

**Performance and Finance Select Committee
24th January 2007**

Briefing note - Vital sign BV 163 D: Adoptions of Children Looked After

The number of looked-after children adopted during the year as a percentage of the number of children looked after who had been looked after for 6 months or more

1. In 2005/6, 5% of children looked after for 6 months or more by Brent were adopted. This represents 13 children and was an improvement on the two preceding years. Our performance was within the range of our outer borough neighbours - Barnet 4.4%, Ealing 5.5%, Hammersmith and Fulham 4.4%, Hillingdon 6% and Harrow 5.7%. We performed noticeably less well than our inner London Neighbours – Camden 9.4%, Kensington and Chelsea 6.1% and Westminster 9.8%.
2. Special Guardianship Orders are now counted in the indicator. They are a new type of order, introduced in the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 and implemented from January 2006. This order gives the guardian parental responsibility but unlike adoption the Special Guardian does not become the child's parent. The order gives a child greater security than long term fostering and is a more acceptable option to some extended family members who wish to care for a child and to communities who have religious and cultural difficulties with the concept of adoption.
3. The target for this year is 7% which represents 20 - 22 children and is a challenging target. At the end of December 2006, five children had been adopted and 5 made the subject of Special Guardianship Orders. Nineteen children are currently placed for adoption - an increase from 14 in April 2006.
4. It is likely that a further 8 children will be adopted and 2-3 more Special Guardianship Orders granted by the end of March 2007. Of the 8 children we hope will be adopted, 6 are children for whom applications have already been lodged and 2 are children for whom Placement Orders have been granted. If orders are granted as anticipated the 2006-7 target will be met.
5. The Social Care Division has struggled for several years to improve performance on this indicator. In 2005 a second adoption team was established in an effort to improve performance. This is now having an impact in that the numbers of children placed for adoption has risen and this is now feeding through into an increase in the numbers of orders made.

6. Although our performance is improving, Brent's experience, supported by anecdotal evidence from across London is that it is becoming harder to secure adoption for children. There are a number of reasons that might explain this.
 - a. The needs of children who become looked after have become ever more complex and issues such as attachment problems, behavioural difficulties and the impact of abuse can mean that work has to be done with children before they are ready to be adopted.
 - b. Although many Brent adopters receive an adoption allowance and all by law receive support from the adoption agency for three years post adoption, there is a growing trend for prospective carers to prefer long term fostering because they are assured of non means tested financial re-numeration and support from the local authority throughout the child's minority.
 - c. In Brent the preferred option for children is often to place within their family of origin with a relative. Placement in the family of origin frequently offers a child the best outcome but adoption may be resisted because of the family's relationship with the parent, for cultural reasons or because a kinship care arrangement, like long term fostering, offers more security for the carer. Brent's kinship care placement figures are good.
 - d. Brent is the most diverse community in London and some of the children and sibling groups for whom adoption is sought have a complex cultural heritage. There is a limited pool of adopters for such children, and finding a family who can meet all the child's needs may take longer than average. This is one of the reasons why kinship care placements rather than adoption can be in the child's best interest.
 - e. In Brent there are several children affected by immigration issues which can delay processes for them both before and after placement with prospective adopters.
 - f. Care proceedings can be protracted and adoption can be seen as a last resort by courts and Children's Guardians – further parenting assessments are frequently requested by the court and by the end of proceedings a child may have become settled in a long term fostering placement.
 - g. The introduction of a new order, a Placement Order, has created additional delay in the past year. Placement Orders replace Freeing Orders and authorise a Local Authority to place a child with any prospective adopters it chooses. Although in itself the

order represents an improvement in process the change has created a short term delay for some children in the last year.

- There are a number of examples of prospective adopters delaying seeking an order following placement because of the difficulties they encounter with the children's behaviour. There are also some adoptive placements that disrupt before the adoption takes place.

Future Action

7. It is hoped that further improvement can be achieved. Both adoption teams are now fully staffed and have been co-located with the children's social work teams – this has led to an improvement in co-working and communication, better planning and additional capacity to family find.
8. The Freeman Family Centre, due to open in 2007 will offer early assessments and additional services to families on the Child Protection Register and at the edge of proceedings – if proceedings are required the assessment already completed will strengthen the local authority position in court and reduce planning delay.
8. Adoption is not the only permanency option available but for some children, especially young children, it remains the option of first choice. It is likely that despite our best efforts it will become more difficult to find prospective adopters.
9. Currently after three years if an adopted child requires a service he or she is regarded as a child in need in the area where they reside and would have no more priority than other children for services. If we wish to further improve our performance across London it may be necessary to take a consortia approach to reviewing the support offered to prospective adopters so that a realistic and consistent level of financial and other support is offered throughout the child's minority, wherever the child lives.

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