

Title of meeting: Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care

Subject: Annual Adoption Panel Activity Report March 2017

Date of meeting: 13 July 2017

Report by: Sarah Newman - Deputy Director of Children's Services, Children's Social Care

Wards affected: None

1. Requested by:

- 1.1. It is required by Standard 25.6 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011 for Local Authority Adoption Services that the executive receives a six-monthly written report outlining the management and performance of the adoption agency.

The Cabinet Member is asked to note the progression of the Regional Adoption Agency and the performance of the Portsmouth Adoption Agency in terms of:

- (a) Reducing waiting times for children being placed in permanent families.
- (b) Sustained number of children adopted in contrast to the national picture

2. Purpose

- 2.1. The previous report prepared September 2016. This report will update the Lead Member on Portsmouth Adoption Agency's end of year activity and ongoing development in accordance with the government's Adoption Reform Programme introduced in 2012. This report includes the independent Portsmouth Adoption Panel annual report written by the panel chair (appendix 3).

3. Background

- 3.1. Practices in adoption continue to receive government attention to promote stable, permanent care arrangements for children unable to be cared for by their birth families. In the DfE paper 'Adoption - A Vision For Change' the government outlined expectations for improved practices through regionalised agencies.

Grants have been made available for local authorities to develop these agencies and Portsmouth, Southampton, Isle of Wight and Hampshire are working with the voluntary sector to develop a regional adoption agency (RAA) - Adoption South Central. The proposed date for the RAA to go live is April 2018.

4. Areas that are doing well

- 4.1. The number of Looked After Children leaving care through adoption has continued to increase in accordance with government led timescales (appendix 2). Nationally there has been a reduction in the number of adoptive families recruited, and whilst Portsmouth has also experienced a reduction, the majority of our children have been placed with Portsmouth approved adopters. The outcome of which is those adoptive families and

children already have established working relationships within the Portsmouth Adoption Service, enabling early targeted adoption support to these families. A common theme for Portsmouth approved adopter feedback is we are welcoming, accessible and we know the children and adopters well and all able to promptly provide support.

- 4.2. Children needing adoptive families have complex needs and Portsmouth is committed to identifying the most suitable families for those children. This year we have successfully placed a very young child with extensive health needs, two older children with learning disabilities and children over the age of six with behavioural issues having experienced chronic neglect and birth histories of substance misuse.
- 4.3. Children's family finding social workers work closely with our regional partners and nationally with adoption agencies to identify the diversity of families needed for our children for where there is not a local match. Family finding costs have been mitigated with the government's introduction of the Inter-Agency Fee Fund July 2015 - November 2016 for children with a range of complex needs.
- 4.4. Portsmouth's timeliness for children being adopted has continued to improve from 541 days in March 2016 (average over three years) to 493 in March 2017 - a total of 94 children have been adopted over the past three years. Learning from the four placements that disrupted in the previous two years has meant improved practice in assessment and matching. This year there have been no placement disruptions.
- 4.5. Portsmouth has responded positively to the government initiative to provide early permanence for some children through Fostering for Adoption (FfA). FfA is suitable for children at high risk of needing an adoptive family and is agreed as a suitable plan with birth parents and the court.
- 4.6. The advantages of FfA is the minimum disruption for children whilst care proceedings are concluded. For 2016/17 four children were placed initial approved adoptive families under Fostering Regulations and then placed for adoption. FfA can reduce the time the child spends in care - for example one child was placed under four weeks old and adopted at four months old.
- 4.7. The Adoption Support Service continues to develop in order to provide comprehensive support packages. Following family referrals the service completed 45 Adoption Support Needs Assessments (ASNAs) leading to support packages being provided. Common themes for adoptive families are children's issues with identity; managing transitions - particularly in school leading to risk of being excluded and child on parent violence.
- 4.8. The adoption support service supports families from the point of children being placed with them (if needed), but primarily from the making of an adoption order through to adulthood offering therapeutic parenting strategies, support with child on parent violence ,life story work as well as offering group workshops for specific issues related to adoption. The service has been boosted as 22 families have been able to access specialist therapeutic support through funding created by the Government's Adoption Support Fund (ASF) at a total cost of £127,545. The ASF has been particularly beneficial enabling external providers to support those families living outside Portsmouth.
- 4.9. The Adoption Service continues to learn and improve following feedback provided by adopted adults and birth parents. For example of the 47 referrals received for birth

records and intermediary work there was an increase in younger adults who were adopted, requesting their birth records. It is evident that adopted adults need to understand how and why decisions were made to separate them from birth family and that they have full and accurate information recorded in their adoption files pertaining to local authority and court decisions where they are separated from their siblings.

- 4.10. Similarly adoption birth parent counselling is an open offer to birth parents involved in care proceedings leading to their child being adopted. This year there have been 16 referrals. Many birth parents are not ready to access this service in parallel with or just after care proceedings and will access the service months or years later. They may also join the quarterly birth parent support group which comprises birth parents having relinquished children many years ago and birth parents having children removed from their care to adoption.
- 4.11. For those Portsmouth approved adopters who are not matched with our Portsmouth children they have the opportunity to be matched with other agency children. This year four Portsmouth families have been matched with a total of six other agency children. Similarly to the previous year, the majority of those children are from our regional partner agencies which demonstrates good working relationships are already being established as we move toward becoming a regionalised adoption agency.

5. Areas for consideration

- 5.1. Portsmouth approved 21 adoptive families this year which in line with the national trend is a reduction in prospective adopters going forward. A recruitment strategy is in place this year to target potential families able to meet complex needs of our children. Portsmouth has an average of 40 children at any one time with a plan of adoption. Currently there are 11 children waiting to be matched to adoptive families. This includes siblings and children aged six plus.
- 5.2. The number of children with plans for adoption has reduced significantly this year in comparison to last year as has the number of placement orders granted by the court. (see appendix 1). Portsmouth continues to maintain a robust permanence tracking process to ensure children becoming Looked After have a clear, timely permanence plan appropriate to their needs. This may be placement with birth parents, special guardians, with extended family long term fostering or adoption. Permanence tracking will continue to monitor the number of children becoming Looked After to ensure early identification of those children needing permanence outside of birth families.
- 5.3. The adoption support service is available to an average total of 104 families each year which includes adoptive families transferring from other local authorities. The availability of the Adoption Support Fund has been invaluable to bolstering the support needs. Whilst there have been some restrictions newly implemented by the ASF criteria for applications, Portsmouth families to date have not been adversely affected by these. The challenge will be for the regional adoption agency to develop and sustain the improved adoption support services once the ASF ceases in 2020, within a static budget.
- 5.4. **Areas of development**
- 5.5. There was a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) project team established to drive the development of Adoption South Central expected to go live in April 2018. Adoption South Central comprises Portsmouth, Hampshire, Isle of Wight; Southampton the voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs), Barnardos, Parents and Children Together (PACT) and Adoption UK. With the contributions from the VAAs the four local authorities will come

together to provide a regional agency specialising in the recruitment of adoptive families; expecting high quality family finding for the local authorities and offering comprehensive support for adoptive families.

5.6. The benefits of an RAA to Portsmouth will be:

- 5.6.1. The removal of local competitive recruitment for prospective adoptive families
- 5.6.2. Immediate access to a wider pool of adoptive families for Portsmouth children across the region
- 5.6.3. Adoptive placements more localised within the local regional area, promoting efficiency in adoption support
- 5.6.4. Adoptive families able to access robust comprehensive support packages to mitigate risk of disruption for children with complex needs.
- 5.6.5. Building on local authority good practice, skills and expertise to enable prospective adopters to be fully prepared and suitably matched and supported with those children placed - securing that child's future throughout their childhood and beyond.

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Signed by (Director)

Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Adoption activity 2011-17

Appendix 2 - Annual report by adoption panel chair March 2017

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location

Appendix 1

Table 1: Adoption activity 2011 – 2017

From	To	Adoption orders No. of children adopted	No. of children's plans for adoption agreed	Placement Orders granted	No. of children linked with adoptive family for adoption	No. of prospective adoptive families approved	Placements disrupted
2010	2011	14	21		15	11	0
2011	2012	16	42		13	18	0
2012	2013	13	30		26	20	0
2013	2014	27	41	30	35	37	0
2014	2015	34	29	27	31	32	2
2015	2016	25	41	41	28	22	2
2016	2017 *	35	21	19	31	21	0

Table 2: Placement type

From	To	PCC	OLA*	VAA*
2014	2015	14	6	11
2015	2016	22	2	4
2016	2017	19	5	6

*Other local authority

*Voluntary Adoption Agency

Portsmouth Team report March 2017
National data A1 515 days

A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (days)

3yr average	Mar-16	Apr-16	May-16	Jun-16	Jul-16	Aug-16	Sep-16	Oct-16	Nov-16	Dec-16	Jan-17	Feb-17	Mar-17
A1	541	537	532	511	507	498	492	490	482	482	486	493	493

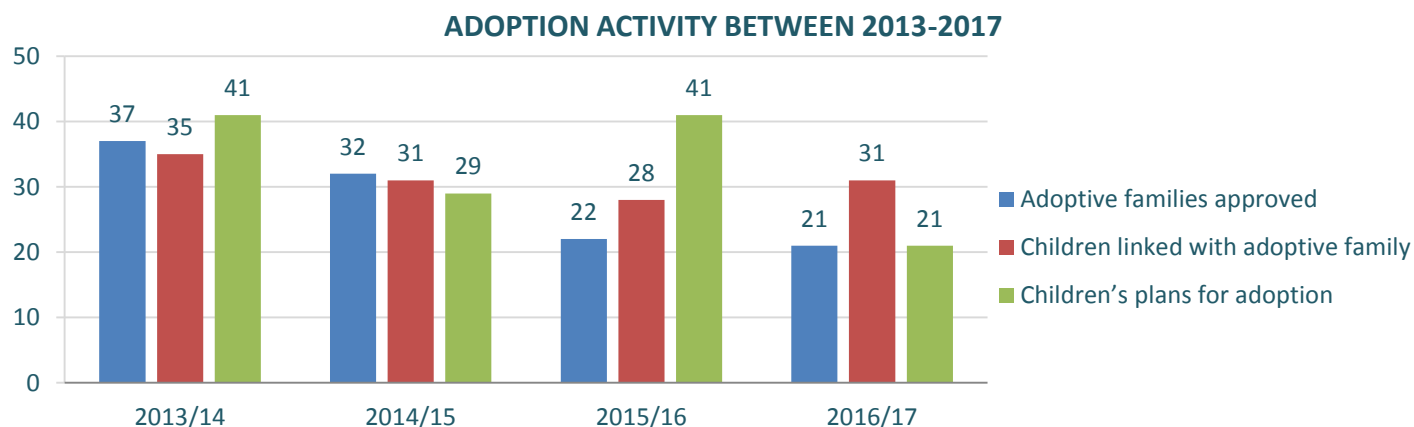
National Data A2 - 229

A2: Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days)

3yr average	Mar-16	Apr-16	May-16	Jun-16	Jul-16	Aug-16	Sep-16	Oct-16	Nov-16	Dec-16	Jan-17	Feb-17	Mar-17
A2	251	251	252	243	244	240	235	235	230	230	236	239	241

ANNUAL REPORT BY ADOPTION PANEL CHAIR –MARCH 2017

ADOPTION ACTIVITY BETWEEN 2013-2017



- As the table shows, panel activity in the last year has continued to decline for approval of prospective adopters and has increased slightly for children linked with adopters. The fall in adopter numbers reflects national and regional trends.
- Panels have a changing membership chosen from the central list consisting of twelve members. The central list consists of social workers; adopters; a medical adviser; the Chair and Vice Chair; a foster carer; an adopted person and a birth mother.
- All panel members are appraised each year by the Chair and Panel adviser, although our programme for these has been delayed by scheduling issues at panel as the appraisals are usually held after panel. All panel members remain very conscientious and committed to the Panel process and provide a rich blend of perspectives for consideration of any application.
- Panel continues to meet fortnightly but there have been a few cancelled panels during the year. We average around 21 panels per year.

- The Chair and Vice Chair attend the six monthly Adoption and Permanence Forum with senior Departmental Managers to discuss practice and performance issues.
- The quality of the reports to panel remain of a good standard but it is clear that Government time scales for Prospective Adopter approval and for Children moving onto Adoption have had an impact on the preparation of paperwork for panel. The Chair and vice Chair have met with managers to discuss rationalising reports needed to reduce duplication.
- The Agency has committed to updating reports to panel ensuring that we have the most up to date information for our recommendations to the Agency.
- This year saw the introduction of Foster Carers attending panel (briefly) to give a short pen picture of their fostered child who is about to be linked with adopters . Panel members have really appreciated this development as it helps them have a fuller picture of the child being considered.
- Panel had expressed concern earlier in the year about the brevity of introductions for children moving into adoptive placements. This appears to have improved, hopefully assisted by creative involvement of the Adoption Support team.
- The Panel has benefitted from short presentations by Adoption team staff to brief us on changes in agency practice around issues such as adopters preparation and training and adoption support programme.
- Finally, uncertainties continue surrounding the creation of the impending Regional Adoption Authority (RAA). The Chair recently attended an initial meeting with other adoption panel chairs in the Region to be briefed on developments and to explore possible models for future RAA panels which will operate from April 2018.

Mo O'Reilly
Chair of Adoption Panel
29.03.17