

Adoption in Leeds

Scrutiny Inquiry Report

Introduction and Scope



Introduction

- 1 Through its regular performance monitoring activity, the Scrutiny Board (Children and Young People) identified rates of adoption as an issue of concern in February 2006. As a result the board suggested that adoption in Leeds should be a topic for scrutiny in 2006/07; this was agreed at the first meeting of the Scrutiny Board (Children's Services) on 9th June 2006. Adoption had also been highlighted as an area for improvement in the Annual Performance Assessment process.
- 2 In order to decide on an appropriate and manageable focus for the inquiry, the board commissioned a small working group from amongst its membership to scope the inquiry. The working group met with a senior officer from Social Services on 30th June.
- 3 The working group discussed adoption as one of a range of options for achieving permanence and stability for children who are not able to remain with their birth parents. Members recognised the immense value of other alternatives including fostering, special guardianship and residence orders in achieving this.
- 4 In order to provide a clear focus for the Scrutiny Board, the working group decided to recommend that the inquiry concentrate on looking at possible ways of increasing adoption rates, reflecting the view that a secure permanent parental relationship is the ideal outcome for our children.
- 5 Members were keen to examine the causes of any delays in the systems for approving adopters, identifying children as available for adoption and subsequently matching children with adoptive parents. They were also concerned to look at strategies to increase the pool of people prepared to adopt children who are considered harder to place for whatever reason, for example older children, sibling groups, children with developmental difficulties and children of African, Caribbean or mixed heritage.
- 6 The Board is also aware, from its previous work in relation to Looked After Children, of the amount of preventative work that takes place involving various agencies working to try and keep families together, and how children can end up needing to be adopted.
- 7 During the inquiry we spoke to representatives from all of the agencies involved in the adoption decision-making process. We also visited Newcastle and Liverpool adoption services in order to discuss examples of good practice elsewhere. We were very pleased to meet with a number of adopted

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children and adoptive parents as part of our inquiry. Their personal experiences added an extremely valuable perspective to our work.

- 8 We are grateful to all those who contributed to this inquiry for the enthusiasm and honesty with which they have responded to our questions and shared their knowledge with us.

Scope

- 9 The purpose of our inquiry was to make an assessment of, and where appropriate make recommendations on, the following areas:
- The 'supply and demand' aspects of identifying and matching children and adoptive parents
 - Funding and capacity issues, and other potential causes of any delays or tensions in the adoption processes
 - The role of regional co-operation and work with voluntary agencies.
- 10 The board hopes that this inquiry will assist the council in securing better outcomes for children and young people in relation to the 'staying safe' theme of Every Child Matters and the Children and Young People's Plan.

Conclusions and Recommendations



- 1 Since the initial trigger for our work was our concern about a fall in adoption rates, it is only right that we acknowledge that the number of adoptions in Leeds is rising again. We welcome this improvement, which was also recognised in the recent Annual Performance Assessment of Children's Services carried out by Ofsted.
- 2 From the extensive evidence presented to us during this inquiry we believe that Social Services has analysed and addressed some of the systematic weaknesses that were previously affecting performance in this area, and as a result, impacting on the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and young people.
- 3 We are satisfied that recent changes, including the restructuring of the adoption service, mean that things are now generally moving in the right direction. We were particularly impressed with the work of the post-adoption support team.
- 4 We are also very pleased to hear that the Primary Care Trust (PCT) has now given the go ahead for an additional medical adviser, which will enable a much needed third Adoption Panel to be set up in Leeds. This will increase the capacity to process adoption cases.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services informs us of the timetable and action plan for the third Adoption Panel to become fully operational, so that we can monitor progress.

- 5 Although we recognise and welcome the improvements brought about by the creation of two dedicated adoption teams, we were interested to see whether further improvements could be made to administrative procedures and timescales throughout the adoption process to reduce unnecessary delays.
- 6 In particular we heard from all parties to our inquiry about the frustrations caused by delays in producing reports, capacity and staffing issues. We noted that the Adoption Panel annual report acknowledges the need for social workers in area teams to be enabled to give priority to complete reports required for court applications on time.
- 7 Parents expressed concern to us about the turnover of staff, the number of part-time staff, and the impact of these factors on the length of time that progressing cases could take. This was coupled with anecdotal evidence of 'drift', where chance conversations between social workers had apparently led to matches that

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could perhaps have been formally identified earlier.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services reports back to us within three months on action that will be taken to reduce administrative delays throughout the adoption process.

- 8 When we visited Liverpool, we were told that the adoption team there takes on a child's case as soon as adoption is confirmed as the plan for the child's future. This change was made in response to problems with cases 'drifting', as child protection crisis responses were (understandably) prioritised over family finding by social workers.
- 9 The transfer of cases (and staff) into the adoption team had allowed social workers in the team to progress adoption cases more quickly, and was singled out as the most effective measure taken by the authority to tackle delays.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services considers whether a similar organisational approach to that taken in Liverpool would benefit adoption in Leeds, and reports back to us with a view within three months.

- 10 We were concerned to learn that the courts are also unable to meet their target times - to deal with 70% of care orders within 40 weeks - although we acknowledge that performance in Leeds is better than in most of the rest of the country. We understand that one of the reasons for the increased pressure on the courts is an increase in the number of private family cases, involving for example custody disputes between separating couples. We are concerned that this is causing unacceptable delays in providing a resolution for children awaiting adoption and believe that action needs to be taken to redress the balance. This may require a national increase in resources.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the courts service advise us how a higher priority or additional resources can be allocated to redress the balance with private cases and improve performance against the targets for dealing with care orders. The Scrutiny Board will raise this issue at a national level with the Local Government Association.

- 11 Overall, although some of our members were already experienced in adoption through their membership of Adoption Panels, professional background or approval as prospective adopters, the majority of us were struck by the sheer complexity of the process leading up to a child's adoption.

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- 12 When we analysed the various stages, as described to us by the respective practitioners, we were led to wonder whether the current statutory procedures make the most effective use of resources, and also to question whether they unnecessarily prolong the time that an adopted child spends in the care system.
- 13 In summary, a child will have been identified at some point as being at risk, leading to intervention by Social Services and possibly a number of other agencies. Preventative work aimed at family support or rehabilitation may have taken place and there will have been a multi-agency case conference before adoption is considered as an option for the child.
- 14 At this point a social worker will produce a detailed report on the child's situation, which will be the subject of departmental supervision before the case goes to an Adoption Panel for a recommendation, and then to the Chief Officer - Children and Families to decide that Social Services believe the child should be adopted.
- 15 Then an application must be made to the court. The court will appoint another social worker – the independent guardian – who will make their own report, before magistrates or a judge finally make the legal decision that the child can be placed for adoption.
- 16 Given the national and local shortage of social workers, the pressures on all agencies' resources, and the recognised damage to a child's prospects caused by delays, this protracted process does not appear at face value to be the most effective organisation of the combined scarce resources.
- 17 Nevertheless we also acknowledge that it is important that all the relevant information is available and that the decision made is truly in the child's best interests.
- 18 We understand that national legislation and guidance largely determine how these process work. However we would like to ask the local inter-agency group of social services, Cafcass and the courts service to consider whether there is a case to be made for change.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services explores, with the inter-agency group, the case for change in adoption processes to make more effective use of combined resources, whilst protecting the integrity of decision-making in the child's best interests. We request a report back within three months.

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- 19 We were pleased to hear of the success of the regional adoption consortium in helping to match children and adopters. In particular we were impressed by the points system which reduced bureaucracy and fees between authorities. Compared to other authorities, this seems to have been a real benefit in promoting use of the consortium locally.
- 20 In other areas of the country, notably the north west, we heard how consortia had developed in different directions. Adoption 22 (the north west consortium) tends to take a more strategic role: for example the development of new protocols in response to the new Adoption and Childcare Act had been shared across authorities. In addition the members of the consortium have effectively used their combined influence to draw up protocols for consistent working with Cafcass (the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) across the region, to tackle areas of regular disagreement.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services reports back to us within three months on the potential for the regional consortium to develop a more strategic role to complement its successful 'marketplace' function.

- 21 The process of identifying a child for an adopter can take time, and we were conscious that potential adopters can feel quite isolated while they wait to hear about a potential match. The adoptive parents we spoke to told us that they did not want to 'pester' busy staff for news. Although we are sure that staff are happy to be contacted, we also recognise the reticence felt by some prospective adopters, who do not wish to appear a 'nuisance'.

Recommendation 7

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services develops arrangements for keeping prospective adopters engaged and informed whilst they await matching, and reports back to us within three months.

- 22 The recruitment and retention of adoption staff was an issue that arose during our discussion. We were already aware of the shortage of social workers generally; and we learned that the requirements for post qualification experience can exacerbate this situation in relation to adoption work. We heard some interesting ideas from Liverpool particularly about their general success in recruiting and retaining, which we commend to the department.
- 23 We explored one particular issue in a little more depth, namely the

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apparent inability of the authority to match an applicant's existing employment benefits if they transfer from the voluntary sector – a key alternative source of staff in this field. (The same was also true vice versa – where a council employee transferred to the voluntary sector.)

- 24 We recognise that there are wider implications at stake here for the authority as a whole arising from national agreements on working conditions, and regulations about where staff can transfer between employers and retain accrued benefits. The issues we considered are set out in slightly more detail in paragraphs 158-161 of the summary of evidence which accompanies this report.

Recommendation 8

We recommend that the Chief Officer – Human Resources reports back to us within three months on the potential for addressing the barriers to recruitment where staff face losing accrued employment benefits.

- 25 Having considered the capacity within the adoption system, we also looked at the recruitment of adopters, which was the other key factor we identified as potentially delaying a child's chances of adoption.
- 26 We were particularly struck to hear from the local NCH manager that an ICM poll on attitudes to adoption commissioned for National Adoption Week had revealed a surprising lack of information about who can adopt. The widely held public perception still reflects the historical position of adoption as a white middle-class activity, rather than the reality of its being open to all. There was a clear message here for publicity.
- 27 This view was reflected in our discussion with social workers when we asked whether prospective adopters coming forward were generally aware of the kinds of children needing to be adopted. We were told that there are still a number of people coming forward who cannot have their own birth child and want to adopt a freely given baby. The preparation training gives people an awareness of the types of issues they are likely to face and the skills they will need. It is important for prospective adopters to be realistic about what they can cope with.
- 28 The authority also needs to be clear about the sort of people it is looking for as adopters, and to get this message across in recruitment as well as training and assessment. We felt that the public understanding of adoption is out of date, and therefore the service is likely to be missing out on people who could help.

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29 Newcastle adoption service told us about some of the successful methods they had used to recruit adopters. Liverpool employed someone specifically with a media background. We also heard from adoptive parents how effective word of mouth and personal recommendation was. They also welcomed the mobile information bus, as a way of reaching people who might not otherwise have considered adopting.

30 In particular we are conscious of the need to raise awareness and interest in adoption among black and minority ethnic communities, and we welcome the work being done by Social Services and in partnership with local voluntary adoption agencies to tackle this.

Recommendation 9

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services commissions appropriate activity to raise general awareness of the range of people who can adopt children and reports back to us on initiatives proposed within three months.

Recommendation 10

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services reports back to us regularly on the progress of the adoption recruitment strategy and the number of black and minority ethnic prospective adopters recruited.

31 One aspect of the Leeds policy on adoption that we did not see explicitly included in the small sample of other adoption agency policies that were sent to us as part of this inquiry, was an assumption about an upper age limit of 60 for adopters, by the time their adopted child reached 18. We question whether this limits the pool of potential adopters unnecessarily.

Recommendation 11

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services reviews the upper age limit policy and reports back to us on the outcome of that review within three months.

32 We were particularly impressed by the post-adoption support services provided in Leeds. We heard first-hand from both adopted children and adoptive parents about how important this is in supporting families at very different stages in their experience of adoption.

33 All of the parents were extremely appreciative of the post-adoption support services, and we heard how crucial a role it has played in some cases in providing the ongoing support that has enabled adoptive placements to continue in situations where they may have broken down in the past. Parents acknowledged that this support might be needed at any time during a child's growing up, not necessarily close to the time of

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adoption. They also benefited from mutual support that has been established between adoptive parents.

- 34 We also learned that Newcastle has been very successful recently in preventing disruptions. Following a number of breakdowns a few years ago, an independent reviewing officer (IRO) for adoption was appointed in 2002 and there had been no disruptions since November 2004. This was attributed to a combination of good matching, and also the proactive role of the IRO. Where the IRO identified a need for support, the resources were quickly assigned to provide this at an early stage.

Recommendation 12

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services considers the appointment of an independent reviewing officer for adoption, and reports back to us with a view within three months.

- 35 One particular issue that played a significant part in our discussion with adoptive parents was around schools and education. Because this issue was raised right at the end of our evidence gathering, we did not have the opportunity to seek clarification from Education Leeds during our inquiry.
- 36 Topics raised included: a general lack of awareness from some teachers of how to meet the needs of adopted children, for example how to handle work about families; the extent of bullying of adopted children; meeting resentment from other parents when an adopted child was perceived as disruptive; and fighting to have a child's special educational needs, recognised, assessed and met.
- 37 During the discussion, it was suggested that the liaison with education had improved for looked after children, but that adopted children perhaps still had a tendency to fall through the net. Many of them would be vulnerable to developing special educational needs at some point as a result of their early experiences, yet because they were no longer in care and had a new family, their needs were not being proactively promoted to the same extent.
- 38 Despite this, we also heard from some parents about good examples of school responses, particularly led by individual headteachers who were more aware of the needs of adopted children.
- 39 We also learned that a transition group for Year 6 pupils is planned for this coming year, to help with preparation for secondary school. We welcome this, especially given our ongoing interest in the importance of good transition experiences for all pupils.

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Recommendation 13

We recommend that the Director of Children's Services, in conjunction with the Chief Executive of Education Leeds, produces an action plan within three months for improving the education support to adopted children, in order to ensure a more consistent quality of experience for adoptive families. This should cover awareness raising for schools; social services staff awareness of education resources; and adoptive parents' awareness of education support particularly for special educational needs.

- 40 We would like to see more resources available for adoption generally, and particularly for post-adoption support. If there are efficiency gains to be made as a result of some of our recommendations, we would like to see them being used to increase the capacity of the service.
- 41 There were two other specific issues that came up during our visits to other authorities which may be worthy of further consideration by Social Services.
- 42 One was the possible emergence of a trend in terms of an increasing number of babies being adopted due to maternal drug or alcohol misuse, and the implications for the adoption service.
- 43 The second was Newcastle's very low use of residential homes for looked after children, and whether there are any learning points for Leeds from this achievement.
- 44 Finally, when we met with the adopted young people they completed a brief questionnaire for us. At the end we asked if there was anything else they wanted to tell us. One of them wrote "I am happy!"
- 45 We hope that our conclusions and recommendations will assist all involved in the adoption service to help more children and young people in Leeds to find happiness with their adopted families.

Evidence



Monitoring arrangements

Standard arrangements for monitoring the outcome of the Board's recommendations will apply.

The decision-makers to whom the recommendations are addressed will be asked to submit a formal response to the recommendations, including an action plan and timetable, normally within two months.

Following this the Scrutiny Board will determine any further detailed monitoring, over and above the standard quarterly monitoring of all scrutiny recommendations.

Reports and Publications Submitted

- Report of the Chief Officer Social Services – Inquiry into Adoption Services in Leeds -Session One – September 2006
- Report of the Chief Officer Social Services – Inquiry into Adoption Services in Leeds -Session Two – September 2006
- Adoption Register – Information for Adopters – leaflet
- Adoption and Childcare Act 2002 briefing
- Extract from Chapter 2 of Guidance on the Adoption and Childcare Act 2002 – Considering and deciding whether a child should be placed for adoption – flowchart
- Leeds City Council Adopters guide
- Briefing on Special Guardianship Orders
- Leeds City Council – Considering a Residence Order – A guide for carers
- Social Services Adoption Implementation Plan 2006/2007
- Adoption Panel statistics
- Children currently on referral for adoption
- Number of adopters approved and awaiting a match
- Adoption Service budgets
- Recruitment Strategy – Fostering and Adoption – 2006/7
- Training Outline for prospective adopters
- Barnardo's Futures – Adoption Supported lodgings – leaflet
- Adoption Linking Services – leaflet on adoption contact agreements
- After Adoption Yorkshire – leaflet
- After Adoption Yorkshire – search service – leaflet
- Adoption Support Services – leaflet
- Adoption Support Presentation
- Adoption Support 3 Year Plan 2004-2007 – Updated November 2005

Evidence



Reports and Publications Submitted (continued)

- Yorkshire Adoption Consortium – Information sheet/adoption statistics
- Yorkshire Adoption Consortium – Information for adopters – leaflet
- Newcastle City Council – Adoption Information Pack
- Newcastle City Council – Birth Parent Information Pack
- Newcastle City Council – Parents Affected by Adoption – leaflet
- Legal Briefing – November 2006
- Her Majesty's Courts Service – Adoption – A guide for Court Users – booklet A20
- Report of the Chief Officer Social Services – Inquiry into Adoption Services in Leeds - Session Three – Adoption Panel - November 2006
- Adoption Procedures
- Functions of the Adoption Panel
- Leeds Social Services Adoption Agency Policy
- Annual report on Adoption Panel Activity 2005-2006
- The Cafcass Practitioner in Adoption – booklet – 2005
- The Role of Cafcass – booklet – 2005
- Internet pages – About Cafcass/Adoption
- Adoption NCH Yorkshire – Adoption Agency Statement of Purpose
- NCH – Adoption Agency Annual Report 2005 to 2006
- Adoption Barnardo's Yorkshire – Adoption Agency Statement of Purpose 2005/2006
- Adoption Barnardo's Yorkshire - booklet
- Report of the Chief Officer Social Services – Inquiry into Adoption Services in Leeds - Session Four – November 2006
- Local Government Employers – The Redundancy Payments (Continuity of Employment in Local Government etc) (Modification) Order 1999
- Leeds City Council – Considering Permanency Options – A Guide for Foster Carers – draft document

NB Some of the information considered relates to individual adopted children and adoptive parents and is therefore confidential.

Evidence



Witnesses Heard

Rodger Walker	Resources Team Manager, Social Services
Val Hales	Team Manager Adoption and Adoption Support, Social Services
Sarah Johal	Team Manager Adoption, Social Services
Debbie Church	Coordinator, Yorkshire Adoption Consortium
Steve Oliver	Adoption Team Leader, Liverpool City Council
Karen Simmons	Looked After Children Manager, Newcastle City Council
Deborah Herring	Adoption Manager, Newcastle City Council
Janice Turnbull	Birth Families Social Worker, Newcastle City Council
Claire McDermott	Adoption Support Worker, Social Services
Sarah Ryan	Adoption Support Worker, Social Services
Marie Travis	Connexions Personal Adviser
Lynne Buckle	Principal Caseworker Adoption Support, Social Services
Judge Hunt	County Court Adoption Judge
Stephen Boorman	Section Head, Social Services (Legal)
Martin Lee	Leeds Magistrates' Court
Stephanie Martin	Service Manager, Cafcass
Jemima Sparks	Social Services (former Adoption Panel Chair)
Alison Share	Adoption Panel Medical Adviser, Leeds PCT
Donal Mullally	NCH
8 adopted children and young people	
13 adoptive parents	

Dates of Scrutiny

30 June 2006	Working Group (Councillors Bale and Cleasby and Mr Gathercole)
7 September 2006	Scrutiny Board meeting
10 October 2006	Visit to Liverpool City Council (Councillor Kendall, Mrs Knights, Rodger Walker and Kate Arscott)
11 October 2006	Visit to Newcastle City Council (Councillors Bale, Cleasby and Kendall, Mrs Knights, Kate Arscott, Rodger Walker and Sarah Johal)
14 November 2006	Meeting with Cooking Crew (Councillor Bale, Mrs Knights and Kate Arscott)
15 November 2006	Meeting with adoptive parents (Councillor Bale, Mr Gathercole and Kate Arscott)
16 November 2006	Scrutiny Board meeting