

Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING:	Early Years, Children and Youth Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel
MEETING DATE:	24 th September 2012
TITLE:	An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay
WARD:	ALL
AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM	
List of attachments to this report:	

1 THE ISSUE

1.1 This is a briefing for members on the proposals within the Department for Education document An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay, and an outline of the preparations the Council's Children's Service has made in anticipation of these, and further proposals to be published later in the year.

2 RECOMMENDATION

The Panel is asked to:

2.1 Note the briefing paper and preparations and actions taken by the Children's Service thus far.

2.2 Request a further report from the Divisional Director, Safeguarding, Social Care and Family Service detailing the actions to be taken to respond to the final proposals.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this paper. The Council's Adoption Service is provided within the existing resources of the Safeguarding, Social Care and Family Service. The Service will need to consider any financial implications arising from the final proposals.

4 THE REPORT

4.1 In the Action Plan for Adoption, the Government sets out its proposals for tackling delay in the adoption system. The plan outlines what the Government intends to do to accelerate the whole adoption process so that more children benefit from adoption and more rapidly. The Action Plan was informed by the work of a national Expert Working Group on Adoption.

4.2 The Government has announced that it will:-

- Legislate to reduce the number of adoptions delayed in order to achieve a perfect or near ethnic match between adoptive parents and the adoptive child
- Require swifter use of the national Adoption Register in order to find the right adopters for a child wherever they might live
- Encourage all local authorities to seek to place children with their potential adopters in anticipation of the court's placement order
- Radically speed up the adopter assessment process so that two months are spent in training and information gathering – a pre-qualification phase – followed by four months of full assessment
- Introduce a 'fast-track' process for those who have adopted before or who are foster carers wanting to adopt a child in their care
- Develop the concept of a 'national Gateway to adoption' as a consistent source of advice and information for those thinking about adoption

4.3 The Action Plan also sets out how the Government will measure improvements in tackling delay across the system, through a new performance scorecard. This includes:-

- Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)
- Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and matching with an adoptive family (days)
- Average length of care proceedings locally (weeks)
- Time taken from prospective adopters' registration of interest to decision of suitability to adopt (days)
- Time taken from receipt of application form to decision of suitability to adopt (days)
- Time taken from decision of suitability to adopt to matching with child (days)

4.4 The Action Plan also recognises that much more needs to be done nationally to improve the support that families receive after adoption, and to reach out to people who have never thought of adopting. It should be noted that post adoption support has been recognised as one of Bath and North East Somerset's strengths – and was judged as outstanding in the last Ofsted inspection of Adoption Services.

4.5 The Action Plan makes recommendations for better training and professional development for the social care workforce (building upon the work of the Social Work Reform Board and the recently launched College of Social Work), and supported the Family Justice Review suggestion that a better understanding of child development and the negative impacts of delay for children was an absolute requirement for all family judges.

4.6 The Action Plan also makes proposals for:-

- 4.6.1 A framework to support swift decision making – and guidance was implemented from 1st September 2012 removing the role of Adoption Panels in advising local authorities on the decision as to whether adoption is the best option for a particular child. This was felt to duplicate the Court process. This decision is now made by the Agency Decision Maker, and we have introduced the process for completing this and advising parties.
 - 4.6.2 Senior Managers formally reviewing progress with plans for all children – we have established a Permanency Planning Panel chaired by the Service Manager.
 - 4.6.3 Matching children with prospective adopters without delay – asserting that it is not in the best interests of children to introduce any delay at all into the adoption process in the search for a perfect or near perfect ethnic match when parents who are otherwise suitable are available and able to provide a loving and caring home for the child. The Government has announced that it intends to bring forward primary legislation to address these issues.
 - 4.6.4 Ensuring that local authorities extend their searches for suitable families as far as possible – we already make use of the South West Adoption Consortium and the national Adoption Register.
 - 4.6.5 Streamlining the assessment, training and recruitment process for prospective adopters – including the introduction of new national gateway to the adoption system, providing a central contact point and independent advice.
 - 4.6.6 Radically redesigning the training and assessment process through the introduction of a two stage process. For the majority of prospective adopters the first stage (pre-qualification) will be completed within two months and the second (full assessment) within four. There will be a fast-track process for people who have adopted before, or who are already approved foster carers who wish to adopt a child in their care.
 - 4.6.7 Improving the provision of adoption support – as outlined above, this is already a local strength and contributes to the recruitment of adopters and sustaining adoptive placements.
 - 4.6.8 Introducing a more rigorous inspection framework for adoption services, with a greater emphasis on the issue of timeliness, both for children and prospective adopters.
 - 4.6.9 Publishing Adoption Scorecards, with performance thresholds and plans for intervening to address underperformance in the adoption system.
- 4.7 The Safeguarding, Social Care and Family Service convened a small working group, chaired by the Divisional Director and comprising the Service Manager and Team Managers for the Children in Care and Moving on Team and the Family Placement Team, to review the Action Plan for Adoption and the report of the Expert Working Group: to consider our current practice, services and performance in relation to the findings and recommendations, and to take actions to respond to these. The Working Group has progressed actions to:-

- Review the number of children with adoption plans new and in the last 3 years: progress with adoptions and any breakdowns (nil)
- Review the Council's performance as reported in the Adoption Scorecard published in May 2012 (good)
- Introduce a Permanency Planning Panel to track progress with all cases (in operation)
- Work with the Courts to reduce delay (in place – Divisional Director and Senior Child Care Lawyer are members of the newly established Local Family Justice Board)
- Consider how to introduce the proposed two stage recruitment process – which will be challenging for a small unitary authority. To explore the case for entering into joint arrangements with a neighbouring local authority
- Introduce new arrangements for the scrutiny of adoption plans (introduced from 1st September 2012)
- Build upon the existing arrangements for post adoption support
- Enable and encourage staff to make use of recent research (in place via reflective practice workshops)

4.8 The Council has a strong Adoption Service and a Social Care Service judged to provide good outcomes for children in care – and these will provide the basis for progressing the proposals from this Action Plan for Adoption and proposals from the anticipated Children in Care publication due later this year.

5 RISK MANAGEMENT

5.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendation has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

6 EQUALITIES

6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed for the Adoption Service (Family Placement Team).

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 No direct consultation has taken place in respect of this briefing paper, but key staff have been involved in the Working Group.

8 ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN REACHING THE DECISION

8.1 Social Inclusion; Customer Focus; Young People.

9 ADVICE SOUGHT

9.1 The Council's Section 151 Officer, the Strategic Director of People and Communities Department, and the Chair of the Policy and Scrutiny Panel have had the opportunity to input to this report and have cleared it for publication.

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Background papers	
Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format	