

Corporate Parenting Board

14 September 2017

Report title	Annual Adoption Agency Report	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Val Gibson Children and Young People	
Wards affected	All	
Accountable director	Emma Bennett, Children and Young People	
Originating service	Children and Young People	
Accountable employee(s)	Dawn Deans Tel Email	Senior Social Work Manager (Adoption) 01902 550842 Dawn.Deans@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report to be/has been considered by	CICC and PLT	

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Corporate Parenting Board is recommended to consider the report and provide feedback on the City of Wolverhampton Council Annual Adoption Agency Report for 2016-2017.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 This report details the work of the City of Wolverhampton Adoption Service in the year April 2016 to March 2017.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Adoption Annual Report attached details the performance of the City of Wolverhampton Adoption Service in the year April 2016 to March 2017. The statutory regulations require that Councillors should be informed of the Adoption Agency's activity on a regular basis. The annual report provides information that will assist Councillors in respect of their responsibilities as corporate parents for Looked after Children.
- 2.2. The report outlines legislative, policy and adoption reform programmes in respect of Adoption practice.
- 2.3. Included in Adoption Reforms is the development of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) who are expected to deliver all adoption recruitment, matching and support functions. The Department for Education (DfE) provided funding to assist in the setting up and establishment of the RAA and practical support from a coach and policy information to achieve the programme's aims.
- 2.4 In November 2015, six Local Authority partners - Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin and their five Local Authority Adoption Agencies, together with Voluntary Adoption Agency Adoption Focus, were accepted by the Department for Education (DfE) as an early adopter project to work together to design and develop a new Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), Adoption@Heart was established.
- 2.5 In February 2017 Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin made the decision to withdraw from Adoption @Heart RAA. Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton LA's remain committed along with VAA partners; Adoption Focus, Adoption UK and After Adoption to the operating and delivery model. Work continues in progressing a series of work streams to develop the Adoption@Heart model.

3.0 Adoption Inspection

- 3.1 All Adoption Services became regulated in 2003, under the Care Standards Act 2000 and were subject to inspections against National Minimum Standards. The inspecting Authority is OFSTED.
- 3.2 OFSTED inspected Wolverhampton Adoption Service in January 2016. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the adoption regulations and National Minimum Standards. The inspectors identified many areas of strength in the adoption service and they judged the service as Good.

3.3 Ofsted reported that; good use is made of adoption to achieve permanence for those children for whom it is the right solution. This includes older children and those with complex needs regardless of their ethnic identity. The timeliness of court proceedings, and matching and placing children with adoptive families is improving (OFSTED 2017).

4.0 Adopter Approval

4.1 The two-stage recruitment and approval process is embedded and tracked in terms of impact and timeliness. A stage one worker undertakes all initial visits and tracks references and medical checks etc. up until stage two. This model was trialled in 2016 and there was a significant improvement in progressing adopters during stage one and two with an 89 day reduction within timescales.

4.2 Wolverhampton continued to utilise an Independent Agency Social Work Assessment Consultancy (SWACS) to complete stage two Prospective Adopter Reports (PAR's)

4.3 The report continues to show improvements in the recruitment and assessment of adopters. There have been 28 approvals of prospective adopters, this represents an increase in the approval of prospective adopters and surpasses the sufficiency target for the year set at 25 approvals.

4.4 Early Permanency Placements were an initiative subject to the Children and Families Act (2014). Wolverhampton has made four early permanence placements via Foster for Adoption (FFA) / Concurrency during April 2016 to March 2017. Two children have been adopted by their dual approved carers, a third is awaiting a celebration hearing date and one child was rehabilitated home to parents.

4.5 The intention is to continue to recruit and assess suitable adopters in a timely manner who can meet the needs of Wolverhampton children with a care plan of adoption.

5.0 Links of children with prospective adopters

5.1 There have been forty-five links during 2016-2017.

5.2 The report outlines Wolverhampton Adoption Team's performance in detail in relation to the adoption scorecard. Despite a significant improvement in performance year on year, for 2013 to 2016 Wolverhampton was rated 'double red' for A1 and A2 indicator.

5.3 Wolverhampton continues to pursue adoption for what would be considered harder to place children. Continuing to secure appropriate adoptive placements may take longer given the ages and circumstances of many of the children. Ofsted judged that 'Wolverhampton achieves permanence through adoption for more 'harder to place' children than similar local authorities' (OFSTED 2017).

5.4 The City of Wolverhampton has always been ambitious about adoption, the use of a three-year average for the scorecard indicator presents a challenge for the authority, and Wolverhampton constantly balances the need for swift placement with not giving up on finding families for older children and children with complex needs. There are occasions

where timescales have been sacrificed in the interest of placing older children, sibling groups and children with complex needs. OFSTED judged; although the average length of time taken between children becoming looked after and moving into their adoptive families is above the national average, there is an improving picture (OFSTED 2017).

- 5.5. There have been three adoption disruptions pre-order in this reporting period involving a sibling group of two children who were aged five and six years old and a single female child aged three years old. The sibling group had significant challenges and despite adoption support being in place, the placement was unsustainable. Disruption meetings have been held and an action plan devised which is going to be shared with Wolverhampton Adoption Panel to inform practice.
- 5.6 In August 2015 the Government made a grant available to local authorities in England for the purposes of reimbursing eligible expenditure under the Adoption Inter-Agency Fee Grant, for hard to place children whose plan is adoption. This ceased in October 2016. During 2016-2017 Wolverhampton received £458,000.

6.0 Adoption order/s

- 6.1 Forty-six Adoption Orders have been granted during this reporting period, this is a decrease on the previous year. The delay is in part due to an increased number of birth parents contesting the Adoption Order, which results in extending court timescales causing a number of Adoption Orders being granted post March 2017.
- 6.2 OFSTED recommended that we ensure that once children are placed for adoption, there is no unnecessary delay in applying for the adoption order. We have had historical cases where extensive adoption support was required due to children's challenging behaviour in the adoption placement. This caused adopters delaying in applying for the adoption order and it resulted in three children waiting three years to secure permanence via an Adoption Order. We have found that where harder to place children are placed with adoption support provision identified early in the placement; adopters have lodged their application in a timely manner.

7.0 Adoption support

- 7.1 Wolverhampton Adoption Team recognises that adopted children and their families need to be able to access appropriate, timely and sensitive adoption support at any time in their lives. OFSTED inspectors highlighted 'that adopters valued the support and responsiveness of the adoption team' (OFSTED 2017).
- 7.2 Wolverhampton has undertaken 34 Assessment of Need assessments and applied for 30 therapeutic packages. Services have included Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service Assessments, Circle of Security therapeutic parenting course; therapeutic life story work and psychotherapy. Three monthly reviews are undertaken to identify family satisfaction and clinical outcomes. Adoption support social workers supported in excess of 60 children during 2016-2017 and three birth children. OFSTED commented that 'children and families receive good post adoption support' (OFSTED 2017).

7.3 In line with good practice the City of Wolverhampton Adoption team do not operate an adoption support waiting list, with phone enquires requesting adoption support responded to and a home visit arranged and an assessment of need completed within 20 days of the visit. Our intention is to continue to provide pre-order support however this remains a challenge due to resource capacity.

8.0 Children's Decisions

8.1 There has been an increase of "Should be Placed for Adoption" (SBPFA) decisions, with 62 during 2016-2017.

8.2 This reporting period has also seen an increase in older children with a plan of adoption from four children in 2015-16 to eighteen. Most of these children are placed in foster placements and have been with the same carers for some time. The 'carer' adoption according to research is on the increase and has many benefits for the children. Berry and Barth's (1990) research sees that children are less likely to experience disruption than children in non-foster parent adoption.

8.3 There has been a significant decrease in the number of children who have had their plans for adoption rescinded with five rescinded plans of adoption during 2016-2017. For one group of children, a sibling group of four their plan is long term fostering which will now mean that the sibling group will not be separated. The other rescinded plan was for a child with complex health needs. For all children who had become subject to placement order significant family finding had taken place prior to considering a change of plan. For most children, a change of plan to permanent long term fostering enabled children to be permanently fostered with their current carers.

9.0 Strategic issues and forward plans

9.1 Wolverhampton Adoption Team's objective will be to secure children's permanence in a timely manner once children are placed in adoptive placements.

9.2 Additionally Annex A's will be completed by ten weeks of placement when adopters can lodge their adoption order application and ten days following the ADM in fostering families.

9.3 Increase the recruitment of adopters who can consider offering Early Permanence Placements to children either through concurrency or foster to adopt.

9.4 Improve recruitment of adopters willing to adopt children deemed harder to place; including older children, children with disabilities and black and minority ethnic children and boys.

9.5 Wolverhampton will continue to lead the development of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) and continue to work with partner agencies in respect of developing the operating model and service delivery. Regionalising the service is consistent with the Government agenda and will widen the pool of adopters for Wolverhampton's looked after children and will enable us to provide a regional adoption support service which will continue to be accessible and responsive to the needs of adopters.

9.6 Furthermore the Government aspires to develop a system with a spirit of innovation and excellence at its heart; we have an opportunity to co design, streamline and enhance adoption services across the region.

10.0 Financial implications

10.1 The approved budget for the Adoption Service for 2016-2017 is £2.4 million.

10.2 There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report.
[NM/14082017/V]

11.0 Legal implications

11.1 The relevant legislation, statutory requirements and guidance is set out in the body of the report. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.
[TC/14082017/F]

12.0 Equalities implications

12.1 The City of Wolverhampton Adoption Team seeks to recruit and purchase adopters who are able to meet the needs of a diverse range of children. This includes children of different black and minority ethnic groups, both young and older children, male and female children. This is reflected within the recruitment strategy and all new policies have been subject to an equalities analysis.

13.0 Environmental implications

13.1 There are no environmental implications.

14.0 Human resources implications

14.1 Regionalisation will have human resources implications but the extent of these is not known at present. Human resources are being considered as part of the development of Adoption@Heart model.

15.0 Corporate landlord implications

15.1 There are no corporate landlord implications.

16.0 Schedule of background papers

16.1 Comments from the Children in Care Council.

16.2 Appendix one.