days). The second indicator measures the average time it takes for a local authority to match a child to an adoptive family once the court has formally decided that adoption is the best option and the threshold will be set at 7 months (213 days). The data within the scorecard are based on a three year rolling average

The scorecard is updated each year and published to show progress in these areas and compare performance across Local Authorities.

Family finding timescales

The adoption service has improved performance in relation to family finding timescales by learning from a diagnostic exercise completed in January of this year. The service has taken advice on best practice. This has been achieved by focusing resources on family finding to ensure that planning to find a family takes place at an early stage. A performance tracker has been developed to identify children with either a primary or contingency plan for Adoption at first presentation to a Legal Action and Advice Meeting; this means that children are known to the Adoption Service at the earliest opportunity. The adoption team manager can then allocate a family finding social worker to co-work with a District social worker, so that final care plans and court timetables are known to the Adoption Team in respect of each child.

- 2.4 Performance in relation to family finding has also improved through changing how information about children is safely shared with adopters. This is referred to as the child's profile. The style, content and presentation of this information have been redesigned to provide for a more accurate representation of the children's character and personality, through the use of media such as a DVD. This work is completed for each child prior to the Court granting a placement order so that Family Finding can begin with immediate effect which includes the availability of written material and live footage of children.
- 2.5 The Family finding social workers from the Adoption Service have attended 'National Exchange Days' to share the profiles of Wirral children to a wider audience, which has proved to be valuable for the more hard to place children. Great care is taken to protect the identity of the children concerned until such time as a family are matched and more detail can be shared with their adopters. Team members have now attended four such days and have a further two events to attend by the end of the year. One child has been successfully matched with an adopter as a consequence, and this was a child with specific cultural needs.

- 2.6 The Service has also taken the decision to share profiles of children at the 'Preparation to Adopt' Training and should any interest be shown in particular children, these assessments are then fast tracked. Additionally information is shared at Open Evenings regarding the children that we are family finding for, this results in a more targeted recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of Wirral children.
- 2.7 There is now a 'Family Finding Record' completed for all children with a plan of adoption. This highlights any delay or obstacles in identifying a family, and evidences the work involved in finding a family in respect of every child. Additionally there is a central point in the team office to access the profiles with supporting media for all the children concerned, thus being easily accessible to all workers.
- 2.8 Concurrent Planning and Fostering to Adopt enable children to be placed with their permanent carers at the earliest opportunity. Assessments of proposed adopters now include a session to determine if they are able to consider caring for a child under such arrangements. This is also explored in some depth both at the Information Evening and Preparation Groups. Rationale for such placements needs to be robust but also underpinned by a comprehensive support plan and close liaison with the Fostering Service. Wirral has recently placed two children under such an arrangement.
- 2.9 From April to October this year 21 children have been adopted with another 9 children awaiting Court dates. If all of these Adoption Orders are granted before March 31st 2014, this will represent a significant increase on last year, when 14 children were adopted. The majority of placements meet the timescale between permission to place through a Placement Order, to being matched with adopters. Of the 21 children adopted only 4 were placed with their adoptive family out of this family finding timescale. These 4 children had more complex matching needs which delayed finding the right family for them. In relation to this score card measure for the average time to match a child to an adoptive family following a placement order being made, the current performance from 1st April to 30th September 2013 is an average of 161 days. This is good performance.
- 2.10 The decision to change an original Care Plan of Adoption to one of long-term fostering has been made for a number of children, following discussions with all those involved, especially taking note of the children's wishes and feelings. This has enabled 15 children to achieve permanence through remaining with their foster carers, with whom they are settled and feel secure. All of these children will have further focused work to support permanence to be achieved. A further 5 children have been able to move into specialist long-term fostering placements with agencies such as Barnardo's, which can better meet their specific needs.

The Journey to Adoption

- 2.11 The second scorecard measure is the time it takes for a child from becoming looked after to being placed for adoption. This involves the work of all social work teams not just the Adoption Service and this is the focus of a project that has been developed. This measure has improved over 6 months. The diagnostic undertaken earlier in the year also made recommendations to support improvements in this area. The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes is working with the Council as part of the agreed expenditure from Adoption Grant on a specific project to address performance. The project, which will commence next month, will focus on embedding the principles of permanence, reducing delay in achieving permanence for children, enhancing skills in reflective practice, and sharpening analytical skills and decision making. The project will:

- Provide additional practice capacity to model and assist to move cases forward.
- Support a corporate approach to recruitment of potential adopters.
- Focus throughout on sustainable culture change in practice.
- Support the development of concurrent planning.

In recent weeks there has been a focus on the Legal Advice and Action Meetings taking place at an earlier stage in care planning to support more timely decisions for children. There have been a number of workshops run for staff focusing on their care planning skills particularly sharpening their focus on permanence. This has included all social workers attending a half day workshop on improving timescales for achieving permanence for children. In relation to the score card measure for the average time taken from a child becoming looked after to being placed for adoption the current performance between 1st April and 30th September 2013 is an average of 643 and this is slightly above the national target.

- 2.12 The shortfall in availability of Adopters is a problem nationwide; although within Wirral there have been 26 approvals of prospective adopters from April 2013 to October 2013. Of these, 8 families have been matched with children and 18 families are waiting to be matched. The Adoption Team are embedding the new two-stage approval process, which is resulting in assessments being completed in a 6 month period rather than 8 months. The team are also working closely with Sefton to ensure that pre-approval training is available every 8 weeks, again reducing the potential for delay. Wirral is part of a regional project supporting the recruitment of adopters. Having sufficient suitable adopters for the children with an adoption plan affects performance on both key measures of the adoption scorecard.

SUMMARY

There are significant challenges going forward in meeting the targets set by the Government. There is a clear project plan being delivered over the coming months that is designed to address current performance issues and build on the progress already made.

3.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 3.1 The implementation of the Family Justice Review to reduce delay in court proceedings and adoption requires change in social work practice and the implementation of new processes within a short timescale. The Adoption Team currently take case responsibility for children once their adoption plan has been confirmed through the court via a Placement Order. This transition can often cause delay whilst the new social worker becomes familiar with the case and gets to know the child. There are several options being discussed to elevate this potential delay.

4.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 There are no other options to consider at this stage. Wirral will take account of the lessons learnt from local authorities where government intervention takes place.

5.0 CONSULTATION

5.1 Consultation has taken place with, the Safeguarding Unit, Social Work Managers, and colleagues in legal services, other Authorities in the region and with the Merseyside Family Justice Council.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

6.1 There are implications for wider community support for children post adoption.

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

7.1 The budget for the Adoption Service in 2012/13 is £1,091,600. The projected spend is £1,102,917. The Council has also been awarded Adoption reform Grant of £671,900; the plans for this were presented to Cabinet in June of this year.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There is a clear expectation that the Authority works to the new Cheshire and Merseyside Local Authority Pre-Court Proceedings Protocol and Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012.

9.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Has the potential impact of your proposal(s) been reviewed with regard to equality?

(a) Yes and impact review can be found via the following link:

<http://www.wirral.gov.uk/my-services/community-and-living/equality-diversity-cohesion/equality-impact-assessments/eias-2010-0>

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 of the Families and Wellbeing Committee note the report and to receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the service and 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.

13.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

13.1 To inform members of the government approach to addressing delays in the adoption system and the local authority's response to the changes.

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APPENDICES

None

REFERENCE MATERIAL

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

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

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

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date