



Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee 8 December 2011

Report from the Director of Children and Families

For Action

Wards Affected:
ALL

Adoption Services in Brent

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The chair of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee has asked officers to prepare a report in response to information released by the Department for Education on adoptions in England. The information was released in early November and members will recall that at the time there was significant press coverage on the timeliness of adoptions. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the key issues relating to adoption in Brent and to give members an opportunity to ask questions in relation to adoption services.

2. Report

- 2.1 The DfE released a suite of information on the performance of Local Authorities (2009-2011), relating to looked after children. This included:
- Placement stability
 - How close looked after children were placed to their host authority
 - Adoption and special guardianship
 - Timeliness of adoption
 - Educational outcomes for school age looked after children
 - School absences
 - Outcomes for care leavers (children who were looked after) at 19, measured by engagement in education, training, employment, attendance at higher education establishments, placements in suitable accommodation.
- 2.2 Despite the considerable amount of data released, attention has focussed on the timeliness of adoptions. Taking the indicators as whole, there were areas where Brent's performance for looked after children was very good (e.g. 5+ A*-C GCSE grades including English and Maths), areas where we performed in the middle banding (e.g. proximity of placement to Brent) and there were areas where there was significant room for improvement (e.g. timeliness of adoptions).
- 2.3 The indicator around timeliness of adoptions measures the percentage of children placed for adoption within 12 months of a decision (that adoption is in their best

interests) being made. The issues around this indicator are complicated and are influenced by the following factors:

- The age of the child; it is a myth that there are lots of babies waiting to be adopted. In most cases babies (when they are available) are placed quickly and any delays usually result from protracted court processes.
- Sibling groups; we follow best established practice and endeavour, where possible, to keep siblings together but often have to balance further delays in placement against the option of separating them.
- Length of legal proceedings; legal proceedings for children have lengthened inexorably over recent years, as courts become more wary of separating babies from their parents and as more and more experts are involved in advising the Courts. It is increasingly recognised by local authorities that even where parents have had previous children removed and where the concerns remain, that the Courts are invariably ordering further lengthy and expensive assessments. The Family Justice Review group has just released its final report which recognises this and recommends urgent action to reduce the average length of legal proceedings from over 1 yr to 6 months or less.
- Complexity of the needs of children; unfortunately, many children requiring adoption have highly complex needs and this makes the process of identifying suitable placements for them difficult. In most circumstances, we will try to pursue an adoption plan but if it becomes clear after a set period, that this is unlikely to succeed and that the children are beginning to “drift” we will adapt the plan to something more likely to succeed.

- 2.4 The timeliness of the adoption placement is however only one component in the drive towards placing children permanently with alternative carers. The number of children placed is the other and there are two ways that this can be achieved. Adoption is the first, the most well known and probably the most secure. Many children are however placed with permanent carers under what is called a Special Guardianship Order. This has a similar effect to adoption but does not remove the birth parents’ rights in quite the same way. It is an option that is often popular both with prospective carers and young people (especially the older ones) as it does not completely remove the birth parent from the child’s life. This, along with placements with family and friends is one of a range of options that allow us to carefully match the needs of the children with those of carers and provides a wider potential pool of carers. Over the last two years, on the combined adoption and Special Guardianship indicator, we have performed above our statistical neighbours in this area, which is a very positive outcome.
- 2.5 The national picture mirrors what is happening in Brent with aggregated figures over the last 5 years indicating that whilst the numbers of adoptions have decreased, Special Guardianship Orders have increased. The combined figure (adoptions and SGO’s) indicates that approximately 25% more children are being placed permanently now than was the case 5 years ago.
- 2.6 The data quoted in the released information relates to the timeliness of adoption placements between 2009 and 2011 and on that basis Brent performed poorly. We recognised this some time ago and have put into place a range of responses to address this, which have resulted in the current situation whereby we anticipate that for 2011 close to 80% of children with a plan for adoption will be placed within 12 months of that decision being made.
- 2.9 However, in the current year there are 4 children with highly complex needs that cannot be adopted and these counted against us in the data return used by DfE

for 2010-2011. They illustrate very clearly the issues of complexity outlined earlier including severe behavioural difficulties (including sexualised behaviour), children born of incestuous relations, parental mental health issues (there is a strong correlation between parental mental health issues and its development in children) and global developmental delay. The plans for these children will now have to be changed as we have been unable to identify prospective adopters within a reasonable timeframe.

- 2.10 We have recognised the need to identify more prospective adopters for Brent children and are currently assessing 21 prospective families against a figure of 9 in the previous year. These prospective adopters will become available for Brent children soon. We are also working more closely with neighbouring boroughs to ensure that Brent children are placed in a timely manner.
- 2.11 Finally, whilst timeliness and numbers of placements are important, ensuring that the right children are placed with the right carers is crucial in achieving the best outcomes for the child. In the last two years in Brent only one adoptive placement has broken down and this reflects the careful matching that is undertaken.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 The information released by the Department for Education covered a range of areas relating to looked after children and adoption services. However, it is important that this information is seen in context, with an informed commentary on the local circumstances influencing service performance. Unfortunately the published information didn't contain this, and focussed on one or two indicators where Brent hasn't been performing well, compared to other boroughs. Importantly the council has recognised this and put in place steps to improve performance which should be reflected when further information is published by DfE in December 2011.
- 3.2 Officers from the Children and Families Department will attend the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee to answer questions on adoption services in Brent.

Background Papers - Children in Care and Adoption Performance Tables –
Published by the Department for Education, 1st November 2011

Contact Officer –

Graham Genoni,
Assistant Director Children's Social Care
Tel - 020 8937 4091
Email – graham.genoni@brent.gov.uk