

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, ADULT AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

TO:	ADULT SOCIAL CARE, CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE		
DATE:	7 NOVEMBER 2013	AGENDA ITEM:	16
TITLE:	ADOPTION - PAN BERKSHIRE PROPOSAL		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR JAN GAVIN	PORTFOLIO:	CHILDREN & FAMILIES
SERVICE:	EDUCATION, HOUSING AND SOCIAL CARE	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. 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. A Berkshire wide service would streamline the process and ensure that children are placed much quicker with a wider pool of adopters to choose from.
- 1.2. The report highlights that progress has been slow to date which is causing some concern about the numbers of children awaiting placements.

**2. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

- 2.1 To note the progress being made in the setting up of a Pan Berkshire adoption service.

**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. 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 Local Government Association, Solace and Assoc of Directors of Children's Services 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.

## **BERKSHIRE POSITION**

3.2. As noted in the July report to the ACE Committee 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. As agreed there has been work ongoing since the spring to develop a shared adoption agency across all of the six Berkshire authorities. This report provides an update as to the position at October 2013.

### **4. THE PLAN & PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 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 was hoped that all six agencies in Berkshire would 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. At this time Windsor and Maidenhead have indicated they wish to host the shared service.
- 4.3. In late July Slough confirmed they would be unlikely to be joining a shared service, noting they have made considerable inroads to develop their own recruitment of adopters and is able to meet their own demand. This could leave Reading Borough Council working with the four smallest local authorities. There is some concern that the sheer volume of demand in Reading may not be able to be met within this limited geography.
- 4.4. There had been some delay in getting a project plan in place, however a costed business case has now been produced and agreed. Reading continues to work on the basis that the new service will incur no additional cost to Reading than the existing service and in all likelihood will make savings in the longer term.
- 4.5. Original discussions focused on the Service being in place by September but it was soon clear that this was unachievable and a revised date of January was discussed. More recently there has been mention of further slippage to March 2014. This is of some concern to Reading.
- 4.6. Given the imperative in Reading to find placements for children we have noted that we will need to explore other options with other areas as well and these approaches are being made and possibilities considered.

- 4.7. We have also noted that the new service will need to explore adopter recruitment from outside the area to meet our demand. We targeted Basingstoke/Hants last year. This would be done in addition to realising the potential effectively inside Berkshire, capitalising on the experience of staff that are familiar with their respective areas. Reading and Slough particularly raised the issue of needing to match the profile of their children requiring adoption
- 4.8. The other issue to be progressed is one of the location of the service. There is an option to co-locate the service in the existing BAAS site in Windsor & Maidenhead or indeed in a central base such as Reading with staff going out to spend time in local authority areas or to have a primary base alongside children's social work teams and then meeting regularly at a base for team meetings and service developments. There are positives and negatives about both options so these will be further explored and decisions made in due course.
- 4.9. Although there are some concerns about the speed with which the project is working and the ability of the service to meet our needs if it is made up of only five local authorities the benefits of the end product are still of great interest to Reading. Having a shared service will minimise the risk of dependency on an external provider/s and will potentially speed up the placement of children. We know maintaining the status quo is not an option.

## **5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS**

- 5.1. 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.

## **6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION**

- 6.1. 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.
- 6.2. Staff are being fully involved and 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

## **7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

- 7.1. 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
- 7.2. 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.

## **8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

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

## **9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The costs associated to the service 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.

## **10 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

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