

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**8 NOVEMBER 2022****REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES****LEICESTERSHIRE ADOPTION AGENCY STATUTORY REPORT****Purpose of Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members with an overview of the activity of the Adoption Agency during 2021-22.

Background

2. Under the 2011 National Minimum Standards 25.6, all Adoption Agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive regarding the activity and work of the Adoption Agency and Adoption Panel. To meet this standard the Adoption Service submits a monthly report to the Cabinet Lead Member and the Director of Children and Family Services and an annual report to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
3. The full report can be found at the Appendix.

Summary of Report

4. Leicestershire County Council is part of the Family Adoption Links (FAL), a regional partnership of Adoption Services. The Government's agenda for adoption was set out in a paper, Regionalising Adoption, published by the Department of Education (DfE) in June 2015 setting out arrangements for the formation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA's) by 2020.
5. This partnership comprises of Lincolnshire County Council (who provide adoption services for Rutland Council), Leicestershire County Council, Leicester City Council, North Lincolnshire Council. Northampton Children's Trust joined the partnership in January 2022. Lincolnshire County Council remains acting as host for the arrangement.
6. The interagency agreement creating the partnership commenced on 14 October 2020 and describes how FAL manages the provision of all core adoption functions on behalf of the local authority. Agency decision making for adults and children are

maintained within the local authority in line with corporate parenting responsibilities.

7. Through working in partnership, the service has started to benefit from the regional sharing of best practice, pooling of resources and developing a strategic approach to the development of a range of services from the marketing of adoption across the region through to the commissioning of post adoption support services.
8. The vision of the Regional Adoption Agencies is that:
 - Children have the widest range of adopters trained to meet the needs of children placed with them,
 - Matching delivers the best quality outcomes for all children,
 - Adopters receive a consistent, high quality and professional service at all stages of the process,
 - The same high standard of adoption support for all adoptive families across the region,
 - Family Adoption Links, local authorities and VAAs work together to promote and maximize choice for children and adopters.
9. Although Leicestershire continues to perform well against Department of Education score cards for the three-year trend data. The decreasing timeliness identified for one-year trend data 2021/22 demonstrates that although timely matches are made for the majority of children, Leicestershire continues have a small cohort of children who wait longer for placements. This is in line with regional partners and statistical neighbours. The service continues to be creative and ambitious in permanency planning, including specific social media campaigns, web site profiles, the increased use of video profiling. Further development is being considered through the Family Adoption Links family finding workstream.
10. The Special Guardianship Order support offer went live in January 2022 and mirrors the lifelong post adoption support service. All Special Guardians have been contacted to ensure that they are aware of the support on offer and that they can contact the team directly, rather than approaching First Response. This had been identified as a barrier to accessing support, as identified by Special Guardians.
11. A range of work is completed by several teams within the service to ensure that priorities and targets are met:
 - The Recruitment Team - enhancing the overall recruitment and experience of prospective Adopters,
 - The Assessment and Support Team - to engage with prospective adopters through their assessment and once approved to support adopters in matching them with a child and supporting them through to the granting of an Adoption Order. Assessments are now, in the main, completed in house. This has had a positive impact on relationships between Leicestershire and adopter applicants and there has been an increase in the number of adopters that receive a positive Qualifying Determination without the requirement of extra work,

- The Permanence Team – work alongside colleagues in locality teams to progress plans for children where adoption may be required. Permanence team social workers also undertake all family finding activity for children who need permanence via adoption,
- The Post Adoption Support Team – work as part of a team around the family, offering support to the child and parents relating to the therapeutic needs of the adopted child and those children subject to a Special Guardianship Order,
- The Birth Records Counselling Team - providing services to adopted adults who wish to access their adoption information.

12. An overview of achievements in 2021-22 is as follows:

- Continuing to be part of Family Adoption Links and to be involved in developing a high quality service to children and adopters,
- Increased the Special Guardianship support offer to life long,
- Positive responses to published newsletters,
- Staff have continued to work safely and effectively to support children and families across Leicestershire and move children to their adoptive families,

2021-22 performance overview:

Adoption Score Card	2020	2021
A10 - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family	489 days	627 days
A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family	311 days	259 days
A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child	352 days	364 days

13. Against all three key performance indicators the three-year trend data remains relatively stable. Figures from statistical neighbours are not available for comparison.
14. Against two out of three indicators, the one-year trend data for 2021/22 is highlighting an increase in the number of days in comparison to the previous year and therefore a decrease in the timeliness to achieve permanence. Detailed consideration of information regarding individual children was completed by managers. Similarly, to last year this analysis reflects outliers in the data set – a small number of children who have waited longer to achieve permanence due to the complexity of their needs and matching requirements, as well as delays related to court proceedings. Of those children, one sibling group of four has experienced a significant bereavement. Although the children have a PO and are placed (the couple were previously foster carers) the service cannot progress to matching panel without a re-assessment of the female carer as a single adopter.
15. Another child has had a change of care plan to long-term fostering, he continues to have a Placement Order which is in the process of be revoked.

16. There is a further sibling group of two who have experienced delay due to placement breakdown for one of them, delay in being able to start a psychological sibling assessment – the first psychologist gave timescales and was commissioned but then subsequently was uncontactable.
17. One set of adopters were due at panel when significant information about them emerged that needed further assessment, this caused some delay for the child.
18. There are three sets of sibling groups of two and one sibling group of four included in the figures.
19. Despite the delays within the court process the Permanence Team continued to strive to find adoptive homes for all of the children including commissioning nationwide, Facebook campaigns and paying for specialist therapeutic training for identified adopters. The Service will continue to have robust monitoring and oversight of the progression of children whose permanence plan is adoption and recognise that matching for children with additional complex needs may require more time, consideration, and intervention. The Department takes pride on making child centred decisions and recognising the importance of relationships. This focus can result in longer timescales but the right outcome for the children

Adopter Recruitment

20. In 2021/22, 48 Initial Visits were completed, 25 of which resulted in a Request for Information (ROI) During this period 26 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, three of which were deferred for further work.
21. 25 adopter households were approved in this period, compared to 23 the previous year. This includes two households who attended panel prior to this reporting period but received their agency decision of approval in the year 2021/22. There were a further 19 households in assessment on 31 March 2022

Permanency Planning for children

22. As of the 31 March 2022, there were 34 children with a best interest decision of adoption, of which 24 had Placement Orders granted by the court. Four children have an ethnicity other than White British. Eleven children are female and 23 are male. Ten are part of sibling groups who require adoption; this does not include children who have siblings with different care plans.
23. 26 children have been placed with their adoptive families during the year, a slight increase of one, compared to the previous year.
24. 34 Adoption Orders were finalised in the year 2021/22, an increase from the previous year when 15 orders were made

Adoption Support Fund

25. To 31 March 2022, Leicestershire has drawn down £862,468.48 from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families

in Leicestershire. This is a significant decrease in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£1,494,524.94). Although evidence is not clear on the reason for the decrease, it would appear that schools re-opening following lockdown, allowing for more direct and daily support for adopted children, has had a major impact on children's emotional wellbeing and this has led to a decrease in the amount being applied for. The total amount of drawn down also includes top up applications where therapy is assessed as being needed to be continued once the initial therapeutic period has ended.

26. Overview of targets and priorities for 2022/23:

- Continue working and developing alongside colleagues in the Regional Adoption Agency, with specific and effective action plans agreed by operational leads and overseen by the Board,
- Focus on the key performance indicators related to the assessment and recruitment of adopters, identify barriers to improvement and learn from areas of good practice,
- Focus on timeliness for children by developing the understanding of children's journey through care to point of Best Interest Decision; developing early linking and matching processes; increasing the use of Fostering for Adoption where appropriate to meet children's needs. There will be a particular focus on those children who typically wait longer,
- To continue to develop the adoption panel, ensuring that that panel members are appropriately trained to continue to meet the needs of the service provide robust scrutiny of the agency,
- Develop a service-wide action plan to ensure that operational managers invest in mutually beneficial activity to improve outcomes for children and adopters,
- Continue to invest in developing processes to strengthen feedback and how this influences change and development,
- Reinvigorate the service offered to birth parents/first family members.

Background Papers

27. Regionalising Adoption, Department for Education:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/437128/Regionalising_adoption.pdf

Appendix

Leicestershire Adoption Agency Annual Report 2021-22

Officers to Contact

Jane Moore, Director of Children and Family Services

Tel: No: 0116 3052649

Jane.Moore@leics.gov.uk

Sharon Cooke, Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Childrens Social Care

Tel: No: 0116 3055479

Sharon.Cooke@leics.gov.uk

Nicci Collins, Strategic Lead, Transformation and Planning

Tel: No: 0116 3054504

Nicci.Collins@leics.gov.uk

Kelda Claire, Head of Service, Children in Care

Tel: No: 0116 3059084

Kelda.Claire@leics.gov.uk

Michelle Robinson, Service Manager, Children in Care

Tel: No: 0116 3050448

Michelle.Robinson@leics.gov.uk