



Corporate Parenting Committee
3 November 2015

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

Brent Adoption Service Report
1 April – 30 September 2015

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide information to the Council's Corporate Parenting Committee about the general management of the adoption service and how it is achieving good outcomes for children.
- 1.2 This report details the activity of Brent's adoption service from April 1st – September 30th 2015.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee is requested to review, comment on and question the contents of this report. This is to provide evidence that the management of the adoption service is being monitored and challenged 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 2015-16 Adoption Statement of Purpose highlights the outcomes that the service aims to support:
 - 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 Since the 1st April 2014, adoption services have been delivered through two teams:

- A Placements Assessment and Recruitment Team – responsible for the recruitment, assessment and training of prospective adopters, as well as family finding and support for them post approval up until Adoption Order.
- An Adoption and Post Permanency team – responsible for family finding for children with an adoption plan; statutory social work responsibility for children subject to a Placement Order up until Adoption Order; supporting adoptive families, Special Guardians and birth families and providing a counselling and intermediary service for adopted adults and their birth relatives.

4. Performance Data

4.1 The most recent set of national adoption scorecards were published in December 2014, covering the 3-year period 2012-14 and were presented to the July 2015 Corporate Parenting Committee.

4.2 The next set of adoption scorecards covering the reporting period 2012-13 to 2014-15 will not be released until the end of this calendar year. Whilst it is not yet possible to provide comparative data, Brent performance against the two most significant indicators has continued to improve:

- **A1** (The time taken from a child entering care to being placed for adoption): 544 days. This is a 9% improvement against the previous reporting period.
- **A2** (The time taken from the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and a match being approved): 197 days. This is a 36% improvement against the previous reporting period.

4.3 Projections have been made for the current reporting year, based on performance achieved to date and planned activity until 31st March 2016. This updated adoption timeliness data shows the following continued performance improvements. As at 30th September 2015 the indicators were as follows:

- **A1:** 492 days.
- **A2:** 180 days.

4.4 Child related data – 1st April – 30th September 2015

- In the first six months of this reporting year 1 child was adopted.
- At the 30th September there were 10 Looked After Children with an adoption plan who had not yet been adopted. The details of these children's cases are as follows:

- Five children are placed for adoption.
 - Two are living with foster carers where the adoption application has been made.
 - Two children have not yet been made subject of Placement Orders – in these cases there is background family finding from the adoption team.
 - One child's plan is changing away from adoption.
- Three children's plans changed away from adoption during this period. In one case a subsequent assessment of the birth parents resulted in the child remaining in the care of his parents. In another case the court determined that a family member should care for the child under a Special Guardianship Order and Supervision Order to the local authority in which the family member lived. In the third case the child's complex mental health needs resulted in no links with prospective adopters in over 5 years. The child's plan is now one of long-term fostering with his current foster carer.
 - As stated in previous reports, all Local Authorities continue to report a reduction in the number of children being made subject to placement orders. A placement order is the court authorisation that a child can be formally placed with approved adopters. The Department for Education recently provided quarterly data suggesting that new placement orders have continued to fall; from 1,550 in quarter 2, 2013-14 to 740 in quarter 1, 2015-16, a decrease of 52%. Brent has also seen a reduction in numbers of children with placement orders and as a result it is projected that there will be 6-8 adoptions made this reporting year. However our own analysis and auditing of children entering care confirms that all children's plans are effectively scrutinised and adoption prioritised where it is in that child's best interests.
 - The child adopted during this reporting period was Brent's first Fostering for Adoption arrangement, an initiative aimed at reducing the time a child spends in foster care before moving to his/her permanent family.

4.5 Adopter Recruitment

- At 30th September 2015 Brent had 15 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 continues to be lower than the number of approved adopters.
- During the reporting period the service received 47 enquiries about adoption. Many people following this enquiry were signposted to our

monthly information evenings. The enquiries received have resulted in 4 ongoing adoption assessments and 4 adoptive households being approved during the reporting period. Of the 4 on-going adoption assessments, 2 are in stage one and 2 are in stage two of the process.

- Three Brent approved adoptive households were matched to children within the reporting period. Two of the families waited between 3-6 months after approval. In the other case the adopters waited more than 12 months for a suitable match, although there had been extensive support offered to assist with family finding.
- Brent continues to attract adopters from a diversity of backgrounds in order to best meet the variety of needs of our Looked After Children. However, in line with the general profile of adopters nationally, the majority of Brent adopters currently waiting to be linked or matched to children are of white British or Asian heritage.

4.6 Adoption Support

- In 2014-15, 47 families received a post-adoption support package (not one-off advice). This support was primarily provided through financial allowances which are reviewed and means tested but also includes lifestory work, strategies for managing difficult behaviour and advice on managing emotional issues within families brought about through contact with birth families.
- In the six months between 1st April and 30 September 2015, 9 new families have requested adoption support. Of these families four have had successful applications to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) following an assessment. Two further ASF assessments are in process. Brent also successfully submitted a joint West London Adoption Consortium ASF bid for therapeutic parenting support where three Brent families will attend and benefit.

5. The Adoption and Permanence Panel

The Adoption and Permanence Panel

- 5.1** The purpose and role of the Adoption and Permanence panel was set out in detail within a previous Brent Adoption Service Report (1st April - 30th September 2014) to the Corporate Parenting Committee.
- 5.2** The Panel continues to meet once a month in respect of all matters concerning adoption. During this reporting period the adoption panel Chair stated her overall satisfaction with the quality of work presented to panel and the effective gatekeeping role undertaken by the panel advisor. The Chair reported that panel continues to be a critical friend to the Local

Authority and uses tracking data effectively to ensure that work is within regulatory guidelines. The Local Authority has also considered and implemented practice recommendations of panel in a number of cases.

- 5.3** A joint annual training day for adoption panel members and the adoption team staff is held and the last one was delivered in January 2015 by the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering. The next training day has been scheduled for November 2015.
- 5.4** 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, other independent members including a birth mother with experience of adoption, an adopted person, 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.
- 5.5** Panel feedback from prospective and approved adopters and presenting social workers has remained consistent in confirming good or excellent comments regarding the panel process and conduct. Feedback concerning the performance of the social work casework is provided to the Agency Decision Maker who ensures this is given to the Head of Service, Placements, for follow up with individual staff or, should the issues be more systemic, broader service improvement. A recent example would be concerns about whether religious or cultural beliefs had been sufficiently questioned when considering if prospective adopters could unconditionally accept an adopted child. This led to a further piece of work to reassure both panel and Local Authority of the prospective adopters' commitment.
- 5.6** During the period 1st April – 30th September 2015 five panels were held with thirteen specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within this group:
- Three households were recommended as suitable to adopt.
 - Four children were recommended to be placed for adoption with specific carers
 - The long-term fostering matches of eight children were discussed (four individual children and two sibling groups of two). All were recommended except for one individual child's match that was deferred pending confirmation of a current DBS for the carer.

All of the recommendations made to the Agency Decision Maker were ratified.

6. Service Improvement

6.1 Over the last six months, the service has continued to improve outcomes for children with adoption plans in the following ways:

- Through effective tracking of timescales at initial and monthly permanency planning meetings at a team manager level, supplemented by quarterly tracking at Head of Service level for children with an adoption plan. This effective oversight continues to contribute to a reduction in the period of time from a child becoming Looked After to being placed for adoption.
- By ensuring that adoptive families have been assessed and then enabled to access the ASF. This has provided families with targeted therapeutic support when it has been most needed.
- By refining and improving the preparation training for prospective adopters in conjunction with other West London Local Authorities.
- By providing our adopters waiting for a suitable child with a regular support group whereby they can meet with other families to discuss concerns, hear other experiences and ensure we provide services appropriate to individual families' needs.

6.2 **Adoption Support.** A summary of the general activity undertaken in this area was provided within the Brent Adoption Service Report (1st April - 30th September 2014) to the Corporate Parenting Committee.

- The Post Adoption Centre (PAC) 1-year education project ended in September 2015. The project targeted support to children within schools where there were concerns about behaviour and attainment. Each authority within the consortium nominated schools within their borough with whom PAC then worked. Activity was focused on direct work with nominated children and the staff group to encourage longer-term changes within staff understanding. Key outcomes were increased confidence from educational professionals in dealing with children who had been permanently placed within families and also an improvement in relationships between schools and families receiving the support. Consideration is now being given within the West London consortium whether an ASF bid can be submitted for project continuation.
- As described earlier in this report, a number of successful applications have already been made to the ASF, as the Local Authority was ready to make these applications from the start of the programme in May 2015.

6.3 Involving Adopters. Many adopters continue to remain closely involved with the service.

- Approved adopters are involved in speaking to prospective adopters at information evenings and preparation groups.
- Adopters are invited to attend relevant training for foster carers where there are crossover issues.
- As described above, in response to the expressed need for adopters waiting for a match we established our 'Next Steps' support group. This takes place bi-monthly and covers a range of issues relevant to the adoption process.
- A bi-monthly Adopters' Support Group for families with children is well established and feedback is positive about the supportive nature of the group. A crèche is provided for this group. Many of the participants in the group attended our annual adopters' picnic that was held in July at a local park.

6.4 Adopter Feedback. One formal complaint was received from a Brent approved adopter during this reporting period. This related to dissatisfaction with the process of approving an adoption allowance. The adopter has taken the matter to Stage Two of the corporate complaints' process and this had not been resolved at the time of completion of this report.

6.5 Staff Engagement. Staff have contributed to service development during the reporting period. A number of staff attended a large conference on 'brain based parenting', run by the American academic Dan Hughes. Staff who attended then provided a presentation to colleagues within a staff forum. The adoption team also attended a joint event with other boroughs to promote educational attainment for adopted children. Staff also take responsibility for the delivery of adoption preparation courses across other West London authorities.

7. Broader adoption issues and the future

7.1 As described in the October 2014-March 2015 report to the Corporate Parenting Committee, Brent chairs the West London Adoption Consortium (WLAC). The workplan for the consortium was completed, ensuring agencies are clearer of their responsibilities. An example of collaborative success has been a joint funded ASF project. The WLAC co-ordinator is also now located within the West London Alliance and this is already providing greater effectiveness by sharing administrative support allowing the co-ordinator more time to focus on child and family activities within the workplan.

7.2 During this reporting period the Education and Adoption Bill was published. Local Authorities will be encouraged to establish regional adoption agencies within 2 years with the risk of these services being removed if sufficient progress is not made. There has been significant activity within the London Adoption Board and regional consortia to agree on future direction for adoption services within London. The Department for Education has made funding available to adoption agencies to consider how this may best be achieved within each region and the London Adoption Board, on behalf of all adoption agencies within London, submitted a bid in early September. The DfE have determined that the London bid has been successful and has been categorised as a 'Scope and Define' bid. This is because the delivery model is currently unclear. Support is needed to determine the best model and to start to lay foundations for moving to this. This will include producing an options appraisal, deciding on which model to pursue and agreeing a plan for delivering this. The DfE have been clear that any bid and proposal must engage Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) fully in the design stage, working with them in the spirit of co-production and that this pan-London activity should not get in the way of smaller scale collaborations. The bid will be further scoped before the end of this calendar year with clearer proposals available for each Local Authority to consider and determine what the best model upon which to move forward is.

Appendix – Adoption Newsletter Winter 2015

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