

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Families and Children's Service Scrutiny Committee
16th November 2017

Adoption Agency Annual Report

Report of the Interim Director of Children's Services: Andy Johnson

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Wayne Daley

Purpose of Report

This report is the Adoption Agency Annual Report for 2016/17. In line with statutory guidance and regulation, all adoption agencies have to provide a report regarding the outcomes of the adoption service.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. Members note and scrutinize adoption performance.
2. The members acknowledge the report and performance information in regard to the period April 2016 – March 2017.

Key issues

1. The agency has identified a number of aims and objectives for 2017 - 18 to be endorsed by the Board.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the new corporate plan.

Northumberland County Council

Family Placement Service

Annual Report of the Adoption Agency

1st April 2016 – 31st March 2017

1. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the main developments relating to the adoption agency during the period 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017.

2. Ofsted Inspection

The Ofsted Single Inspection Framework for ‘the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers’ incorporates adoption services into the single framework inspection process. Adoption performance is a key judgement within the single inspection framework. Northumberland was inspected under this framework in January/February 2016. The outcome from this inspection is that Children’s Service’s within Northumberland requires improvement to be good. The judgement for adoption was good.

The full inspection report can be accessed at:

https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/northumberland/052_Single%20inspection%20of%20LA%20children's%20services%20and%20review%20of%20the%20LSCB%20as%20pdf.pdf

3. Adoption Scorecard

The Adoption Scorecard was introduced by the Department for Education (DfE) in January 2014 for all Local Authorities. The set of adoption scorecards and performance tables covers a three year period that the DfE measure each Local Authority's performance against. The three indicators are:

A1. Average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted.

A2. Average time (in days) between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family.

A3. Percentage of children who wait less than 15 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

In the measurement of average days between a child entering care and moving in with the adoptive family (A1), Northumberland's performance for those children adopted in 2016/17 stands at 597 days (2013/16 was 618) with this being over the national average of 558 days. We are not yet meeting the ever challenging target set by the Department of Education (DfE) of 426 days.

In the measurement of days between obtaining the Placement Order, and placing the child with the adoptive family (A2), Northumberland's performance stands at 193 days. (2013/16 was 208). The national average 3 year timescale is 226 days therefore Northumberland's performance is better than the national figure by around one month (on average). The latest target set by the DfE for 2013 - 16 is 121 days and this remains a challenge.

Government targets in relation to the timescales for adoption are similarly challenging in 2017. The target for A1 in 2013 – 16 is 426 days and the target for A2 is 121 days. This will continue to be a pressure for the local authority. It is known from the current cohort of children who have been placed for adoption that timescales in relation to both A1 and A2 are increasing. These figures will have a detrimental impact upon performance reporting for the next three years.

We continue to proactively family find for children despite the length of time a child has been 'waiting'. This is often due to the child being 'harder to place' due to a number of factors, for example, complex health needs, sibling groups, older children. This determination has proved successful for some children resulting in them being placed with adopters. Six children have waited over 12 months for an adoptive family to be identified and four children waited over 2 years.

Timely decisions are made in regard to family finding for children when we need to explore options outside of the agency. If the agency does not have an approved adopter within its pool of adopters that can be appropriately matched to the child, external family finding is undertaken within the regional consortium, adoption publications and through 'Link Maker'. This is a web based national family finding tool that enables agencies to share profiles of children and adopters securely and quickly. This has impacted positively on securing families for our children in a timely way. We have successfully placed children with adopters from outside of the agency. The national adoption register is also used.

The percentage of children who wait less than 14 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family over this reporting timeframe is 55%. The national figure is 47%.

Information about the age of children when placed for adoption in this timeframe.

- 5 children aged 5 years and over
- 5 children aged 4 years to 4 years 11 months
- 3 children aged 3 years to 3 years 11 months

- 3 children aged 2 years to 2 years 11 months
- 4 children aged 1 year to 1 year 11 months
- 5 children under 11 months old.
- 5 Sibling groups of 2 children have been placed together during this time period and one child joined a sibling already in placement with adopters.

4. Adoption Panels

Adoption Panels continue to have a crucial role in the approval of prospective adopters and matching children with adopters. The panel meets at least once a month and has an independent chairperson who has significant knowledge and experience of adoption issues. The panel advisor, panel chair and panel members all play a key role in the quality assurance of all documents that are presented to panel.

During this time frame, 19 prospective adopters have been assessed and approved and 25 children have been matched and placed with adopters.

5. Agency Decision Makers

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) from April until August had an interim arrangement with it being one of the Children’s Senior Managers. This responsibility transferred, in September 2016, to the Children’s Service Director.

The agency continues to be fully compliant with the Adoption Regulations and National Minimum Standards (NMS) timescales in regard to panel minutes, recommendations and ‘should be placed for adoption’ (SHOBPA) decisions. The ADM has been provided with all adoption panel papers within the appropriate timeframe and received the final panel minutes to enable them to make a decision. The ADM provides any feedback to panels via the agency advisor.

SHOBPA decisions and Adoption Order Figures for the last 3 years are:

	SHOBPA decision by ADM	Number of Placement Orders granted	Placed for adoption	Adoption Orders
2014/15	36	38	34	25
2015/16	36	30	36	38
2016/17	44	32	25	34

Placement of Children Information 2016/17

	Number of Children
Placed with NCC approved adopters	13
Adopted by foster carer	1
Inter Agency Placements	11
Total	25

The number of children placed for adoption is lower than in previous years. This is due to a number of reasons including delays in court decisions, birth parents challenging the court order that in turn delays progressing the plan for adoption (this relates to 5 children). Family finding for 2 children was purposely delayed due to the individual circumstances about each child.

No adoption disruptions have taken place in this timeframe.

6. Recruitment of Prospective Adopters

The recruitment and retention of adopters is a priority for the service in ensuring that we have the right families for children that have an adoption plan. The Family Placement Service has a Recruitment and Marketing Strategy. The aim of this strategy is to recruit adoptive parents living in and within reasonable travelling distance of Northumberland who have the skills and qualities to meet the diverse needs of children in our care.

The strategies for recruiting adopters is based on an analysis of practice information including current and emerging areas of need in terms of our children & young people. Recruitment is targeted across the county

During this reporting time frame the local authority has sold 3 adopters to other local authorities.

Recruiting adopters is an on-going, year round campaign, with focus at particular time periods e.g. National Adoption Week. These opportunities provide extra support from the press and social media elements of the campaign.

Information Evenings are planned throughout the year and are bi-monthly. The NCC web page is kept up to date with information about the agency and provides detailed information about adoption for prospective applicants.

The agency continues working in partnership with the North East Adoption Consortium. The purpose of this is to share performance information and good practice across the region.

7. Adoption Support

All children that are being matched with adopters have a comprehensive adoption support plan. This undergoes close scrutiny from the Adoption Support Services Adviser, Adoption Panel and the ADM. When appropriate, funding is made available to support children with more complex needs that require specialist services. If children are placed out of county, access to these services can be crucial in supporting and securing the placement.

Staff within the team have been trained to deliver the 'Fostering Changes' course

that is adapted to 'Adoption Changes'. This enables the staff to apply the principles of this course when supporting and advising adopters on a range of behaviour management techniques. This is made available to adopters pre and post order and adopters from other agencies, that have NCC children placed with them and live locally who can access the training. The course has been delivered twice throughout the year and has received positive feedback from adopters.

The adoption agency offers all newly approved adopters a one year membership of Adoption UK. Membership includes the bi-monthly 'Adoption Today' magazine, use of their postal lending library and access to their online community. The service also offers access to Adoption UK's buddy scheme and Parent Consultation Service.

The agency has submitted 34 requests (14 requests made in 2015/16) for support from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) with all of these having been successful. The DfE have confirmed that funding will continue to be available until 2020.

Families in Northumberland have access to adoption support. Referrals for support include support to adopted adults, support to birth parents and requests by families for assessment of adoption support needs. The data for the period April 2016 to March 2017 is:

- 20 requests for support to adopted adults
- 22 requests for support to birth relatives
- 30 requests for assessment of adoption support

The agency has seen a rise in families requesting adoption support over the last 12 months.

The agency provides a counselling service for adults adopted before 1976 in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It also offers a support service to adults who were adopted since 1976 who are seeking information about their origins, and to birth relatives who wish to explore the possibility of making contact with adoptees.

A 'letterbox' contact facility is administered and monitored within the agency. This is a system that enables birth relatives and adoptive parents to stay in contact by exchanging written information. Direct contact between siblings and between adopted children and their birth families is supported on a case by case basis.

The agency has a service level agreement with PAC – UK. PAC – UK provides independent advice, support, and guidance to birth parents and other family members affected by adoption. This support is available to birth parents during legal proceedings once the plan for the child is identified as adoption. Birth parents can access this service at any time that they have been affected by adoption either via self-referral or a referral through the agency.

In line with the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005, those affected by adoption can seek an assessment of their support needs. The agency undertakes these specific assessments and will offer a range of support services in order to meet the identified needs or will act as a contact or signpost to other appropriate services.

Children adopted from care can have on-going needs with families benefiting from post-adoption support known as the 'Adoption Passport'.

The Adoption Passport sets out the support adopters could be eligible for, including:

- paid adoption leave at similar rates to maternity and paternity leave
- priority access to social housing, and access to additional support to cover a spare room whilst adopters wait for their child to arrive in their new home
- priority admission for school places, including academies and free schools
- a range of adoption support services, including access to counselling, information and advice for both adoptive parents and their children, who may have complex needs.

8. Regional Adoption Agency

In June 2015, the DfE published a paper, "[Regionalising Adoption](#)" which set out to address and rectify a number of challenges which the government has defined as follows:

- Inefficiencies in the delivery of adoption services in England: there are too many adoption agencies chasing a limited market and not utilising economies of scale
- Matching of children: this process is taking too long and hard to place children are not being matched quickly enough
- Recruitment concerns: while the numbers of adopters recruited recently has increased, concerns remain about the capability of some adopters to take on harder to place children
- Adoption Support challenges: adoption support is still not being provided consistently or strategically with LAs not providing or purchasing provision of high enough quality to support the long term needs of adoptive families

In order to address these challenges, the government suggested a coming together of networks of local authorities (LAs) and Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) to form regionalised adoption services, utilising economies of scale, mutual learning and expertise.

In the north east, 5 local authorities and 4 VAAs have agreed to work together to explore how a regional adoption agency might work in practice - 'Adopt North East'. The 5 local authorities are Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Gateshead. 5 different models got considered by the board with a decision made to progress the joint venture model with all 5 local authorities. Various workstreams sit below the board that have undertaken various scoping

exercises. These include, for example, financial, information technology, human resources, adopters journey.

Consultation sessions have taken with adopters and adopted children including representatives from all the LA's and VAA's.

The go live date for this arrangement is 1st October 2018.

9. Aims & Objectives 2017/18

The service will continue to successfully operate on a day to day basis in line with the Adoption National Minimum Standards & Regulations.

Six of the key aims and objectives for 2017/18 are:

- Increase placement availability and choice ensuring the service remains inclusive and engaging to all, while maintaining a focus on a number of key targeted audiences, for example, sibling groups, older children.
- To continue to ensure that adopters are fully supported in accessing the Adoption Support Fund (ASF)
- To continue to work with other local authorities within the region in regard to a regional approach to adoption - Adopt North East
- Promote early permanence placements at all stages of the adoption process
- Review the marketing strategy
- Review the team to increase the number of adopter assessments

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	Northumberland Fostering and Adoption Services Manual Adoption Agency Statement of Purpose Corporate Parenting Strategy Other relevant legislation as detailed below
Finance and value for money:	The Family Placement Service has a budget that is closely monitored to ensure value for money in regard to the placements and provision it provides.
Legal:	Adoption National Minimum Standards and Regulations 2011 (England) The Adoption & Children Act 2002 Children Act 1989 and 2004 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 (England) The Adoption Support Services (Amendment) Regulations 2014 The above mentioned policies, procedures and guidance.
Procurement:	None
Human Resources:	None
Property:	None
Equalities: (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Risk Assessment:	This report is part of the Risk Management systems in place to check on the standards and service provision of children in adoptive placements.
Crime & Disorder: Customer Considerations:	None
Carbon Reduction:	NONE
Wards:	NONE

Report sign off.

Finance Officer	N/A
Monitoring Officer/Legal	N/A
Human Resources	N/A
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A
Director of Children's Services	Andy Johnson
Portfolio Holder(s)	Wayne Daley

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Useful Links

- NCC Adoption Webpage
www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=1035
- Adoption National Minimum Standards
www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-national-minimum-standards
- NCC Virtual School for Looked After Children webpage
<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=12414>
- PAC – UK
www.pac-uk.org/
- Adoption UK
www.adoptionuk.org/
- First4adoption
www.first4adoption.org.uk/