

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Corporate Director of Children's Services

to
Cabinet
on
1st July 2014

Report prepared by: Sue Hadley, Head of Children's Services

Partners in Adoption Annual report

Department for People Scrutiny Committee – Executive Councillor:
Councillor Anne Jones

A Part 1 Public Agenda Item

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To report on the work of the Partners in Adoption Consortium for the year 2013/2014

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Annual report be noted.

3. Background

- 3.1 The provision, standards and operations of the adoption service is governed by:
- The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2005(amend 2013)
 - The Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (amendment) Regulations 2011 and the
 - Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
- 3.2 National Minimum Standard 25.6 states that the Executive side of the Local Authority should :
- a. receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency
 - b. monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users
 - c. satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.
- 3.3 Since 1999 Southend has been part of a tri-authority arrangement regarding the identification, support, training and matching of prospective adopters. In 2013 the consortium expanded to include Barnardos Voluntary Adoption Agency, in

line with Government advice and all partners entered into an updated Consortium agreement. The arrangement has therefore been in place with Thurrock and Havering Councils and Barnardos. Each year a report of the activity of the consortium is written and presented to the partner agencies. This year the report has been written by Southend Borough Council who chaired the Consortium during 2013/14.

4. Other Options

- 4.1 The functions undertaken by the consortium are statutory requirements. One other option would be for Southend-on-Sea to undertake these functions alone and to have a looser arrangement with other areas (adoption often takes place outside the immediate area where the child's birth parents live and so co-operative arrangements with other areas are necessary). This option has not to date been recommended for reasons of best value (functions are shared).
- 4.2 Following completion of the attached report, Havering informed the Consortium members of their intention to withdraw from the consortium with immediate effect in June 2014, and to belong solely to the London consortium. This was an unexpected move, having only recently signed up to the new agreement. At the point of this report being presented to Cabinet, we are in negotiations with Havering for a planned exit strategy and are looking with the remaining authorities as to the way forward.
- 4.3 We are exploring with other neighbouring authorities areas of work where joint initiatives could be undertaken and looking at other potential partners to join the existing consortium.
- 4.3 Outside of the Consortium arrangement, Southend during 2013/14 gave full consideration to forming a public services mutual VAA (a local authority trading company). Following this work, a decision was made that this was not a cost effective method of moving forward. Additional staffing funded through the Adoption Grants made available over the past three years has enabled the adoption service to undertake additional work which has brought income into the authority but which would have been lost if achieved through a trading company.

5. Reasons for Recommendations

- 5.1 The consortium annual report outlines the activities of the Consortium during the year and shows the level of activity undertaken by each agency in the period

6. Corporate Implications

- 6.1 Contribution to Council's Vision & Corporate Priorities

The Consortium report sets out the framework for its work. It directly supports the delivery of the Corporate Priority to 'improve outcomes for vulnerable children'.

6.2 Financial Implications

Each Authority within the consortium places an agreed amount into a central fund each year to allow for web-hosting, for advertising and for the annual conference and open evenings. The cost for 2013/14 remained at £4000, the same as for 2012/13. The financial implication of Havering leaving the consortium cannot at this stage be confirmed for 2014/15. However it does increase the risk of not meeting the service income target (see 6.8)

6.3 Legal Implications

None

6.4 People Implications

None

6.5 Property Implications

None.

6.6 Consultation

Due to changes in adoption legislation during 2013, ongoing consultation has been undertaken to ensure that new procedures not only meet the legislative changes but meet the needs of those families approaching Southend for adoption.

6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

The Consortium covers a diverse geographical area and enables a wider choice of families for Looked after Children in Southend-on-Sea being placed for adoption. Every effort is made to match children and adopters in relation to culture, ethnicity and religion, but such factors are only one element of the matching process and do not take priority over the overall ability of a prospective adopter to meet the needs of a child.

The departure of Havering from the Consortium will have an impact on the diversity of families available and will need to be closely monitored as decisions are made about the way forward.

6.8 Risk Assessment

The existing Consortium arrangement reduces the risk of not finding suitable adoptive families for children and the cost of purchasing expensive inter-authority placements. The impact on placement availability and cost of Havering leaving the consortium will need to be looked at closely, given that the two remaining local authorities have a similar ethnic make-up. The joining of Barnardos with the consortium will however offset some of this loss.

Given the withdrawal of Havering it is likely that in 2014/15 there will be an increase in the use of families from the National register, at a cost of £27,000 per

placement, however it is expected that this will be offset by additional family assessment being sold through the same process given our successful recruitment of adoptive families in Southend. There is a significant income target for the service as part of the 14/15 budget and this needs to be monitored to see if achieving this becomes problematic.

6.9 Value for Money

Effective quality assurance supports value for money within the service. The existing Adoption Consortium arrangement with Thurrock continues to be a no fee consortium which saves on the cost of inter-agency payments whilst giving Southend-on-Sea a wider choice of families. As stated above, this will potentially change with the exit of Havering from the consortium, but at this stage it is unclear as to the long term financial impact for Southend. There is a cost for Barnardos placements as they are a net provider of families and not of children.

The Consortium regularly reviews the value for money it provides which forms an integral part of the service planning process.

Timely adoption enables permanency for a looked after child and invariably does not lead to long term financial commitments unless required in specific circumstances. It improves the outcomes for children and avoids the cost of them being long term looked after.

6.10 Community Safety Implications

None

6.11 Environmental Impact

None

7. **Background Papers**

8. **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Partners in Adoption Consortium Annual report 2013/14



ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1ST APRIL 2013 – 31 MARCH 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This is the 14th annual report regarding the “Partners in Adoption” Consortium in accordance with the joint consortium agreement.
- 1.2. This Report covers the period 1st April 2013 – 31st March 2014.

2. Operational Matters

- 2.1. Quarterly meetings of the Management Committee were held throughout 2013/2014, with Southend holding the chair during this period.
- 2.2. The adoption social workers have continued to hold their quarterly meetings to address practice issues and potential matches. They attended joint exchanges for profiling our children waiting and they have offered joint training to our adopters through our regular support groups. The developments introduced last year within support groups with each authority running local support groups to meet the needs of those service users who cannot attend the joint consortium group have proved very successful and we have seen a rise in numbers attending Adoption support groups.

- 2.3 Southend have held responsibility for updating the Consortium Register during this period. The register has remained healthy and presently has 34 families waiting for placements; however a number of these are on reserve for linking with children. We have continued to see a very quick turnover of families coming through the register this year. This is a reflection of the speedier placement of children with families on the register.
- 2.4 The management team has seen some change throughout this period. Havering have a new Service Manager, Vanessa Strang and Team Manager, Carol Turton. The management of Thurrock & Southend has remained stable.
- 2.5 The Consortium has been joined this year by Barnardos Voluntary Adoption Agency. This led to the contracts being updated during the year. The consortium continues to be a no fee consortium between the three local authorities but full fees are paid with Barnardos.
- 2.6 Lyndsay Davison is retiring as the Adoption Panel Chair for Southend in April and will be replaced by Barbara Foster, who is an experienced ADM and chairperson. Thurrock will also be appointing a new chairperson at the same time.

3. Statistical Information

As At 31.3.14	<u>HAVINGING</u>	<u>SOUTHEND</u>	<u>THURROCK</u>
No. of Children placed	11	31	13
No. of Adopters Matched	14	24	11
No. of Adopters Approved	11	31	16
No. of Adopters Withdrawn	0	0	0
No. of Disruptions	0	0	1

No. of Interagency Matches			
Children	12	7	1
Adopters	14	11	5
No. of Children Placed with families from within the Consortium			
Havering family	4	4	1
Southend family	4	19	5
Thurrock family	1	1	7
No. of Children waiting for Placements	9	6 with Placement Orders (3 are linked) and all have identified potential families.	17

4. Adoption Consortium Website

There have been some difficulties with the hosting of the consortium website this year, leading to the current site being withdrawn and links to each local authority added. It is our aim during 2014/15 to ensure that the website is hosted by one of the three local authorities and that additional information is added to promote the working of Partners in Adoption.

5. Actions points from the period 2013/14

In May 2013, prior to the review of the full consortium contract, we undertook an extensive review of the Consortium activity between 2007 & 2011. The original agreement stated that each member authority would use their best endeavours to provide a minimum of ten prospective adopters annually to the consortium register. In the four year period reviewed, both Southend and Havering were able to meet this target. Although Thurrock did not quite meet the target, they also placed far less children than the other two authorities and therefore balanced out the interagency costs which would have been gained and paid in that period had interagency fees been paid within the consortium.

The numbers of adopters sold outside of the consortium remained very balanced between the three authorities.

5.1 The Partners in Adoption Consortium has maintained its ability to be a “no fee” consortium which is positive for each of its partner agencies. With changes in adoption legislation and the push by the Government to provide more adoptive families and to prevent delay in placing children for adoption, the report recognised that there would need to be more development work undertaken to look at areas such as:

- Formal concurrent planning – although this has occurred in a couple of cases, none of the partner agencies currently has a formal training or assessment programme for this within their current provision
- More varied information sessions on a monthly basis across the consortium (complete)
- Clear production of a children’s consortium register to ensure that where possible adopters can be identified at stage 1 of the procedure for specific children and can then be prioritised for assessment (now complete)
- Expanding the partners to include a Voluntary Adoption Agency (now complete)
- Review point at which adopters are used by partner agencies, with the possibility of adopters being transferred between agencies at the end of stage one where identified as a positive link to specific children. This could then include Barnardos.
- Produce a Consortium policy to underpin the agreement

5.2 The report concluded that It was clear that the consortium continues to be of positive benefit to all partners and recommended that we continue for a further three years, and aim to tighten further links within new legislative frameworks.

- 5.3 Following this review, the consortium agreement was updated and signed by each partner agency.
- 5.4 An Adoption Information Evening was held at the Orsett Hall for the national adoption week. Due to the holding of monthly information sessions in each area, this was not well attended this year and further discussion is required before the 2014 week to see how we can best recruit during this period in coming years.
- 5.5 New adoption legislation came into force in 2013, changing the process for the assessment and approval of adopters to a two stage process with tight timescales. This has also changed the way that we run information sessions, now required monthly and run in each of the three local authority areas. Barnardos continue to run their own information events.
- 5.6 Alongside this there have been changes to Government expectations regarding placing children sooner with their permanent family and the legislation made easier the concept of Fostering to Adopt. This is an area which has been hotly debated within the consortium this year and we continue to work on policies and procedures consortium wide to reflect this change. A presentation was given by Elaine Watkins from Southend who as part of the recent adoption grant funding has undertaken a research project into concurrent planning/foster to adopt, to see how this could be better managed within the consortium. This is an area which will be taken forward further in the coming year.
- 5.7 On 21st June 2013 The Annual Consortium Conference was held at Tickfields in Southend. Again this year both Adoption and Fostering Panel members and workers met for the day. The main speaker was Eadaoin Bhreathnach who delivered two sessions on Sensory Attachment Integration (SAI). This day proved very interesting and a lot of questions were raised. Feedback described the day as interesting, inspiring and thought provoking.

- 5.8 Following on from the conference, the full SAI training was undertaken in Southend with invites extended to all partner agencies within the consortium. This was well attended and should further improve the work and support undertaken by the adoption teams into 2014/15.
- 5.9 There has been considerable inter agency discussion this year on the impact of Special Guardianship (SGO) on the adoption and fostering services and on some of the court decision making in this respect. There is Government research due to be released in mid 2014 in respect of the longer term outcomes and impact of SGO this may well be an area for discussion at a future conference.
- 5.10 The Consortium Christmas party saw nearly 200 people attending. This proved a well received event involving adults; birth children and adopted children.
- 5.11 The linking meetings, across the Consortium, where decisions are made as to the best family for a child to be matched with for adoption, have for a number of years been undertaken with one member from another authority attending each other's linking meeting. It has been agreed this year that these will now be internal meetings due to the many legislative changes which have taken place and the extended pressures placed on local authorities. This appears at this point to be working well.
- 5.12 Post Adoption services have continued to grow throughout the past year. There has been a variety of requests for support and this is an area which will need to be constantly monitored further over the coming year to ensure that as a consortium we have sufficient trained staff to deal with the requests.
- 5.13 The three Senior Managers have met twice this year to look at strategic objectives for the Consortium and this will continue in the current year to ensure that policies and procedures are in place which consolidates consortium working.

6. Adoption Scorecard

6.1 The adoption scorecard for 2010-2013 was published in January 2014. This identifies performance in two key areas:

- Average time between a child entering care and moving into an adoptive family (a)
- Average time between the making of a Placement Order and a child being matched with an adoptive family. (b)

6.2 The chart below shows the performance of the partner local authorities:

	(a) As above	(b) As above
Targets set by Gov	608	182
National Average	647	210
Southend	639	183
Havering	759	249
Thurrock	784	323

6.3 As a consortium we have looked at the impact of the adoption grant money on timescales and recruitment. It is clear from each authority that the grant money impact should begin to show over the next few years scorecards.

7. Conclusion

6.1 The past year has been a busy one for adoption, with major legislative changes and the joining of Barnardos with the consortium. Each partner has successfully implemented the changes and is working hard to reduce timescales in line with Government expectations.

6.2 We have set the consortium a number of targets for the coming year:

- Produce consortium policy and procedures, particularly in respect of concurrent planning and fostering to adopt
- Update the consortium website, to be hosted in house
- Look at SGO research and the impact on partner agencies
- Monitor timescales to meet legislative changes
- Monitor the adopters register and alongside the newly produced children's register
- Regulate further practice between partner agencies generally
- Look at the use of adoption parties

6.3 Thurrock will take over responsibility for chairing and minuting the management meetings from April 2014. They will also maintain the consortium Adoption Register during the period 1st April 2014 – 31st March 2015.

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