

**TITLE OF REPORT: Gateshead Council Adoption Service Annual Report**

**REPORT OF: Caroline O'Neil, Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report summarises the activity of the Adoption Service for the year ending March 2017 with particular reference to proposed developments in adoption.

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#### **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 2016 – March 2017 is attached. This report is freely available to the public via the Council's website pages on adoption.
2. The report for April 2017 – March 2018 is due to be completed in early summer 2018.
3. The 2016/17 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 a slight decrease 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 2017 to the time of writing this report, 19 children have been successfully adopted with adoption hearings pending for a further 9 children. A further 9 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 2016/17 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.

However for the current year, April 2017 to the time of writing this report enquiries have fallen which is in line with information provided by other local authorities to the Adoption Leadership Board.

7. 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.
8. 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 the national Adoption Support Fund.
9. The pressure and demand on the Adoption Support Fund has been so great that the 'cap' of £5,000 per child/family is to continue with local authorities expected to meet the costs for anything over this level or to match-fund.

### **Policy Context**

10. The 2016/17 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.
11. 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.
12. 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 April 2018.
13. Work in relation to the establishing a Regional Adoption Agency – Adopt North East (Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland and South Tyneside) is ongoing with proposals to be considered by Cabinet in February 2018 with a 'go live' date of October 2018.
14. 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 is underpinned by input from a variety of work streams which involve key stakeholders e.g. operational staff from each local authority and key agencies; adoptive parents etc.

15. The work streams are looking 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.
16. The group has explored different delivery models for the new adoption agency and the decision about whether the new agency is a joint venture between the local authorities or a hosted model is expected to be made by the end of the year/ early 2018.
17. The challenges for the adoption service going forward towards regionalisation are continuing to recruit adopters for older children with complex and challenging needs and sibling groups. Continuing to meet the increasing demand for post adoption support and managing the implications of the development of the Regional Adoption Agency (AdoptNE).

### **Recommendation**

It is requested that the Corporate Parenting Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the performance of the adoption service in 2016/17 and notes the implications for the service of future proposals to changes in the service delivery.

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