

	<p>Corporate Parenting Committee</p> <p>25 October 2016</p> <p>Report from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People</p>
<p>Wards affected: ALL</p>	
<p>Brent Adoption Service Report 1 April 2016 – 30 September 2016</p>	

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 2016.

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 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 In Brent adoption services are 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 March 2016, covering the 3-year period 2013-2015. The next round of national adoption scorecard data will be released in December 2016.

4.2 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 and compares against a national average of 593 days.
- **A2** (The time taken from the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and a match being approved): 194 days¹. This is a 37% improvement against the previous reporting period and compares against a national average of 223 days.

4.3 Internal projections for the next 3-year average (2013-14 to 2015-16) have been produced. As at 30th September 2016 the indicators were as follows:

- **A1:** 536 days.
- **A2:** 184 days.

4.4 Child related data – 1st April 2016 – 30th September 2016

- In the first six months of this reporting year 3 children were adopted.

¹ The DfE confirmed the published scorecard did not reflect the accurate A2 position for Brent (194 days). This anomaly is captured within the scorecard.

- At the 30th September there were 11 Looked After Children with an adoption plan who had not yet been adopted. The details of these children's cases are as follows:
 - Four children are placed for adoption.
 - Three children are due to be matched at the Adoption Panel in November 2016 with a view to being placed for adoption during the same month.
 - Four children are not yet placed or as yet have an identified adoption match; family finding is in process for these children.
- 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.

4.5 Adopter Recruitment

- At 30th September 2016 Brent had 7 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 20 enquiries about adoption. Many people following this enquiry were signposted to our monthly information evenings. The enquiries received have resulted in 6 ongoing adoption assessments (1 being a step-parent assessment) and 0 adoptive households being approved during the reporting period. Of the 6 on-going adoption assessments 5 are in stage one of the process, 1 is in stage two of the process.
- 5 Brent approved adoptive households were matched to children within this reporting period. One of the households waited between 3-6 months after approval. In the other cases the adopters waited more than 12 months for a suitable match with 2 of the 5 households waiting 2 years or more, although there had been extensive support offered to assist with family finding. The lengthy waits which some adopters are experiencing reflect the reduction in children awaiting adoption nationally and the large number of adopters across the country awaiting placements.
- 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. We continue to assess

adopters who more closely reflect the needs of those children awaiting adoptive placements. We receive early notification of children's possible plans for adoption through Initial Permanency Planning meetings, PLO and Looked After Children tracking meetings. This gives the Adoption Service the opportunity to start tentative identification of likely adoptive families at an early stage.

4.6 Adoption Support

- In the last six months, 78 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 life story 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, 2016 and 30th September 2016, 6 new families have requested post adoption support. During this period, seven applications to the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) were successfully approved to support the therapeutic needs of Brent families. Thirty-six adopted adults also received adoption support. This was in the form of provision of access to their records, linking them with members of their birth family, and providing counselling support around issues related to adoption.

5. 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 to the Corporate Parenting Committee.
- 5.2** The Panel continues to meet once a month in respect of all matters concerning adoption and to consider all long-term fostering matches. During the period under review two panels were cancelled due to lack of cases. This was due in part to the national shortage of children available for adoption and also to Brent's early linking and matching of those children who have a current adoption decision (the details of which are outlined elsewhere in this report).
- 5.3** A joint annual training day for adoption panel members and the adoption team staff is held as per statutory regulation; the last one was delivered on 23rd May 2016 by Brent's Agency Advisor. The focus was on independent scrutiny, minimising disruptions and identifying particular areas of learning for Brent. The next training day will be in 2017.
- 5.4** A central list of panel members, in line with statutory guidance, 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 adopter; a previously fostered adult, a former Looked After Child and a foster carer from another Local Authority. There are also panel members employed by Brent, including: representatives from Social Care; the virtual school; health; the probation service; Children's Centres; and an elected member. All panel members receive 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 (Operational Director – Integration and Improved Outcomes, Children and Young People's Services) who ensures this is given to the Head of Service (LAC, Permanency and Care Leavers) for follow up with individual staff or, should the issues be more systemic, broader service improvement.

5.6 During the period 1st April – 30th September 2016 four panels were held with fifteen specific cases discussed during these sessions. Within this group:

- Three households were recommended as suitable to adopt;
- Three children were recommended to be placed for adoption with specific carers;
- The long-term fostering matches of five children were discussed (one individual child and two sibling groups of two);
- Six prospective adopters were recommended as remaining suitable to adopt following annual review; and
- One prospective adoptive couple resigned due to not having been matched with a suitable child in the three years since their approval.

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 As described earlier in this report, a number of successful applications have been made to the Adoption Support Fund in order to support families requiring help with their parenting.

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 and enjoyed our 2016 Summer Picnic for adopters

6.4 Adopter Feedback

During this reporting period there have been no complaints received from adopters. There has been one complaint by an adopted adult and this was in relation to their dissatisfaction with the communication between the service and themselves. The complaint was resolved at Stage One of the corporate complaints' process.

6.5 Staff Engagement Staff continue to take responsibility for the delivery of adoption preparation courses in conjunction with colleagues in the West London Adoption Consortium.

Staff members regularly participate in bespoke training, which includes in-house training opportunities and also external training offered by the West London Alliance, Making Research Count and other providers.

Staff deliver Life Story Work training to foster carers and also a regular, separate Life Story Work training to social work colleagues across Children's Social Care. Managers set up and ran a training workshop on Permanency Planning for social workers in the Locality and Care Planning Teams

7. Broader adoption issues and the future

7.1 On the 7th October 2016, just after the end of this reporting period, we were notified of the immediate changes being made to the allocation of Adoption Support Fund (ASF) monies. As of the 7th October 2016 the ASF have capped the amount of financial support available to individual children. Prior to this date the Adoption Support Fund imposed no restriction on the amount of funding requested. This will impact on adoptive families as their therapeutic support packages are frequently more than £5k and LB Brent will have no means of funding this additional cost. The current support packages that are in place or being processed are being analysed to help to quantify future need. Once this is established we will work with our Consortium partners to explore more cost effective means of delivering therapeutic services.

7.2 Following the publication of the DfE paper, *Regionalising Adoption* (June 2015), the Department invited councils and Voluntary Adoption Agencies to submit Expressions of Interest in becoming part of new regionalised arrangements. In response, the Association of London Directors of Children's Services (ALDCS) submitted a London proposition, which was approved for development in a 'scope and define' phase. Through the development of regional agencies, the DfE and ALDCS aspire to speed up matching, improve adoption support and achieve cost efficiencies.

A number of possible models for the London Regional Adoption Agency have been explored. ALDCS have recommended the creation of a new local authority owned entity operating in a hub and spoke approach. The model is expected to retain a strong local link. It is recognised that local knowledge and relationships will be essential. The current recommended model is based on a not-for-profit community benefit society, jointly owned by all of the LAs. This model is quicker and cheaper to set up, and retains close VAA partnership working.

Each London Borough is now being asked by ALDCS to reach their own decision on whether to join, in principle, the London Regional Adoption Agency. A cabinet report is being prepared for December 2016 that will seek a decision on the following points:

- To agree, in principle, to join a London Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), subject to detailed financial analysis; and
- To authorise the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, to progress arrangements relating to the development of the Agency model.

It is anticipated that the London RAA would be operational within the 2017/18 financial year, subject to agreement from the DfE.

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