



**Corporate Parenting Board  
October 2014**

**Report from the  
Director of Children and Young People**

**Report Title:**

**Brent Adoption Service Report  
1st April 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014**

### **1.0 Summary**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Board about the general management of the adoption service and how it is achieving good outcomes for children.

1.2 This reports details the performance of Brent's adoption service for the year April 1<sup>st</sup> 2013 - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014. The report draws upon information supplied to the Department for Education in the adoption scorecard analysis; the annual Ofsted data return and narrative detail from the adoption panel.

### **2.0 Recommendations**

2.1 The Corporate Parenting Board is requested to note and comment upon the contents of this report. This is to provide evidence that the management of the adoption service is being monitored in order to promote good outcomes for children. This is in line with standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2014).

### **3.0 Background**

3.1 Our adoption Statement of Purpose highlights the key values of the service which are that:

- Children are entitled to grow up as part of a loving family that can meet their developmental needs during childhood and beyond.
- Adopted children should have an enjoyable childhood, benefit from excellent parenting and education, enjoying a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills leading to a successful adult life.
- Children, birth parents/guardians and families, and adoptive parents and families will be valued and respected.

3.2 During the year 2013-14 the adoption functions of the Placements' Service were delivered within two teams:

- The Adoption Assessment team – responsible for the recruitment, assessment and support of prospective adopters.
- The Adoption and Post-Adoption team – responsible for family finding for children with an adoption plan, supporting adoptive families and providing a counselling service for adopted adults.
- The Placements' Service has since been restructured. Adoption services from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 are being delivered through a Kinship, Fostering and Adoption Assessment team and an Adoption and Post-Permanency team. The 6-monthly report on the adoption service, to be produced by 31<sup>st</sup> October 2014, will provide detail on the impact of the reorganised teams.

#### **4. Performance Data – Adoption Scorecard**

**4.1 Background.** Since 2012 the DfE has measured Local Authority adoption performance through a scorecard approach. Government was keen to address both the low numbers of children being adopted from public care and the length of time children waited to be placed with permanent families. The adoption scorecard covers three main areas:

- A1 – the average length of time taken from a child entering care to being placed with prospective adopters.
- A2 – the average length of time taken between the court granting authority for a child to be placed for adoption and the Local Authority agreeing upon a match.
- A3 – the percentage of children who wait less than 21 months from entering care to being placed with an adoptive family.

**4.2 Current Published Brent Performance:** the indicators are measured on an individual yearly basis but also a 3-year, rolling cycle to enable a longer-term perspective on performance to be achieved. The most recent set of scorecards were published in January 2014 – covering the 3-year period 2010-13.

- **A1.**
  - 2012 – 9 children adopted who waited an average of 955 days.
  - 2013 – 19 children adopted who waited an average of 565 days.
  - Three-year performance (2009-12): 854 days.
  - Three-year performance (2010-13): 694 days.
  - England average (2010-13): 647 days.

- **A2.**
  - 2012 – 446 days.
  - 2013 – 152 days.
  - 3-year performance (2009-12): 343 days
  - 3-year performance (2010-13): 314 days
  - England average (2010-13): 210 days.
  
- **A3.**
  - 2012 – 11%
  - 2013 – 70%
  - 3-year performance (2009-12): 48%
  - 3-year performance (2010-13): 52%
  - England average (2010-13): 55%

### **4.3 Analysis**

4.3.1 Performance improved significantly against all indicators to the year ending 2013, compared to the previous year.

4.3.2 The need for a better grip of the issues had been identified in 2010 which led to a change in management arrangements. A greater focus on adoption timeliness through effective case tracking and purposefulness in family finding has resulted. However the 3-year indicator is affected by performance in years 2011 and 2012 where children's cases, that had waited lengthy periods of time to be placed with their permanent families, were addressed. The recognition of Brent dealing effectively with these legacy cases was acknowledged by a diagnostic assessment of the service in 2012. It will not be until these two years fall out of the measurement cohort (the period 2013-15) that Brent's performance will rise above the national average.

4.3.3 Brent has been working both internally and within the West London Adoption consortium to tackle the challenges identified within their adoption system, the areas in need of improvement identified in the most recent adoption service Ofsted inspection (2012) and feedback from potential adopters, to enhance their adoption services. By separating the family finding from the recruitment and assessment of potential adopter teams, we have created a more focused approach. In line with recent regulatory changes we have also introduced a recruitment system that is adopter-led through the initial stages.

## 4.4 2013-14 Scorecard Performance

4.4.1 Data incorporating the most recent reporting year's performance has not yet been published nationally. However internal performance data is available and enables a comparison to be made with previous years.

4.4.2 There were 11 children adopted in the last financial year. This is a smaller number than the previous financial year although still higher than in 2010-11 and 2011-12.

4.4.3 Some reasons for a smaller number of adoptions last year were:

- Fewer children had been relinquished by birth parents for adoption in 2013-14 than 2012-13.
  - There was a continuing high number of children leaving the court proceedings process through means of other permanent outcome – particularly Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) to family members or friends. In Brent over the last three years 50% more Special Guardianship than Adoption Orders were made. A higher proportion of SGOs are made in Brent than most statistical neighbour authorities – reflecting our approach to keep children within the kinship network wherever possible.
  - There were fewer children currently within Brent with adoption plans. Those children with adoption plans are moved through the system to permanent placement more quickly. Currently there are fewer than 10 children subject of an adoption plan without a match to a permanent, adoptive family.
- **A1**
    - 11 children adopted who waited an average of 382 days.
    - Three-year performance (2011-14) has reduced to 600 days.
    - England average (2010-13): 647 days.
  - **A2**
    - 10/11 children were subject of Placement Orders.
    - These children waited an average of 133 days from the making of the Placement Order to match with the adoptive family.
    - Three-year performance (2011-14) has reduced to 254 days.
    - England average (2010-13): 210 days.
  - **A3**
    - Of the 11 children adopted in the most recent financial year 82% waited less than 21 months from entering care to being placed with adopters.
    - The 3-year performance (2011-14) improved to 56%.

- Statistical neighbour average (2010-13): 51%.

4.4.4 Improved performance has been sustained in the most recent reporting year due to continued effective tracking of children's cases through panel processes which leads to swift matching to in-house or external families. The Adoption and Permanency panel provides an effective quality assurance mechanism for the service and provides feedback on both quality and timeliness of work.

## **5. Performance Data – Ofsted Data Return**

**5.1** Each Local Authority is required to submit an annual adoption data return to Ofsted by 30<sup>th</sup> June that provides performance information on the previous financial year's activity. This information ranges across a broad range of fields, is greater in scope than the adoption scorecard and is a key reference point during inspections. The detailed dataset can be found at appendix B.

### **5.2 Child related data**

- At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 there were 16 Looked After Children with an adoption plan. Of these children, 6 were already placed with adopters, seven were subject to Placement Orders but not yet matched to an adoptive family and 3 had not yet had Placement Orders made.
- Of the 16 children with an adoption plan 5 were from a white background, 3 were of mixed heritage and 8 were of black ethnicity. This breakdown is reflective of Brent's general Looked After Child population.
- There were 11 children adopted during the year. Of these, 8 were made with Brent recruited adopters and three with other agencies.

### **5.3 Adopter Recruitment**

- At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 Brent had 12 approved adoptive households for children where a child had not yet been matched or placed. The number of children requiring adoption and not yet matched or placed was fewer than the number of approved adopters. This has enabled professionals to choose from a good range of adopters when determining the most suitable match.
- Over the course of the year the service received 139 enquiries about adoption. Many people following this enquiry were signposted to our monthly information evenings. The enquiries resulted in 18 adoptive households being approved during the year. The level of initial enquiry and overall approvals are comparable to the previous year. There were no referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism, which regulates decision making by adoption agencies.

This suggests adopters were satisfied with the service they received and that our adoption panel activity is sufficiently robust.

- During the year the service initiated the new, 2-stage adopter recruitment process. This process is led by the adopter in stage one and is completed within a 2-month period. The second stage is formed around the social worker assessment and should be concluded and presented to panel within 4 months.
- In terms of measuring the length of time taken for adopters to be matched to children, 80% of the cohort was matched with a child within 6 months of approval. This positive performance is in line with that achieved in 2012-13. Performance has improved regarding the time taken for adopters to be approved following their initial application – with 83% of applications being dealt with within 9 months, compared to 65% last year.
- Brent continues to attract adopters from a diversity of backgrounds in order to best meet the variety of needs of our Looked After Children. The largest ethnic group of adopters are people of black Caribbean or black African background which reflect the work we have undertaken to recruit from black and minority ethnic communities.

#### **5.4 Adoption Support**

- At 31<sup>st</sup> March there were 95 families receiving an adoption support package from the Local Authority. This support was primarily provided through financial allowances which are reviewed and means tested. This figure has remained stable, as new adoption support packages are balanced by those ending as children reach the age of 18.
- A further 198 families were in receipt of other post-adoption support services within the financial year. These support services ranged from therapeutic services for families to birth records counselling and tracing services for adopted adults.

### **6. The Adoption and Permanence Panel**

**6.1** Brent has one Adoption and Permanence panel constituted in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 (amended 2011) and Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011. The panel plays a central role in assisting the Agency Decision Maker (who in Brent is the Operational Director, Children's Social Care) to reach the best possible decision in relation to:

- whether a child should be placed for adoption;
- the suitability of prospective adopters and concurrent carers;
- whether a child should be placed with a specific prospective adopter; and

- whether a child should be matched for long term fostering with a specific carer.

**6.2** The panel also advises the service on matters relating to contact arrangements; whether an application for a placement order should be made in certain circumstances; the profile of children the prospective adopter(s) may be suitable to adopt; and the provision of adoption support.

**6.3** The Panel meets once a month in respect of all matters concerning adoption. A joint annual training day for adoption panel members and the adoption team staff is held and was delivered last year by the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering.

**6.4** Following each panel presentation those attending are asked for feedback. People asked for feedback include prospective and approved adopters, Brent social care staff and social workers from other adoption agencies within England and Wales. The consistent message received is that the panel is robust in nature and that attendees felt able to express their views and opinions.

**6.5** In line with statutory guidance, a central list of panel members is used on a rotating basis to ensure members maintain regular links with Brent and current issues in adoption. The central list consists of an independent chair, an independent vice chair, various independent members including a birth mother with experience of adoption, a former Looked After Child and a foster carer from another Local Authority. There are also panel members employed by Brent, including representatives from education, health, the probation service and Children's Centres as well as an elected member. All panel members contribute to an annual appraisal and have the opportunity to attend any additional relevant training provided by Brent and the West London Adoption Consortium.

## **7. Service narrative**

**7.1** As the data has highlighted, Brent's adoption service ensures adoptive placements are provided to meet children's needs through a number of means:

- By effective recruitment activity that targets specific groups within the community and identifies carers with skills to meet the needs of harder to place children.
- Through close working relationships with the West London Adoption consortium that encourages the sharing of children's and adopters' profiles to increase the opportunities of successful matching.
- By regular and effective use of the adoption register and other adopter exchange initiatives for our hard to place children and to support successful placements of our own adopters.

- By ensuring that adoption support plans are robust, agreed with adopters and reflect the needs of individual children.
- Through regular tracking activity of children for whom adoption is the plan and of adopters progressing through the 2-stage process and those awaiting a match.

**7.2** The service has improved outcomes for children with adoption plans during 2013-14 in the following ways:

- Through effective tracking of timescales at monthly permanency planning meetings and quarterly tracking meetings for children with an adoption plan. This activity contributes to a reduction in the period of time from a child becoming Looked After to being placed for adoption.
- By commissioning concurrent planning support via Coram for our adopters where there is the assessed capacity for them to take on this role.
- Through working creatively and openly with other London boroughs to share children's profiles to enhance the pool of prospective placements.
- By identifying opportunities for children to be placed together with siblings wherever possible. In one case example specific adopters have been recruited, assessed and trained to parent a family of three children.
- Through regular feedback from the adoption panel on quality assurance issues which are fed back to the Head of Service and Operational Director. These are incorporated into appraisals and service plans.

**7.3 Recruitment & Assessment Initiatives.** Our marketing and advertising approach has been refreshed in order to attract adopters from different social groups and there has been advertising in a variety of online and print based media. The local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service has provided advice in cases where adopters under assessment expressed concerns about managing specific types of behaviour. Coram was commissioned to support the training of prospective adopters as concurrent carers to enable the swifter placement of children with adoption plans. The adoption service has worked with four other London boroughs to share preparation training of adopters and to ensure there is no delay in providing appropriate training for them.

**7.4 Adoption Support.** Workers provide a birth parent counselling service, which includes siblings who are separated from adopted children and other birth relatives, such as grandparents. On occasions, and when more appropriate, birth parent counselling sessions are arranged at the Post Adoption Centre, which are funded by Brent.

- A birth record counselling service is offered by a dedicated team of adoption support workers for all adults (over 18) living in Brent affected by adoption. This includes adopted adults requiring information about their adoption, birth relatives wanting to make contact with their adopted children and all adults,

regardless of where they live, who were adopted through Brent or their birth relatives. In addition, Brent holds all the adoption records of the National Adoption Society (approximately 17,000) and those of the Western National Adoption Society and is responsible for birth records counselling if the enquirer lives in Brent or for file vetting and sending the relevant information to the local authority who is providing a birth record counselling service to the enquirer living in their area.

- The Adoption Support Team provides a range of activities for adoptive families and adopted children. These include bimonthly support groups for adopters, held on a Saturday and where a crèche is provided for the children staffed by adoption social workers; two social events each year (a summer picnic and a festive party in December) which are very well received and attended and a quarterly adoption newsletter. An informal buddy system is routinely set up for most Brent adopters whereby they are linked with other similar adopters caring for children of the same age and this has been very successful in terms of adopters supporting each other and for adopted children making friendships with other adopted children.

**7.5 Involving Adopters.** Adopters are involved closely in matching and linking and subsequent planning in a variety of ways.

- Adopters are closely supported by their social worker and profiles of children in-house, within the West London consortium and through the adoption register are discussed at regular intervals. Adopters are able to access the adoption gateway and a new matching agency (Adoption Link) in order to increase their opportunities of effective matching. Within the assessment and approval process prospective adopters are involved in discussions about matching opportunities and how processes operate. Our adopters' profiles are shared regularly with the West London Consortium and their preferences discussed with them.
- We are keen to involve adopters in the development of the service and achieve this through their annual review which provides opportunities for feedback on service development. Adopters are also asked for their feedback on the assessment, approval and review process following adoption panel. Our recruitment and marketing co-ordinator uses the perspective of adopters to help form the content within the regular newsletter which is the preferred method of keeping in touch and encouraging participation.

**7.6 Adopter Feedback.** Adopters are generally positive about the service they receive from Brent. This is evidenced through feedback to the adoption panel about adopter experiences of the assessment process and within their annual review. Adopters are also very positive about the support they receive from their assessing social worker. Some adopters have felt that they have waited some time for a match but this is not generally directed as a criticism of the agency, rather a frustration at

the system as it operates. There is good attendance from adopters at our annual summer picnic and Christmas party which evidences our ongoing positive engagement with families. Many adults contacting our service with queries about post-adoption queries have given positive feedback about the helpful responses they have received.

**7.7 Staff Engagement.** Staff are engaged to help the adoption service develop in a number of different ways. One of the most significant examples is through the sharing of key development tasks on a Local Authority, consortium or London-wide basis. Examples of this in the last financial year has included recruitment events, preparation training and activity days. Staff contributed to the rebranding of the adoption marketing information and provide articles and ideas for inclusion in the regular newsletter. Staff were consulted and involved in the restructure of the Placements' service which took place towards the end of the financial year and have been encouraged to adapt the service plan at an individual level within team meetings. Training opportunities for staff in the borough and within West London have been provided in areas such as concurrency.

## **8. Broader adoption issues and the future**

**8.1** The national context for adoption is rapidly changing with Local Authorities and other adoption agencies being challenged to improve their performance and seek innovative solutions to structural problems. Brent's adoption service has been restructured for the beginning of the 2014-15 financial years in order to be better placed to adapt to local and national challenges and to continue to build on the improved performance delivered in the last twelve months.

**8.2** Brent has taken over the chairing of the West London Adoption Consortium since April 2014 which has provided an opportunity to shape services across the region. A number of current initiatives are in progress to enhance co-operation in order to share information to reduce waiting times for children with adoption plans.

**8.3** Jointly run adoption preparation training days for potential adopters have been established with other West London boroughs to ensure there is an event every month which will reduce time delays within the system.

**8.4** Examples of collaborative working including a joint event with seven boroughs to give potential adopters the opportunity to look at the profiles of children awaiting a placement. Brent has also actively participated in the first London-wide adoption activity day and a further event of this kind is planned in 2014.

**8.5** We have partnered with Coram in order to encourage the recruitment of adopters who have the particular interest and skills to foster a child who may go on to require an adoptive home. This initiative aims to reduce further in-built delay within the system.

**8.6** Post-adoption support is an area of increasing development and effective co-ordination is instrumental in encouraging the adoption of traditionally hard to place children. Brent has been actively involved in commissioning services across the West London Consortium and has a well-developed post-adoption service that has ensured there have been no adoption breakdowns in the last three years.

**8.7** Our advertising and recruitment activity aimed at adopters is innovative and creative. We use a variety of web and print based media and as well as individual advertising have run joint campaigns with the West London Consortium.

### **Background Papers**

- i) Adoption statement of purpose 2014/15
- ii) Ofsted adoption data return 2013/14

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