

TITLE OF REPORT: Gateshead Council Adoption Service Annual Report

REPORT OF: Interim Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the activity of the Adoption Service for the year ending March 2016 with particular reference to proposed developments in adoption.

Background

1. The Adoption Service produces an annual report of its activities and key developments to cover each financial year, 1 April to 31 March. A copy of the most recent annual report produced by the Service covering the year April 2015 – March 2016 is attached. This report is freely available to the public via the Council's website pages on adoption.
2. The report for April 2016 – March 2017 is due to be completed in early summer 2017.
3. The 2015/16 annual report provides details of the numbers of children successfully adopted during that period with an accompanying breakdown in terms of age and gender. There was an increase in the number of children matched to their adopters in comparison to the previous year, with a high proportion of children being matched to adopters recruited and assessed by Gateshead Adoption Team.
4. For the current year, April 2016 to the time of writing this report, 17 children have been successfully adopted with adoption hearings pending for a further four children. A further 14 children are also placed with their adoptive families awaiting adoption and the Service is currently family finding for 10 children.
5. The annual report for 2015/16 highlights some of the factors that had a bearing on both family finding and adopter recruitment during that year, such as the reduction in the number of Placement Orders for adoption that were granted by the courts.
6. The Service has been fairly consistent with regard to the number of enquiries in relation to adoption that it has attracted and an analysis of the figures from the past four years suggests that we have maintained our ability to attract enquiries from prospective adopters from across the whole of the north-east region.

7. The report also incorporates several positive comments from the recent Ofsted report of March 2016 in relation to various aspects of the adoption process and the support provided by the Service to adoptive families, both before and after the granting of the Adoption Order.
8. Feedback from adopters at various stages of the process continues to be positive. The level of adoption placement breakdowns of children placed by the Service continues to be extremely low, a rate of no more than one a year, and usually involving children with very complex needs and challenging behaviours.
9. Requests for adoption support from families continue to increase, partly as a reflection of the more complex needs and backgrounds of children being placed for adoption and increased public awareness of new initiatives such as the national Adoption Support Fund.
10. At the time of writing this report the pressure and demand on the Adoption Support Fund has been so great that a 'cap' of £5,000 per child/family has recently been introduced with local authorities expected to meet the costs for anything over this level or to match-fund.

Policy Context

11. The 2015/16 report draws attention to some of the proposed changes for the way adoption services could be delivered in the future. The publication in January 2016 of the Department for Education document 'Vision for Change', outlines an expectation for local authorities to move to a system by 2020 whereby adopter recruitment, matching and support will be delivered on a regional basis by a single organisation. Local authorities were also expected to demonstrate that they had plans in place by 2017 to evidence that locally they are working constructively towards achieving such an outcome.
12. The rationale is that operating at this larger scale will overcome the current challenges in the adoption system, lead to improved adopter recruitment, speed up the process of matching children with adoptive families and enable the provision of better adoption support across the region.
13. In the north-east region, five local authorities (Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton) and all the local voluntary agencies in the region have combined to set up a Regional Adoption Agency project Group (Tees Valley). This group has already undertaken some initial scoping and consultation and hopes to have an established Regional Adoption Agency for the Tees Valley area up and running at the earliest by the autumn of 2017.
14. The five local authorities of Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tyneside in conjunction with all the existing voluntary agencies in the region (ARC Adoption NE; After Adoption; Barnardos; and Durham Family Welfare) have also expressed an interest in working collaboratively together as a project group for the north of the region.

15. Newcastle Council is the lead agency for the latter group, and following the provision of a small grant for funding the work of the group and some consultative input from the DfE, this group is currently in the process of undertaking initial work in relation to the viability of establishing a Regional Adoption Agency – Adopt North East.
16. A board which includes Senior Officers from each of the local authorities and voluntary agencies has been established to oversee the work of the project. The board is assisted in its work by a project team and the project work will also be underpinned by input from a variety of work streams which will involve key stakeholders e.g. operational staff from each local authority and key agencies; adoptive parents etc.
17. The work streams will look at a range of issues pertinent to the establishment of a RAA such as the adoption journey for adopters and children; communication and engagement; business models; legal advice; finance; IT and performance; workforce and HR issues.
18. The group is currently exploring different delivery models for a new adoption agency, which could involve, for example, an agency delivered by one local authority on behalf of others, a joint venture between local authorities, or between local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. The work plan for the project board over the next few months is intended to encapsulate the following:
 - Awareness raising with key stakeholders
 - Formation and start of work stream groups to look at various aspects e.g. adoption journey, finance, IT, performance, workforce and HR, legal requirements.
 - Consultation and engagement with key stakeholders.
 - Analysis of feedback from consultation and work streams.
 - Options appraisals leading to a recommended delivery model.
 - Decisions by relevant parties in relation to proposed models.

Recommendation

It is requested that the Corporate Parenting Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the performance of the adoption service in 2015/6 and notes the implications for the service of future proposals to changes in the service delivery.

CONTACT: Elaine Devaney

EXTENSION: 2704