

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, SOCIAL SERVICES AND HOUSING

TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	1 JULY 2013	AGENDA ITEM:	10
TITLE:	ADOPTION - PAN BERKSHIRE PROPOSAL		
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. Within the next few years there will be systemic changes to the way adoption services are delivered nationally and Reading Borough Councils adoption agency needs to be at the forefront of the changes to ensure the timely and smooth transition to permanence for its most vulnerable children who require adoption to secure their long term well being
- 1.2. There is an urgent need to increase the number of adopters to match the number of children awaiting adoption and the complexities of their specific needs. Nationally and locally the supply of approved adopters has not kept pace with the demand, particularly for adopters for older children, sibling groups and those with disabilities or other complex needs
- 1.3. This report notes the work underway to establish a shared pan Berkshire adoption service under a joint arrangement for agencies to work together in providing recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and supervision of adopters. This will include a team of family finders and a team of assessing social workers who would recruit, prepare, train and assess prospective adopters. A Berkshire wide service would streamline the process and ensure that children will be placed much quicker with a wider pool of adopters to choose from.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 To support the establishment of a shared pan Berkshire adoption service under a joint arrangement for agencies to work together in providing recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and supervision of adopters
- 2.2 To request an update report on progress and outcomes of the shared service in due course

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1. The swift and successful adoption of children looked after by local authorities has been the subject of significant national political and media attention over the last two years or so. The Secretary of State for Education has expressed dissatisfaction with the numbers of children who are adopted, and the time it takes for an adoptive family to be found once the decision has been made that a child should be adopted. The publication 'Further Action on adoption' (DfE, Feb 2013) (which draws on Ofsted data and that contained in the SSDA903 statutory annual return quantified the rise in the number of children with an adoption decision and the resulting shortfall of adopters) and argues that the local responsibility for the recruitment and approval of adopters has led to a fragmented system that does not respond quickly to such shortfalls.
- 3.2. LGA, SOLACE and ADCS all agree that the supply of approved adopters has not kept pace with the demand, particularly for adopters for older children, sibling groups and those with disabilities or other complex needs. The number of children approved by courts for adoption has increased significantly in each of the last two years. It is estimated that some 4,200 children were waiting to move in with a family at 31 March 2012. The DfE estimates an additional 500-600 adopters need to be recruited and approved per annum, in order to address the estimated national shortfall of 2,000 - 3,000 adopters (as at 31 March 2012)
- 3.3. There is an urgent need to increase the number of adopters to match the number of children awaiting adoption and the complexities of their specific needs. The LGA, Solace and ADCS are encouraging Councils to reform the way they are working together to make it easier for prospective adopters to find children to adopt in any part of the country, not just their local area. They state that our statutory role as corporate parents reinforces the need to ensure the best outcomes for looked after children and we should drive forward progress in this area. The Government's suggestion that this work could be better managed in the private/voluntary sector is not supported by the professional bodies which fear this could lead to further fragmentation of service delivery.

BERKSHIRE POSITION

- 3.4. The six Berkshire Unitary Authorities have been part of the Berkshire Consortium of Adoption Agencies for many years and they jointly fund the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS). The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead hosts the BAAS and therefore the BAAS can legally act as part of the adoption agency of this Council. BAAS manages all the adoption panel functions for the 6 Berkshire LA's, plus provides other services such as the Letterbox exchange, birth parent project, training for staff, adopters and wider family members, amongst other tasks. This service has always been highly rated by Ofsted with other authorities being referred to it due to their high standard of services provided.

CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR THE BERKSHIRE AGENCIES

- 3.5. The Berkshire consortium adoption agencies (local authorities) have a good reputation in the field of adoption and the most recent OFSTED reports are testament to this. However individual agencies in Berkshire have relatively small

numbers of children to place for adoption and, while it is possible to recruit from outside agency boundaries and therefore place children with locally recruited adopters, this will never meet the need for all children who have a plan for adoption. The LA's, to a greater or lesser degree, will at some point need to turn to neighbouring agencies and voluntary agencies for placements and Reading have needed to do this consistently over the years. The changes to adoption, which will be introduced over the coming months, will test established resources. Whilst there have always been elements of the service which work together, there will be considerable pressure to provide more flexible and responsive services in the future especially as Reading is the busiest adoption agency of the Berkshires.

- 3.6. As noted in prior reports to Cabinet (as was) there has been a substantial rise in the number of children with an adoption plan across the Berkshire Consortium from average 40-50 in 2009 to between 90-100 in 2012-13 with no sign this is likely to slow down in the near future. In Reading, the number of children requiring adoptive placements has risen from 45 in March 2012 to 65 in March 2013. There is some indication that these numbers will stabilise or reduce slightly in the next few years. The Government is stressing that children should not be left in families which do not meet their needs and are encouraging the removal of children at an earlier age. Michael Gove in November 2012 stated ' I firmly believe more children should be taken into care more quickly, and that too many children are allowed to stay too long with parents whose behaviour is unacceptable. I want social workers to be more assertive with dysfunctional parents, courts to be less indulgent of poor parents, and the care system to expand to deal with the consequences.'
- 3.7. One of the drawbacks of having six separate Berkshire Adoption Agencies is that prospective adopters can approach a number of them before deciding on where to apply and therefore duplicating the initial work of responding to each enquiry. Additionally, there is no formal agreement between agencies when adopters approach one agency and that agency cannot accept them, for them to be referred to one that has the resources to assess them.
- 3.8. Smaller agencies do not have the resources to recruit and assess all adopters who might apply so therefore they are selective in who they chose to accept. This challenge is particularly evident in LA's which have joint fostering and adoption teams where the demands of finding foster homes for children coming into care can take precedent over adoption work, (Reading has a dedicated Adoption Team).
- 3.9. Adopter recruitment, preparation and placement are resource intensive processes. In September 2013, a new two-stage assessment process for adopters is being introduced by Government which will also be challenging for smaller agencies as currently the vast majority of assessments take longer than eight months. The new process also takes a different approach to the timing of key events during the assessment and the objectives of different parts of the process. These new timescales will have to be rigidly adhered to and will be reported to nationally compare performances.
- 3.10. While an effort has been made in recent months to undertake county wide adoption recruitment, there is no Berkshire wide strategy for ongoing recruitment; particularly for older children and this means that most approved adopters are childless couples who wish to adopt very young children i.e. the supply is not meeting Reading's needs.
- 3.11. Older children, even those over the age of three are now harder to place, as are sibling groups. They are waiting too long and, although permanence through adoption may be the initial plan, they are sometimes being placed in long-term foster care as no adoptive placements are available. In Reading Borough Council in March 2013, there were 65 children for whom adoption is likely to be the plan. Of these 17 are already in adoptive placements, 48 are actively being sought placement. Of these 39 are 3 years or older and 10 of these have complex needs.

- 3.12. Although the consortium agencies have tried to work together in delivering elements of the service, this has not always been easy. The area of family finding (recruiting adopters to specific children) is one that is particularly challenging as each agency works independently not necessarily being aware of the adopters already under assessment in another area. Attempts to address this with regular consortium family finding meetings, including local voluntary agencies have not been as successful as hoped as the contact between agencies still relies on the sharing of information by individual family finders in each area's adoption teams.
- 3.13. In addition, the establishment of concurrent planning and early placement will be a challenge to small local authorities and this is an area of work which will need to be addressed. The placement of very young children, with foster carers who may then go onto adopt, is a new way of working which will need careful planning and training of these prospective adopters.
- 3.14. Due to the high number of children with adoption as the plan nationally, adopters can be much more selective about whom they will accept to adopt and therefore it is difficult to find adopters for children aged over 3 years and for those with any specific difficulty. There are far fewer options when placing these children and for every year a child spends in foster care, their chance of adoption is reduced by 20%.

4. THE PLAN

- 4.1. The plan is to establish a shared adoption service under a joint arrangement for agencies to work together in providing recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and supervision of adopters. This will include a team of family finders and a team of assessing social workers, who would recruit, prepare, train and assess prospective adopters. A Berkshire wide service will streamline the process and ensure that children could be placed much quicker with a wider pool of adopters to choose from. It will always be appropriate for children (for their health and well being) to be placed with adopters outside their local area. Such a Berkshire wide service would also recruit outside of the area.
- 4.2. It is hoped that all six agencies in Berkshire will join this arrangement but it could be established with fewer than six. The preferred option is to site this within the existing joint arrangement at the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service hosted by The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead but there is also the option for another agency to host should this not be agreed by the host agency.

JUSTIFICATION FOR WORKING COLLECTIVELY TO DELIVER ADOPTION SERVICES

- 4.3. Other local authorities have combined services to good effect and have now provided examples of what shared services can achieve. The 'Tri- Borough' of Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea & Westminster was combined in early 2012 and are now recruiting more adopters than they have children to place.
- 4.4. In 2011/12, St Helens, Warrington and Wigan Borough Councils combined their adoption services and established a shared service WWISH, hosted by Wigan under a joint arrangement. The service took a year to establish and has been operating for 12 months. They have seen a sizeable increase in recruitment from 25 adopters to 48 adopters in this time and are increasingly able to place children within their own resources. It is anticipated that they too will ultimately realise a cost saving for the three local authorities.
- 4.5. Combined services are consistent with the government agenda in promoting innovation, new enterprise, specialism and working together to achieve excellence in service

provision and better outcomes for service customers. Additionally they are recommended as a way forward in Further Action on Adoption and The Children and Families Bill 2013, which is currently going through parliament and contains provision for the Secretary of State to force local authorities to contract out their adoption services if they do not begin to recruit more adopters and place more children.

- 4.6. Situating adoption within a specialised area ensures that priority can be given to this work in a way that is not always possible within multi functional family placement teams. Increasing the local and national pool of adopters and speeding up the adoption process with greater placement choice and better matching of needs reduces delay and its detrimental impact on children, enabling them to achieve timely placements and associated improved outcomes.
- 4.7. A shared service attains a higher profile and identity, there is the opportunity for shared branding, shared advertising, information, training and events and single point of referral and as a consequence is likely to attract more publicity and consequently more adopters.
- 4.8. There is the opportunity to develop staff expertise and to learn from a greater number of experienced staff members.
- 4.9. Concurrency and early placement (sometimes called fostering to adopt) is a specialised area of work which requires a degree of experience and expertise. It could be introduced more easily in a combined service and it does not make sense to reproduce 6 systems and 6 sets of procedures if we are considering small numbers of children. It would be beneficial to have a team with expertise in this area. Ensuring that children are placed for adoption even one month earlier than currently would realise a saving in fostering allowances for each local authority.

BENEFITS FOR JOINING SERVICES UNDER THE BERKSHIRE ADOPTION ADVISORY SERVICE

- 4.10 Use of the current joint arrangement structure reduces the risk of dependency on an external provider with the possibilities of escalating costs and lack of control. The agencies remain in control of the service and can set the agenda and can change or review it when required.
- 4.11 Berkshire already has a history of joint arrangements within the child care area with a solid infrastructure and a proven track record. There are already sound mechanisms for monitoring and oversight of such arrangements by all agencies.
- 4.12 The joint arrangement under BAAS is unique and offers best value by working with economies of scale. The BAAS already specialises in adoption and supports the work of the existing teams, offering advice and guidance to staff, organising the joint adoption panels, undertaking contact arrangements and support for birth families. There is already a sound management structure.
- 4.13 There is already a consortium arrangement with shared policies and procedures and shared resources
- 4.14 Additionally, joint arrangements work in a way that is different from those services situated at the heart of the local authority. They engender a service culture, operating in a way more akin to a small business. There is awareness that they must evidence their usefulness to stakeholders and the separate but connected nature of their provision gives staff the independence to focus fully on the task in hand.
- 4.15 Change needs to take place quickly and given the need to set up an infrastructure, the other agencies are unlikely to be able to act as quickly as the Berkshire Agencies and currently to our knowledge are only at the beginning of discussions.

5. OTHER OPTIONS FOR ADOPTION SERVICES FOR READING

MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

- 5.1. There have been and are many planned national changes in the future of adoption and the legal case system which makes it increasingly difficult to maintain the status quo. These include:-
- 5.2. The introduction in 2012 of the adoption scorecard which measures performance and compares with other LA's. Within a small LA, there is the potential for large fluctuations in performance. The increase in numbers of children needing adoption continues to present a challenge for the team, even with additional staff. Some children are still waiting too long for an adoptive placement, particularly those aged over 3 years and those with disabilities.
- 5.3. The size of the current team can result in challenges in times of staff absence such as for maternity leave or whilst recruiting staff in achieving the time scales. The new Ofsted framework for adoption which will come into force later this year will focus on how quickly adoption agencies place children for adoption when adoption is in the child's best interests.
- 5.4. Most children need to be placed outside of their home area therefore the adopters Reading recruits will most likely not be a suitable match for our children thereby causing some delay in the matching process. A larger team covering a much wider area can capitalise on matching children with potential adopters at a much earlier stage. This should result in less needing to be spent on fostering allowance fees. For some children with specific needs an adoption allowance may need to be paid but this can be lower than the current fostering fees.
- 5.5. The demands of changes in the legal system whereby care proceedings will be limited to 26 weeks in all but the most challenging cases. The Berkshire judiciary are currently reviewing ways in which they will work to try to meet these timescales which are not being met in many cases at present. These new timescales create particular challenges to adoption teams who will also then need to find placements for children much quicker than the current timescales.

JOINING WITH ANOTHER LA PARTNER

- 5.6. It is unclear at present which of the counties bordering Berkshire would be best placed to enter negotiations with, additionally, the Berkshire agencies have a good reputation in relation to adoption and this needs to be maintained. Agencies outside Berkshire tend to be larger shire counties and the joining up of the Berkshire Agencies would offer more opportunities to join regionally in the future if this was appropriate.

JOINING WITH A VOLUNTARY ADOPTION AGENCY PARTNER

- 5.7. Most voluntary adoption agencies (VAA's) are fairly small and the levelling out of the interagency fee from April 2013 (all adoptive placements will cost £27,000 instead of the lesser current fee of £13,500 for LA's and £6,500 for the Berkshire LA's) will make it possible to continue to use their resources and at the same time enable them to preserve their independence, making joining a local authority joint service less attractive.
- 5.8. Most VAA's specialise in recruiting adopters but the proposal being considered also looks at family finding for Berkshire children and in this area, the Berkshire agencies have

considerably more experience. According to the LGA, VAA's currently supply no more than 20% of approved adopters and there is little evidence to suggest that they have the capacity or the appetite to reach deeply into the LA market.

- 5.9. There does not appear to be any additional benefits for joining with a voluntary agency, given that Berkshire already works closely with the two VAA's in this area (PACT and Cabrini) and their resources would still be available to us.

6. NEXT STEPS

- 6.1. A seminar has been held with the Service and Team Managers of the Berkshire LA adoption teams to look at the various options with agreement to go forward to explore a pan Berkshire option. In principle five of the Berkshire LA's have indicated a firm interest, Slough are still considering their options. They have had significant investment in their adoption service over the past few years and may decide to keep their status quo. This need not deter the remaining Berkshire LA's from joining up.
- 6.2. A project manager is to be appointed to take forward the project with the aim of a new pan Berkshire service being implemented in October 2013. Information is currently being gathered from the Berkshire Authorities re staffing levels. The proposal is that this will be a three year project and then reviewed. Staff will need to be either seconded or TUPE'd from their current LA's into the new arrangement. The Head of HR at RBWM is leading on this piece of work.
- 6.3. Work is underway to devise the possible structure of the new service based on current and future demand. The role of Agency Decision Maker (each Agency has to have an ADM who approves adoptions based on the recommendations from panels and is usually the Head of Service) will continue to be carried out by the Head of Service although some decisions could be carried out on a rolling basis by two Heads of Services.
- 6.4. The Service Manager of the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service and the Adoption Manager in Wokingham have visited WWISH, hosted by Wigan, to ascertain how they brought their adoption agencies together under one roof.
- 6.5. Premises will be needed to base the new proposed adoption service, ideally this would be in central Berkshire. The headquarters of BAAS can continue to be based in Windsor. Each LA area would need some hot desks for the team to visit the Children's Teams to ensure good communication about the children needing adoptive placements.
- 6.6. Adoption support is important for the ongoing stability and support of any adoptive placement. It is proposed this will initially continue to be provided in each LA, and will be measured nationally on placement breakdowns. It is felt that keeping this role located in each area would enable a swifter response when needed but may warrant a closer examination in due course.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1. Within the next few years there will be systemic changes to the way adoption services are delivered nationally. As the Government acknowledges this will not be an easy transition, whether they take action or whether local authorities put forward alternative proposals, a direction of travel has been established. The ADCS is looking at what, in the next 2-3 years, will be an acceptable minimum viability for a Local Authority Adoption agency for it successful.

7.2. The critical need is for the Berkshire agencies to respond to the challenge of ensuring that they recruit, approve and match the larger number of children who have adoption as the plan. If the powers are taken by the Secretary of State as proposed in the Children and Families Bill, then a very different set of organisational arrangements will be established.

7.3. In taking up this challenge and deciding to work together, the Berkshire unitary agencies will become one of the largest group of agencies to pool their resources and should this prove to be successful there is no reason why it could not become the blueprint for other agencies who wish to establish a joint arrangement. Taking bold action now would additionally send a message to Government that we are ready to embrace change and that local authorities continue to have a role in the recruitment of adopters for local children.

8. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

8.1. The decision will support the strategic aim of promoting equality, social inclusion and a safe and healthy environment for all by ensuring that the some of the most vulnerable children are enabled to live in a permanent secure home for the duration of their childhood and beyond.

9. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

9.1. National research and consultations have concluded that adoption services need to be more accessible and sensitive to the needs of adopters. This proposal will improve the customer experience. Likewise young people and adults who were adopted all report on the importance of early placement with suitable carers to ensure their future live security and well being.

9.2. Staff will be fully consulted on the development of the service to ensure where possible they are able to influence the development of a first rate provision for the children of Reading

10. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

10.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, and advance equality of opportunity

10.2 An EIA will be conducted for the new service in due course, however there is already considerable national evidence to suggest that children from BME backgrounds wait longer for suitable placements, as do disabled children and children whose parents have mental health issues. Therefore the proposal to improve the number and speed with which children are adopted will specifically help to address this issue.

11 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The adoption service will need to be inspected under the adoption regulation and legislation.

12 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The costs associated to this proposal have yet to be finalised. Although it is likely there will be some initial start up costs which can be met within the one off Government Adoption Reform Grant. There is then no expectation of budget increase, indeed there is likely to be a budget saving in the longer term given the savings that will be made by placing children in placements earlier. This is as

yet not quantified but will be the subject of careful scrutiny and projections in the next few weeks.

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

'Further Action on adoption' (DfE, Feb 2013)