



CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 5 NOVEMBER 2024

LEICESTERSHIRE ADOPTION AGENCY ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY
SERVICES

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an overview of activity of Leicestershire County Council's Adoption Agency, from March 2023 until March 2024.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

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 Lead Member and Director and an annual report to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
3. The Leicestershire Adoption Service Annual Report 2023-2024 can be found within the appendix.

Background

4. Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Adoption Agency. It undertakes statutory and regulated responsibilities relating to adoption. The main roles of the Adoption and Permanence Service is to provide high quality adoptive placements, a range of adoption and special guardianship support and other permanency options, including profiling for long term placements for children who are looked after by Leicestershire County Council and are unable to live with their birth families.
5. Adoption and Permanence Services are provided to:
 - Children who are to be adopted
 - Birth parents
 - Prospective and approved adopters
 - Children and adoptive parents who require adoption support services
 - Children and Special Guardians who require therapeutic support and advice, where the child lives permanently in Leicestershire
 - Adopted adults

6. The Adoption Service is led by the Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption and Children in Care and managed through a Service Manager who has responsibility for the three teams that make up the adoption service, Assessment and Support, Permanence and Post-Order Support

Summary of Report

7. 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.
8. This partnership comprises of Lincolnshire County Council (who provide adoption services for Rutland Council), Leicestershire County Council, Leicester City Council, and North Lincolnshire Council. Northampton Children's Trust joined the partnership in January 2022. Lincolnshire County Council remains acting as host for the arrangement.
9. 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.
10. Through working in partnership, the Service continues 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.
11. The vision of the Regional Adoption Agency 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 voluntary adoption agencies work together to promote and maximize choice for children and adopters.
12. The Adoption Score card presents the performance data for authorities over a three-year trend and one-year trend. The three main key performance indicators are:
- A10 – Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family.
 - A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving the court judgement and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.

- A20 - The Average time between a child entering care and the Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child.
13. Against all three key performance indicators, the three-year trend data remains relatively stable. The Service does not yet have figures from statistical neighbours for comparison. Against two of three indicators, the one-year trend data for 2023/24 is highlighting an increase in the number of days in comparison to the previous year. Whilst most children have their permanence achieved in a timely manner, there have been a small number of children whose plans have been delayed. Detailed consideration of information regarding individual children is routinely completed by managers and the Service Manager. Improved data collection means that all children are tracked from the point of the initial request to consider adoption as the care plan Pack A request) and monthly Improvement Cycle Meetings ensure that any drift and delay is identified, challenged and rectified.
14. A range of work is completed by several teams within the Service to ensure 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 continue to be completed in house. This has had a positive impact on relationships between Leicestershire and adopter applicants and we have seen an increase in the amount 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.

2023-24 Achievements highlights:

15. Key achievements made during the 2023-24 period includes:
- Continuing to be part of Family Adoption Links and to be involved in developing a high quality service to children and adopters.
 - Positive response to newsletters and events.
 - Staff have continued to work creatively and effectively to support children and families across Leicestershire and move children to their adoptive families.
 - Increasing our support offer to adopters by using support workers creatively.

2023-24 performance overview:**Adopter Recruitment**

16. In 2023/24 44 Initial Visits were completed, 21 of which resulted in a Stage 1 start. During this period 14 adopter households were presented to the adoption panel for approval, compared to 19 during the previous fiscal year. Leicestershire has experienced a decline in adopter applications in line with the National picture.
17. Leicestershire County Council hold adoption panels once or twice per month in response to service requirements. During period 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024, panel met on 18 occasions hearing a total number of 49 cases (including de-registrations and withdrawal). This is an increase on the previous year when panel met on 16 occasions, hearing 33 cases.
18. During this period, 14 applications and 26 matches were presented to panel. In the previous year, there were 19 applications (approvals) and 14 matches; therefore, the number of applications has decreased, and matches have increased during this period.

Permanency Planning for children

19. At the end of March 2024, there were a total of 27 children with a Placement Order who have not yet been placed with their adoptive families. This is broken down into 15 male children and 12 females. Within this there are six sibling groups of two. In this group, eight of these children have links with prospective adopters, two children are having links explored with their foster carers.
20. There are currently 16 children for whom the Service is actively family finding for, this includes nine children are considered to be 'harder to place' as a result of their additional needs (health and arising from trauma experiences), which also includes five sibling groups of two children. All children waiting are discussed at local and regional family finding meetings, are profiled at Discovery and Exchange Events and have also been invited or attended the Regional Activity Day.

Adoption Support Fund

21. To 31 March 2024, Leicestershire has drawn down £1,651,340.16 from the Adoption, Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is an increase in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year (£852,432) and represents support to 505 families, up from 414 in 2022/23. 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. Leicestershire has successfully trained workers therapeutically to ensure a better provision of services.

Overview of targets and priorities for 2024/25:

22. The Service had the following key targets and priorities for 2024/25:

- To 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.
- Continued 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. We will measure stage one and Stage 2 timeliness with an aim of achieving assessments to be completed within six months. This will be achieved by ensuring that recruitment is transparent and that we are clear at the beginning of the process about suitability of applicants to adopt. Robust management oversight will ensure that delay is picked up quickly and addressed.
- 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 our 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. The Service will utilise FAL activity days for are children who wait longer and ensure that these children are profiled on our FAL website. It is also driving forward the quality of Link Maker profiles with support from the marketing officer.
- 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, including continued contact, if appropriate, after adoption through the Keeping in Touch agenda.
- To provide bespoke training and support opportunities to Special Guardians and the children that they care for.
- To consider the impact of the national drive on promoting direct contact for children after adoption.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

23. None

Equality Implications

24. These are addressed throughout the report as the aim is to improve standards and outcomes for all children with a care plan of adoption, including disabled

children, young children and those from minority and harder to reach groups. The Adoption Service has a diverse compliment of staff with representation across gender, age, sexual orientation as well as ethnicity.

25. The Adoption Service has an Equality and Diversity Action Plan in place which ensures that all staff are enabled to feel safe and supported, in addition to working towards a stronger, evidence-based approach to tackling inequalities - including relevant research, data, Quality Assurance activity and engagement with children, young people and families.

Human Rights Implications

24. There are no human rights Implications arising from this report.

Appendices

Leicestershire Adoption Agency Annual Report 2023-24

Officers to Contact

Jane Moore
Director, Children and Family Services
Tel. No. 0116 3052649
Jane.Moore@leics.gov.uk

Sharon Cooke
Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care
Tel. No.
Sharon.Cooke@leics.gov.uk

Kelda Claire
Head of Service, Children in Care, Care Leavers, Adoption and Fostering
Tel. No. 0116 3059084
Kelda.Claire@leics.gov.uk

Michelle Robinson
Service Manager, Adoption
Tel. No. 0116 3050448
Michelle.Robinson@leics.gov.uk