

TITLE OF REPORT : Case Study – Foster to Adopt

REPORT OF : Strategic Director - Care, Wellbeing and Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a brief summary of the experience of the Adoption Service to date in relation to “fostering to adopt”. The report includes feedback from the adoptive family with regard to their experience of fostering to adopt and an outline of the process in relation to the case.

Background

1. Under the Fostering for Adoption process adopters who have undergone an adoption assessment and been approved to adopt are given temporary status as foster carers for a specific placement. This would usually be in the case of a very young child or baby for whom the final plan is adoption and where the likelihood that this plan would be agreed by the court is extremely high.
2. This might include such situations as:
 - Where parents have had one or more children previously placed for adoption or other forms of permanent placement and the evidence strongly suggests that their circumstances have not changed and pose the same risks as for the previous children. Consequently, the Local Authority does not have a proactive plan to rehabilitate the child.
 - Where this is the first child, the circumstances of the parents and risks to the child are such that there is no proactive plan to place the child with birth parents or family members.
 - Where parents have indicated that they may want their child adopted but have not yet formally consented to this plan.

3. In relation to a foster to adopt placement it is essential that the Local Authority fully addresses all the issues with the birth parents and ensures they completely understand the actions being planned by the local authority and are consulted on their views of such a placement. Birth parents must also be informed that the local authority cannot prejudge the outcome of court proceedings and that until the court authorises the adoption placement, the placement of the child remains a temporary one made under fostering regulations.

Policy Context

4. The introduction of Fostering to Adopt was part of the Government's reform agenda. Regulation 25A of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 provides for the temporary approval of prospective adopters as foster carers for a named child by the Agency Decision Maker, (a senior manager in Care, Well-Being and Learning) where the Local Authority is satisfied that a placement with that person is the most appropriate for the child and in their best interests.
5. The Adoption Service continues to promote the concept of Fostering for Adoption to potential prospective adopters at an early stage, it needs to be borne in mind that Fostering for Adoption will not be suitable for every child, nor will it be appropriate for all adopters as it requires a high level of resilience, the emotional ability to deal with the potential of some degree of direct contact in the very early stages of a placement, the willingness to consider a meeting with birth parents, together with the ability to manage a considerably higher level of uncertainty up until the granting of the Adoption Order than is usual for the majority of prospective adopters. This is particularly pertinent given the recent increase in the level of challenges to placement orders/granting of adoption orders.
6. Therefore, in selecting children for Fostering for Adoption placements, it is essential that all the evidence indicates that the potential risk of disruption or termination of placement will be minimal, and that both the Fostering and Adoption Services receive as much advance warning as possible to explore possible placements, in order to properly brief and prepare prospective Fostering for Adoption carers.

Foster to adopt placements

7. Since the introduction of Foster for Adoption the Adoption Service has been able to offer seven foster to adopt placements and at the time of writing this report we have one current foster to adopt placement which is our first with an external agency, ARC. The background circumstances of each placement have been very different and the experience of the adopters involved to date has been varied, partly as a result of the changing view of the courts.
8. The Service continue to seek feedback from Foster to Adopt Families to ensure that we review our processes to better support these placements.
9. In terms of positive feedback; the Foster to Adopt Families found staff to be helpful, the joint visit by the child's social worker and the adoption social worker beneficial. Support from Fostering around how the placement would work was seen to be a good experience and financial support to the families who needed it was appreciated. Foster to Adopt Families have found attending the Loud & Clear music group an opportunity to meet other similar families and develop their support network.

10. The most positive feedback is the opportunity that these placements give adopters to parent a child from a very young age.
11. The issues which Foster to Adopt families reported that were not so positive are managing ongoing contact between the child and their birth family and needing to keep a diary. Attending Adoption Panel to be matched seemed 'artificial' when they had attended previously and had been caring for the child for some time. It was also suggested that some training for grandparents and family members would have been beneficial. This is something that is now discussed with prospective adopters during their assessment and an Evening Information Event is held.

Case Study (names have been changed for confidentiality)

12. Mary and Andrew are a young couple in their early thirties. They met 13 years ago at University and have been married for the past 9 years. Mary does not work and Andrew works as an accountant for a local company.

In 2009 following their marriage they decided to start a family but after many tests learnt in 2013 that they had unexplained infertility. The couple were understandably saddened but also a little frustrated by this diagnosis as they did not know whether to keep trying to conceive or look at alternative ways to become a parent.

They had long discussions about whether to try IVF and made an appointment to discuss this with professionals. At the same time, they attended an Adoption Information Evening.

After talking about it over a number of weeks they both decided that it would be 'a wonderful thing to adopt'.

13. In August 2014 the couple applied to Gateshead to adopt and attended preparation training sessions for adopters. Their assessment was completed and their approval as adopters for Gateshead for one child aged 0 to 2 years was ratified by the Agency Decision Maker in February 2015.

During their assessment Fostering to Adopt was discussed with the couple and they hoped to adopt either one child 0 -2 years or a sibling group 0-3 years and also be considered for a fostering to adopt placement. Following their approval as adopters the couple were selected for an inhouse match with a child in March 2015. The couple were successfully matched and Sam was placed with them at the end of April 2015 and adopted in September 2015.

14. In November 2016 the couple contacted the Adoption Service to enquire about adopting for a second time. Their Registration of Interest was received in January 2017 and the couple's assessment was updated. They were approved as second time adopters in May 2017. The couple's approval was for one child 0-2 years and again they did not want to rule out a fostering to adopt placement as they felt it would give a child the best start in life.

The couple stated in their assessment; *"It is difficult to remember what our lives were like before Sam moved in. He has changed lots of little things, but there is nothing that we miss from our childless days. We were content before we knew him, but are so very happy now that he is our son."*

15. The baby's birth mother, Amanda, had previously had extensive social work involvement with Children's Services. She was the mother of six children. Her eldest child resided with his maternal grandmother from birth under a family arrangement. The next three children came into foster care in October 2016 due to concerns about Amanda's capacity to safeguard and nurture her children. It was during the period of time that the three siblings were looked after that Amanda gave birth to her fifth child who was removed into foster care and an Interim Care Order was granted.
16. A psychological assessment was undertaken which concluded that Amanda had an affective disorder that compromised her ability to nurture and stimulate her children.
17. In February 2017 concerns emerged that the three siblings placed into care together had experienced sexual harm in their mother's care. Two of the three children made allegations that they were physically and verbally abused by their father which had caused them injury. A police investigation was undertaken.
18. A final hearing took place in June 2017 and Care and Placement Orders were granted for the children and a No Contact Order for the oldest child who was then placed in a specialist therapeutic residential placement. The next child down remains in foster care and the younger two were placed for adoption together in August 2017.
19. In July 2017 Amanda attended the civic centre and informed that she was pregnant with her sixth child. She discussed with the social worker relinquishing the baby and not wanting to 'fight' the Local Authority in care proceedings.
20. The Unborn Baby was subject to a child protection enquiry and made subject to a child protection plan with a Legal Gateway Meeting being held prior to birth. The outcome of the meeting was to remove the baby at birth, issue proceedings and place the baby in a foster to adopt placement. The sibling's adopters were approached but did not feel in a position to have another child.
21. A detailed report was presented to the Agency Decision Maker on 17 August 2017 requesting approval for Mary and Andrew as temporary foster carers on a Foster to Adopt basis and outlining the eventual plan of adoption for the baby.
22. Susie was born by caesarean section in August 2017 and following her birth, Amanda agreed Section 20. Susie was discharged from hospital into the care of Mary and Andrew, her foster to adopt carers and has remained in their care.
23. Susie had no further contact with her birth parents who disengaged with the social worker and did not attend any contact.
24. The couple received financial support via provision of a fostering allowance throughout the placement which ended when they were matched with Susie and the placement stops being Foster to Adopt and becomes an adoption placement.
25. During the early stages of the placement Mary and Andrew kept to the same routines and practices as would be expected of our Local Authority foster carers, e.g keeping a foster carer diary and being subject to social work visits.
26. Mary and Andrew stated; *'We met Susie within 24hours of her being born; we are the family she has known from birth. Our home is her home. She is settled and happy as part of our family. Our son Sam, adores her. Practically and emotionally she is our daughter, even if that is not yet legally the case'*.

27. A Placement Order giving permission for Susie to be placed for adoption was granted by the court in early November 2017 and on 15 November 2017 information about baby Susie and Mary and Andrew as prospective adopters for Susie was presented to Gateshead Council Adoption Panel. This was in order to ratify the adoptive match between the couple and baby Susie and to provide confirmation that the agency was giving its approval to the change from a foster placement to one of adoption, meaning baby Susie could now be deemed as being placed for adoption with Mary and Andrew. As soon as the couple were legally able they lodged their formal application with the court to adopt Susie and the Adoption Order was granted by the court on 23 March 2018.
28. Mary and Andrew have said in feedback that they initially felt shocked as they had not expected such a young child would be placed with them and that they only had a week to prepare for her arrival but with the support of family friends they got organised. They said that their experience of Foster to Adopt had been extremely positive but they acknowledge that it had been made easier for them due to the fact that there was no contact at all between Susie and her birth parents and so it did not feel like a foster placement.

Conclusion

29. Fostering to adopt is not without its challenges but the early months of a child's life are significant in that they lay the foundations for future development. Anything that can enhance these early opportunities and promote positive outcomes for children is to be welcomed. The achievement of the foster to adopt placements to date will have resulted in these children experiencing fewer moves and disruptions at a key stage in their early lives, being placed at a much earlier stage with their permanent family, and having the chance to jointly share more of their early history together with all the associated benefits this entails.
30. Mary and Andrew state that Susie; *'practically and emotionally she is our own daughter'* and *'we are the family she has known since birth'*.

Recommendation

It is requested that the Corporate Parenting Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the case study and the issues that it presents.

Contact: Debbie Wilkinson Extension: 2377