



Executive
15 October 2012

**Report from the Director of
Children and Families**

Wards Affected:
ALL

Adoption Service Report, 2011/ 2012

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide general information about Brent's Adoption Service and to update the Executive following the Ofsted inspection in February 2012 and Department for Education (DfE) Diagnostic assessment in July 2012. The inspection and the DfE diagnostic assessment recognised the good work being undertaken by the Brent Adoption team, particularly the support to children and families, whilst at the same time acknowledging the historic concerns around timeliness of adoptive placements, which have now been robustly addressed.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to note the contents of the report and of the Action Plan contained in Appendix A.

3.0 Detail

- 3.1 The key task of the adoption service is to provide adoptive families to those children who require permanency through adoption. In discharging that responsibility, the emphasis is on ensuring that children are matched with the "right" family which is best able to meet their needs in a safe and loving environment, and that this is done in a timely manner.
- 3.2 This report provides general background information on the service and an update following the Ofsted inspection (February 2012) and the Department for Education Diagnostic which took place in July 2012.
- 3.3 In 2010 concerns were identified in the functioning of the service and following an independent assessment, an Interim Head of Service was appointed in

July 2010. An Improvement Plan was put into place with a primary focus on addressing drift in the placement of children largely through better data collection, more robust performance management systems and an increased focus on quality of planning.

- 3.4 Weekly case tracking meetings and fortnightly Adoption team meetings were introduced which proactively review all children with either a 'should be placed for adoption' recommendation or who are awaiting an adoption match. These children are examined alongside all prospective and approved adopters awaiting a placement with a view to identifying potential early links. All recruitment activities in relation to prospective adopters (including initial visits and assessments) are tracked on a weekly basis to ensure that there is no drift.
- 3.5 The service has developed innovative recruitment strategies by exploring new ways to reach prospective adopters such as: attending The National Fertility Show, attending a National Islamic Event at the Excel Centre in London, facilitating an Information Morning at a Brent Somalian Community Centre and launching a mobile recruitment campaign using an open top double decker bus which tours Brent and neighbouring boroughs. We have also advertised by Life Screen in all G.P. surgeries and health centres.
- 3.6 A key priority is ensuring that children are matched with the right prospective family as quickly as possible. This means examining our own approved adopters in the first instance, but if none are suitable, we move quickly to seek external adopters via the Adoption Register, the West London Consortium and by circulating profiles of the children waiting on a monthly basis to other local authority and independent and voluntary adoption agencies throughout the United Kingdom. We also routinely advertise for specific children in the publications 'Children Who Wait' and 'Parents for Children', as well as using their online web facilities.
- 3.7 Over the period of the last year, the service has significantly increased its recruitment activity which has resulted in 183 enquiries for adoption, against 118 in the previous year. The Adoption and Permanency Panel approved 13 adopters in 2011/12 against 8 in the previous year. Most significantly, 9 children were adopted in 2011/12, whilst the same number was achieved within the first 6 months of this year, with a projected figure of 14 children by the end of the year.
- 3.8 There were also changes to improve the Adoption panel and to make sure it worked in an efficient and effective way. Additional adoption panels were introduced to improve timeliness of approval and matching and a robust monitoring system was put in place to ensure children's plans routinely return to Panel for monitoring purposes, which alerts us to any potential delay and provides the opportunity to counteract it. Monitoring sheets are completed for each case presented at panel and the panel provides feedback to the agency decision maker in respect of the quality of care planning in every case

- 3.9 Finally, the adoption service was reconfigured, with one team being responsible for the recruitment of prospective adopters, whilst the other supported children when they were placed with prospective adopters. This has allowed a greater focus on the two separate areas and led to a more proactive approach to the case tracking of children through the system. This will, in due course, lead to decreased costs as children are moved through to adoption more rapidly.
- 3.10 Ofsted inspected the Adoption service in February 2012. There were four judgement areas, two were judged good and two adequate. The overall judgement was adequate. There were only four recommendations made and all of those have now been actioned. The inspection noted a range of real strengths in the way the service worked. These included the good outcomes for children and the positive work being done with birth parents and adopters. It made particular comment on the level of support being offered to birth parents and was impressed with the support that was offered to them. The improvement in the numbers of prospective adopters being assessed and approved was also noted. It recognised the historical concerns but noted that these had been identified and that an improvement plan was in place. *'Recruitment of adopters has increased and all sections of the community are represented ... Adopters are often linked with children at an early part of the assessment process. This means that once the decision has been made for children to be adopted, they can move quickly to their adoptive placements.'* Ofsted report Feb 2012
- 3.11 The Government introduced an "adoption scorecard" in October 2011 and this highlighted that Brent's performance in placing children for adoption in a timely manner was poor and significantly below the national average. The scorecard drew on figures over a three year period, meaning that the performance was depressed by poor timeliness figures dating back to 2008. This performance combined with the Government's new focus on adoption is what led to the DfE Diagnostic Assessment which took place in July 2012. This assessment was very positive, acknowledging that the Council had recognised the issues and put into place a robust action plan to address these. It acknowledged the significant strengths of the service but recognised that the improvements will take some time to work their way through the system. The adoption figures for 2012 are beginning to evidence these improvements with timeliness of children through the system (from point of coming into care to being adopted) having vastly improved from the previous period. The national average is 625 days with Brent's previous average being 827. This year, 9 children have been adopted, in an average of 417 days. This is almost half the time previously taken.
- 3.12 The other area that the scorecard highlighted was the relatively low number of children placed for adoption in Brent. Adoption however is not the only route into permanency for children: many are placed permanently with families (often extended members of their family) through Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's). This is a relatively new legal option that has been made available to families. It is very similar to adoption, in so far as it makes a permanent arrangement for children and gives the new carer legal authority over the child. One of the major differences however, is that it does not

completely remove the rights of the birth parent. Special Guardianship Orders are used widely across the country but more so in London than elsewhere. The suggestion being that they are more acceptable to the more diverse communities in London because they do not completely remove parents' rights, and allow for placement with extended family members. When numbers of children placed for adoption are combined with those placed through SGO's, Brent's performance in this area is above the national average and in the top 25% nationally.

- 3.13 Placing children quickly is not the only measure of a high performing adoption service. Children must also be placed with the appropriate families which have the skills to care for them. The quality of our matching of adoptive children to prospective adopters is very good. The adoption service has worked very hard to ensure that the match between the two is appropriate to ensure that the placements have the best prospects for success and to support these placements robustly and this is one of the reasons that we have only had 1 adoption breakdown in 5 years.
- 3.14 Transracial placements are made on a regular basis in Brent. Brent has never accepted the argument that children should wait for the perfect ethnic match and whilst we will search for an appropriate match, adjustments are made very rapidly if no appropriate families are forthcoming. This issue is more acute in a borough like Brent because of both the high percentage of children from BME communities, but equally, the fact that the BME communities themselves are so heterogeneous.
- 3.15 Finally, the Government's focus on adoption and the drive to improve timeliness will continue with further improvements planned. Changes to the Adoption Panel are planned for September 2012 and the Council will soon be legally obliged to consider placing children with approved Adopters who will foster children before the adoption process is complete (Concurrent Planning). The 'foster to adopt' programme was initially launched earlier in the year but the government is now to legislate to make fostering by potential adopters standard practice.
- 3.16 The implications for Brent will mean that babies and younger children will be placed with approved adopters who will foster them first, whilst awaiting for the court orders to enable them to be adopted. This will significantly speed the process up for children but will introduce a level of uncertainty for adopters, who are accepting children where the final plan has not been approved by the Court.
- 3.17 The Family Justice Review, which is intended to speed the Court process up for all children, not just those being placed for adoption, will further impact on timeliness of planning in this area. There are a number of implications arising from this review and these are currently being addressed by the Department alongside other West London Boroughs.

4.0 Legal Implications

- 4.1 To comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services 2003 the Adoption Agency has a statutory responsibility to report on the work of the adoption service on a six monthly basis.

Standard 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards 2011 requires the Adoption Agency to produce a six monthly report on adoption activity to the Executive function in order for the Executive function to

(a) receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency;

(b) monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users; and

(c) satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

In Brent, the executive function is discharged by the Lead Member for Children and Families, who receives and reviews all reports on a regular basis.

5.0 Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications identified in this report and any changes have been met from within existing resources.

6.0 Diversity Implications

- 6.1 There are no diversity implications contained within this report.

7.0 Staffing/Accommodation Implications (if appropriate)

- 7.1 There are no staffing issues contained within this report.

Background Papers (essential)

- i) Adoption Improvement and Action Plan

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