

# FAMILY SERVICES

## Adoption Agency Annual Report for the period 2009-10

### 1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The annual Adoption Agency report is for a wide audience of relevant people including Elected Members, service users, staff and colleagues from other agencies. The report provides information about the activity and outcomes achieved in 2009-10 by the service and what is planned for the year 2010-11.
- 1.2 The work of the Wakefield Council Adoption Agency is governed by statutory regulations, which require that Elected Members be informed of the Agency's activity on an annual basis. This is also an important part of Elected Members fulfilling their responsibilities as Corporate Parents for looked after children in Wakefield MDC.
- 1.3 Alongside receiving the Annual Report, Elected Members are also asked to give executive approval to the Statement of Purpose for Adoption Services, which is updated each year.
- 1.4 The annual report informs Elected Members about
  - National developments in Adoption issues
  - Activity, performance and developments in the Adoption Service in 2009-10.
  - Future plans for the Adoption Service in 2010-11.

### 2 National developments and historical context

#### 2.1. The Adoption and Children Act 2002

- 2.1.1 The Adoption and Children Act received Royal Assent in November 2002 and has been implemented in phases since then. This legislation was a radical overhaul of adoption law, modernising the legal framework for both domestic and intercountry adoption and replaces the Adoption Act of 1976. The 2002 Act has provided the framework for a new approach to adoption and has been complemented by secondary legislation.
- 2.1.2 In June 2003, regulations restricting adoption from overseas were implemented so that there were additional safeguards and controls about this route of adoption. Regulations about Adoption Support Services were put in place in October 2003 to enhance responsibilities to provide support services for families after adoption. In April 2004, the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) was introduced and is a means by which applicants to adopt can appeal if their application is not approved.
- 2.1.3 Full implementation of the Adoption and Children Act took place in December 2005 and Local Authorities received briefings and guidance about changes and new responsibilities in the legislation and practice. Significantly, Special Guardianship was recognised as an alternative option where Adoption was not possible.
- 2.1.4 Practice guidance on assessing the support needs of adoptive parents was published by DCSF in 2008, recognising the importance of financial and practical support.
- 2.1.5 The *Review of the Child Care Proceedings System in England and Wales* was issued jointly by the Department for Constitutional Affairs and the Department for Education and Skills, in May 2006. The Public Law Outline, (the PLO) issued in April 2008, was a key reform arising from this review.
- 2.1.6 The PLO introduced a simpler, more streamlined process designed to minimise unnecessary delay, with greater emphasis on case management and advocacy preparation. It shifted the balance from the emphasis on a specific target time for completion of cases, to a more

flexible requirement for cases to proceed at a speed appropriate to meet the needs of the individual child, known as 'Timetable for the Child'.

- 2.1.7 This obviously affects the journey of looked after children through the court system and was revised on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010.
- 2.1.8 The Children and Young Person's Act 2008 continued the emphasis on family-based, long-term and permanent placement arrangements for children, which are important aspects of the Adoption process.
- 2.1.9 There has been no further primary or secondary legislation affecting adoption.

## **2.2 The Adoption Register**

- 2.2.1 In April 2004, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) was awarded the contract to administer the National Adoption Register.
- 2.2.2 There have been positive changes to improve the Register and make it primarily a tool for providing choice of suitable adopters for children when needs cannot be met locally or within the region.

## **2.3 Adoption Support Services (ASS)**

- 2.3.1 Following the implementation of the Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (England) Regulations 2003 there is a legal duty on the local authority to provide adoption support services to both adoptive families and birth parents.
- 2.3.2 Regulation about Adoption Support recognises the importance of adoptive families – parents and children – and birth families having access to support and guidance services following an adoption and particularly for this to be successful for the children involved. Each child, where adoption is the plan, has an Adoption Support Plan which is reviewed annually and should set out any help needed and how this will be achieved.
- 2.3.3 The Local authority has a responsibility to provide support and advice to children adopted for the duration of their childhood if they are placed and remain within the Wakefield District. If the children are placed in the area of another local authority then Wakefield is the responsible authority providing adoption support for a period of three years after the adoption order has been made. Services can be provided directly or commissioned and other agencies, such as Health Services, have an important contribution to make in the Adoption Support plans.

## **3 Inspection**

- 3.1 Regulation requires that all Adoption Agencies are inspected every three years. The Commission for Social Care Inspection has undertaken inspections in 2004 and 2007. This responsibility transferred to Ofsted in April 2007.
- 3.2 Ofsted carried out their first inspection of Wakefield's Adoption Agency in January 2009. This was graded as 'Satisfactory'.
- 3.3 A comprehensive Adoption Improvement Plan was put in place to ensure that all observations from inspection were fully responded to, with the intention of improving the grading for the next inspection.
- 3.4 This included instituting a revised process for ensuring the timeliness and quality of Child Permanence Reports (which are the reports which relate to each of the children who are proposed for adoption); improving the information held on Adoption Panel members' files and updating our Children's Guide to Adoption.

- 3.5 All of the actions in the plan have been completed.
- 3.6 In 2009 the DCSF (as was) published a draft revised set of National Minimum Standards for Adoption, the standards against which we are inspected. The new standards seek to amalgamate the existing two sets of standards and to reflect changes in law, practice and expectation since the original standards were published in 2000. Consultation on these standards closed in December 2009.

#### 4 Agency Activity for 2009-10

- 4.1 The agency statistics for the periods 2009-10 provide information about the number of children adopted and prospective adopters approved in this period.
- 4.2 In 2009-10 22 out of 302 eligible Looked After children (i.e. those looked after for more than 6 months) were either adopted or made subject to Special Guardianship Orders (an alternative form of 'permanence' for young people). This represents 7.3% of the looked after population.
- 4.3 This is a reduction in the percentage achieved in 2008-9, which was 8.9%. However, as the number of looked after children also grew from 269, it only represents two less children being adopted.
- 4.4 The reason for this is surmised to be the introduction of the Public Law Outline (see above), which early indicators suggest has increased the average amount of time children spend in legal proceedings. This would be very unfortunate as it was meant to have the opposite effect.
- 4.5 As this indicator is not part of the National Indicator Set we no longer have information on how our performance compares with other local authorities and there is no 'best performance' to measure ourselves against. However, anecdotal information suggests others have had the same experience.
- 4.6 The ages of the 18 children actually adopted were as follows

<b>Ages</b>	<b>Number</b>
Under age of 1	2 children
Aged 1 to 4	12 children
Aged 5 to 9	4 children
<b><u>Total</u></b>	<b>18 children</b>

- 4.7 The results of adoption recruitment and training from 1/4/2009 to 31/3/10 show:
- 110 Initial enquiries
  - 29 Initial visits
  - 10 formal applications
  - 10 adopters approved
  - 8 matches approved
  - 17 Wakefield children placed for adoption.

The reasons for an enquiry not culminating in approval included counselling-out, not meeting criteria (e.g. removal due to unsuitability following formal checks on applicants) and applications withdrawn by applicant.

- 4.8 The 'Letterbox' scheme (see below) has been providing a service for 245 families during 2009-10.

## 5 Staffing and Service Developments

- 5.1 The service is now fully staffed with the exception of one adoption support social worker post.
- 5.2 Two special events for local adopter and children were held and both were a success. A celebration day held in August was attended by 20 adoptive families. A Christmas party for adoptive families and children was held in early December at a soft play venue and was attended by 25 adoptive families.
- 5.3 The area of adoption/post-adoption support has seen continued significant change and growth since the appointment of the Principal Post Adoption Support Social Worker in 2007. In 2009-10 direct support was provided to over 20 families. Some of this work was time limited and some will be long term support.
- 5.4 From April 2009 to March 2010 the majority of adoption support workload has been providing direct social work support and intervention to adoptive families in the district. This often included co-working with other teams.
- 5.5 Co-working with colleagues from Family Services has worked well and, as in the previous year, all adoptive families who have requested an assessment of their adoption support needs have received a service and subsequently the majority of cases have been closed.
- 5.6 The Adoption Support Social Worker and Letterbox Co-ordinator continue to be regular attendees at the regional consortium letterbox meeting three times per year to discuss good practice. They both also attend the Yorkshire and Humber Post Adoption Network meeting twice a year to share good practice and ideas around the development of the service with other Local Authorities and Voluntary Agencies.
- 5.7 Further services for Adoption Support continued to be provided through an agreement with After Adoption (Yorkshire), which includes independent support for birth parents and counselling work about access to adoption records for adopted adults who request access to information relating to their backgrounds and official records.
- 5.8 This contract was formally re-tendered during 2009-10 and After Adoption (Yorkshire) were successful in retaining the contract for 2010-11
- 5.9 The role of the three Children and family workers was reviewed and focussed more towards fostering. However, they still undertake direct work within adoptive families and co-facilitate the adoption support groups. These are informal groups, open to all adoptive parents, which meet bi-monthly. The groups are co-facilitated with After Adoption Yorkshire and provide a forum for adopters to raise any issues or questions they may have related to the care of adopted children. External speakers are also invited to address specific aspects of adoption.
- 5.10 Nick Hughes continued in the role of Independent Chair of the Adoption Panels.
- 5.11 Quarterly meetings continued with Panel Chairs, Panel Advisors, Agency Decision Maker (Service Director), Service Managers and Team Managers to facilitate an overview of both panel and service activities and improvements.
- 5.12 During the period from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 27 panels were convened and all were quorate. During the period the panels approved 33 children with a plan for adoption, approved 10 sets of adopters, and approved 28 children (including sibling groups) for a match. The panels also received regular updates on children and also considered changes of plan for three children who had a plan for adoption. All decisions were confirmed by the Agency Decision Maker within the prescribed timescale.

- 5.13 Wakefield has continued to be a member of the Yorkshire Adoption Consortium which comprises a number of local authorities: Leeds, Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, North Yorkshire, Barnsley, Hull, York, East Riding, Sheffield, NE Lincs, Doncaster and N. Lincs. Voluntary agencies contribute families for inclusion on the consortium database including Action for Children, Catholic Care and Adoption Barnardos Yorkshire. In addition there are associate members who are: BAAF, SSAFA, After Adoption Yorkshire and Adoption Register for England & Wales.
- 5.14 The Adoption Service policies and procedures, which are held on a separate website accessible by staff, adopters and the public, were fully reviewed and updated in February 2010.

## **6 Complaints**

- 6.1 In the period of 1st April 2009 to 31 March 2010 there were two complaints about the Adoption Service. One came from a prospective adopter and was not upheld. A second one came from an adoptive family who had adopted a Wakefield child a number of years ago. Much of this complaint was historical and was partially upheld. The process for disseminating learning points from complaints remains in place.

## **7 Financial Information**

- 7.1 In the financial year 2009-10 the gross revenue cost of adoption services was £863,306 against a budget of £801,357. Of this:
- £288,089 was spent on staffing,
  - £240,067 on Adoption Allowances (the weekly allowances paid to adoptive parents to meet children's assessed needs),
  - £101,643 on transport, supplies and services,
  - £187,171 on third party payments, (comprising £102,555 on agency adoptions which have a set fee structure and are the fees paid to other agencies where Wakefield children are placed with their adopters. £84,616 on adoption support including external contracts and internal adoption support plans.
  - £46,357 was spent (net) on general service costs and internal support services, which are the charges levied by other internal departments such as Finance and Human Resources.
  - The balance was made up by minor income.

## **8 Future Plans**

- 8.1 The greatest challenge for the Adoption Service is to recruit sufficient numbers of adopters to be able to provide permanent placements for the looked after children for whom that is an option, the numbers of which have been rising in Wakefield since 2008. The challenge is compounded by the need to do that in a cost efficient manner.
- 8.2 Added to this, is the formal LAC 'sufficiency duty' from April 2011 which will require local authorities to demonstrate that they are able to provide sufficient placements to meet the needs of the local population.
- 8.3 At present we initially source adopters 'in-house' from those who are assessed and approved by Wakefield MDC. However, it has always been necessary to source a number of adopters from our local Consortium and from both Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies further afield. This is usually because the net has to be cast more widely to find adopters for children with particular needs, sibling groups and those who have to be adopted out of the area for specific reasons.
- 8.4 To ensure that we are approaching this task correctly, a Placements Strategy will be produced in 2010. This will be combined with a revised LAC Strategy and will be based on a wide assessment of the needs and profile of Wakefield's current and anticipated cohort of

looked after children. From this we will identify where we will source adopters from with consideration of both the cost and timescale for each option.

- 8.5 From this Adoption Recruitment Strategy will be revised to target our own recruitment more specifically.
- 8.6 A new local Performance Indicator will be introduced in 2010-11 which measures the number of adopters approved within 6 months of training.
- 8.7 The service will also prepare for its next inspection and for the implementation of the revised National Minimum Standards.

Simon Hall  
Placements Service Manager