



Children's Services, Education and Skills

Annual report on the Adoption Service in York: April 2013 - March 2014

1. Background

The Adoption National Minimum Standard 25.6 requires that the Executive of the local authority receives written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every 6 months. This report sets out a summary of the work of the Adoption Service for the period 1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014, and supplements the report previously submitted covering the period April-September 2013. The attached Appendix provides data on activity over the year. The Adoption Service was last inspected by Ofsted in January 2010 and was rated as Good overall with Outstanding for 'Helping children make a positive contribution'

2. Summary of main issues

Improvement to the performance of adoption services nationally remains a high priority for Government. The Adoption Reform agenda is focused on increasing the number of families available for children with adoption plans and decreasing the time taken to place these children. Regulatory changes have been introduced to speed up court processes for children and the recruitment process for adopters.

3. Purpose of this report

The purpose of the report is to consider the activity of York's adoption service in relation to the National Minimum Standards; the progression of children's care plans; the provision of adoption support to those seeking to adopt and to those affected by adoption. It identifies any significant trends in adoption practice and ways in which York continues to meet the changing requirements of an adoption service.

4. National Picture

4.1 The work of City of York Council as an adoption agency is governed by the Adoption and Children Act 2002. A full revision of the statutory adoption guidance was issued by the Department for Education in February 2011; part of the Statutory Guidance relating to prospective adopters was revised and implemented on 31st July 2013, and further revisions are expected in 2014.

4.2 Statutory guidance does not have the full force of statute but should be complied with unless local circumstances indicate exceptional reasons which justify a variation. Revised Adoption National Minimum Standards were published in March 2011 and, together with the Adoption Regulations, form the basis of the regulatory framework which governs the conduct of adoption

4.3 Steps have also been taken to reduce delay for children. Courts have introduced a new care monitoring system to speed up care proceedings and since the Children And Families Act 2014 was implemented in April 2014 it is mandatory for all proceedings to be completed within 26 weeks (unless an extension of 8 weeks is agreed by the court) Local authorities are encouraged to consider the use of 'Fostering for Adoption' placements, whereby approved adopters are also approved as temporary foster carers, so that a child can be placed prior to the court granting a Placement Order, to restrict the number of placement moves for a child.

4.4 A new, shorter two-stage training and assessment approval process for prospective adopters was introduced on 1st July 2013. The process comprise a two month initial training and preparation stage (stage one) and a four month assessment stage (stage two). Stage one commences when a prospective adopter registers his/her interest with an adoption agency, and ends with the agency informing the prospective adopter whether or not they can proceed to stage two; the timescale for this is 2 months. Stage two commences when the prospective adopter lets the agency know they want to proceed to stage two (the prospective adopter can take a break of up to 6 months between the stages); the timescale

for stage two is 4 months from start to the Agency Decision Maker deciding that applicants be approved as prospective adopters. There is fast-track procedure for approved foster carers and previously approved adopters, who receive a tailored assessment and any necessary additional training.

4.5 In January 2013 the DfE published 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes' which stated the intention to devise legislation that would give the Secretary of State the power to require local authorities to outsource the recruitment and approval of adopters. This power has been included in The Children and Families Act 2014, which came into force on 1st April 2014.

4.6 The DfE provided local authorities with financial support for greater investment in adoption in the form of a one-off £150 million Adoption Reform Grant for 2013/14 (separate funding was made available for the development of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs). The grant was in two parts: Part A which was not ring fenced, for which City of York was awarded £279,193 and Part B, which was ring fenced, for which York received £160,880.

4.7 The Department for Education recently published the latest report on the quarterly survey on adoption activity completed by local authorities. The key findings were that over the period concerned, Jan 2013 – Dec 2013,

- the number of new decisions that a child should have a plan for adoption fell by 21%;
- the number of new Placement Orders fell by 29%; the number of adoption orders rose by 23%;
- the time from entering care to placement with adoptive parents decreased by 16%;
- The number of adopters approved by local authorities increased by 27%;
- the proportion of applications approved by local authorities within 6 months of application increased by 11 % (from 36% to 47%);

- the proportion of approved adopters matched within 6 months of approval increased by 2% (73% to 75%).

York's Adoption Service

5. Overview

5.1 Adoption work in York is located within two main areas; the Safeguarding children's social work teams, who complete the necessary internal and legal processes when adoption is identified as a suitable plan for a child; and the Adoption team, where adoption social workers assess an individual's suitability to be approved as an adopter and help children's social workers identify a suitable adoptive family for a child. Adoption support is provided jointly by the Adoption team and the Referral and Assessment team.

5.2 In the restructure of Children's Social Care services in 2013, the designated role of Adoption Service Manager became operational in July 2013. Two additional social worker posts were added to the Adoption team in Autumn 2013, so that the team now consists of 6 full time equivalent posts, including an Advanced Practitioner.

5.3 Through a service level agreement, After Adoption Yorkshire, an independent voluntary adoption agency provides support to all those living in the city affected by adoption. Alongside direct work with adoptive families, this agency provides support to birth relative, during and after the adoption process, specialist counseling and access to adoption records and intermediary services for adopted adults. There is a high take up of this service, such that part of the Adoption Reform Grant was used to purchase additional hours in 2013/14. There is also a service level agreement with the Yorkshire Adoption Society to provide advice and information for those enquiring about inter-country adoption.

5.4 York continues as an active member of the Yorkshire Adoption consortium . A proportion of the adoption reform grant

has been pooled by all members in the consortium to develop recruitment ; fostering for adoption across the region.

6. Services for children

6.1 Children's social workers and colleagues in the Looked After Children's team work together to help children understand, in an age appropriate way, that an adoptive family is being sought for them, and the reasons for this. All the children will have a health action plan, regularly reviewed and updated and those of nursery or school age have a personal education plan, so that planning keeps pace with a child's changing needs. CAMHS provide input to foster carers to support them in preparing children to move to an adoptive placement. The children all have Life Story books, explaining their past in an age appropriate way that they take with them into their new families.

6.2 Family finding meetings are set up as soon as the plan for adoption has been agreed by the Agency Decision Maker, a senior manager in Children's Social Care, so that there is no delay in seeking an adoptive family for a child. A social worker from the adoption team works with the child's social worker to identify a suitable adoptive family. The child's details are entered on the local Consortium database, and the Adoption Register to ensure access to all available families. The child's needs are carefully considered against identified prospective adopters to ensure the best possible match.

7. Performance for York children

Performance Indicators from National Minimum Standards

7.1 When adoption has been identified as a child's permanence plan at a statutory Child Care Review, within 2 months of this the Agency Decision Maker should decide whether the child should be placed for adoption.

7.2 This happened for 9 out 11 children.

7.3 A match with a suitable prospective adopter should be recommended by the adoption panel within 6 months of this decision.

7.4 For these 11 children, this happened for 4; 4 were not matched within 6 months; and another 3 have had plans for less than 6 months on 31st March.

For the 5 children who had plans for adoption agreed in the previous year and were matched this year, 3 were matched within 6 months

7.5 Where a birth parent has requested that a child aged under 6 months be placed for adoption, a proposed placement with a suitable prospective adopter should be recommended by the panel within 3 months of the agency deciding that the child should be placed for adoption:

7.6 1 child, out the 11 with a plan for adoption agreed this year, was a relinquished child who was placed with adopters within 2 months.

8. Performance Indicators from the 'Adoption Scorecard'

8.1 The DfE collects information on the performance of all 152 local authorities in a national 'Adoption Scorecard' drawn from data about children who have been legally adopted. The Adoption Scorecard was update on 14 January 2014 to include data related to the year from April 2012 to March 2013. The scorecard figure is based on the average over the 3 years 2010-2013.

8.2 The 3 main scorecard indicators are:

8.3 Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted. The target for was 20 months (indicator 1).

8.4 York achieved a positive outcome in relation to the threshold for placing children with adopters within 20 months.

8.5 Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a

match to an adoptive family. The target was 6 months (indicator 2)

8.6 York's performance fell just outside the threshold by an average of 10 days, in relation to the matching of children within 6 months of a court's decision about adoption. This was a reflection of the challenge of finding matches for a small group of children, which impacts upon the overall average.

8.7 Percentage of children who wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

8.8 66% in York , compared with a national average of 55 %. This ranks York 14th out of 152 local authorities in England.

8.9 Only 36 local authorities met thresholds for both of these indicators and 65 authorities failed to meet either thresholds.

8.10 The scorecards timescales become increasingly ambitious each year:

Financial years	Indicator 1 threshold (months)	Indicator 2 threshold (months)
2010 to 2013	20	6
2011 to 2014	18	5
2012 to 2015	16	4
2013 to 2016	14	4

9. Other indicators collected on the scorecard include:

9.1 Percentage of children leaving care with adoptions orders

York achieved adoption for 19% of children in the care system, compared with a national average of 13%. This ranks York 16th out of 152 local authorities in England.

9.2 Average time between becoming looked after and adoption

York's average timescale from looked after date to adoption date of children in the care system was 530 days, compared with a national average of 647 days. This ranks York 17th out of 152 local authorities in England.

9.3 Average time between placement order and matching for adoption

York's average timescale from placement order date to match for adoption was 192 days, compared with a national average of 210 days. This ranks York 65th out of 152 local authorities in England.

10. Services for adopters

10.1 The adoption team recruits, prepares and assesses prospective adoptive families and seeks suitable children from across the region and country to match with these families. The team, in conjunction with colleagues in North Yorkshire and East Riding, run monthly information sessions providing general information about adoption for all those who enquire about adoption to any of the 3 agencies. Following this enquirers then decide with which (if any) adoption agency they wish to progress their interest.

10.2 Those who wish to take their interest further with York have a home visit to explore their circumstances and what adoption involves. They are then sent a copy of this initial assessment, plus a Registration of Interest form. If the initial assessment has been positive, an adoption social worker is allocated to undertake stage one of the assessment process. If this is successfully completed they then progress to stage two, during which a comprehensive assessment is undertaken and written up as a prospective adopter report (PAR). This report is presented to Adoption Panel, who recommended to the Agency decision Maker whether the applicant would make a good adoptive parent. Supervision and support is provided by the adoption social worker through the matching and placement process, onto adoption order, and beyond as required. The positive working relationships established enable adopters to

seek advice and support from the adoption team in parenting their children throughout their childhood.

10.3 From 1st July 2013, the process for approving prospective adopters was revised to a shorter two stage process. The expectation is that the new application and assessment process will be completed within 6 months. It is expected that stage one will take no longer than 2 months and stage two will take no longer than 4 months.

11 Performance indicators for adopters

11.1 Adoption scorecard

This was updated on 14 January 2014; the data related to the year from April 2012 to March 2013:

11.2 Percentage of adopters approved within 6 months:

None were within 6 months (the 6 month timescale was only introduced, along with the new two stage process, on 1st July 2013). All were approved within 9 months.

For those approved in year from April 2013 to March 2014, 61% were approved within 6 months. Out of these, 100% of those who applied after 1st July 2013 (when the timescale became 6 months) were approved within 6 months.

11.3 Percentage of adopters matched with a child within 3 months

None were within 3 months, though 100% of matches for adopters in year from April 2012 to March 2013 were within 3-12 months of approval.

York's adopters are mainly matched with children from other local authorities, therefore matching is an inter agency process,

requiring the identification of a potential child and exploratory meetings before a matching report is progressed to panel. This is a challenge to achieve within a 3 month timescale.

In the year April 2013 to March 2014,

29% of matches were within 3 months of approval;
64 % within 3-6 months; and
7% within 7 months.

12. Other indicators

12.1 two stage assessment process timescales

This was introduced in July 2013. Stage one should take 2 months and stage two 4 months; those who have previously adopted or fostered do not have to complete stage 1

80% of families applying after 1st July 2013, who had to complete stage one, did so within 2 months; 10% were still in progress at the year end and 10% took longer than 2 months, due to the delay in getting checks back from other countries.

Of those in stage two, 60% completed this within 4 months. 40% were still in progress at year end, but on target for completion within 4 months.

13. Recruitment

13.1 Regulatory requirements include the need for a strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet the needs of children waiting. City of York previously approved around 12 prospective adoptive families each year. The recruitment target for the year 2013/14 was to increase this by 50% to 18 prospective adoptive families. This has been achieved.

14. Adoption Support

14.1 The adoption team provides general adoption support to families living in the City. These can be families approved by York, or families approved by other adoption agencies, with children placed by other local authorities. Three years after the making of an adoption order, York becomes responsible for addressing any adoption support needs these families may have. The Advanced Practitioner in the adoption team acts as the Adoption Support Service Adviser, offering general support and advice to adoptive parents and also signposting to other agencies. The adoption social workers run regular 'drop in' events for adoptive parents and children, which provide informal training and advice, alongside offering opportunities for adopters to meet each other and build up support networks.

14.2 Some adoptive families need significant levels of individual support. Often these are families not previously known to the adoption service, who have been approved by other adoption agencies operating in the city, or have moved into the city from other areas. Some of the more complex situations involve older children and young people, some of whom are on the edge of care and who were placed some years ago. These requests for adoption support are assessed by the Referral and Assessment team in collaboration with the Adoption Team's Advanced Practitioner, or another member of the team. If ongoing work is required, the family will be allocated a worker from the Children in Need team, to work alongside a member of the adoption team.

14.3 There is a service level agreement with the charity After Adoption Yorkshire, who provide independent support and advice to all in York affected by adoption.

15. Finance

15.1 As required by Standard 20 of the National Minimum Standards for adoption, a qualified accountant oversees the financial arrangements and management of the service.

15.2 Due to the compact geography of the city, children from York are rarely placed with adopters approved by City Of York. In order

to preserve the anonymity of the placement, York children are usually placed with adoptive families purchased from other adoption agencies. This cost of these placements is partially funded by the fees paid by other local authorities to place children with adopters approved by City of York.

15.3 Between April 2013 and March 2014,

For York's children placed for adoption

- 2 children were placed with adopters approved by City of York;
- York children were placed with families approved by local authorities
- children were placed with adopters approved by a VAA.

City of York adopters offered homes to

- 2 York children;
- 16 children from other local authorities

15.4 In recognition of the increased expectations on the adoption service, part of the Adoption Reform Grant for 2013-14 has been used to increase the adoption team staff compliment by 50%. A separate post of Adoption Service Manager has also been established.

16. Recommendation

16.1 The Executive notes the information about the adoption agency in the financial year 2013-2014

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