

**THIS ITEM IS FOR INFORMATION ONLY.** (Please note that 'Information Only' reports do not require Equality Impact Assessments, Legal or Finance comments as no decision is being taken.)

**Title of meeting:** Cabinet member for Children Families and Education

**Subject:** Six monthly Adoption Agency Activity Report March 2022 - September 2022

**Date of meeting:** 20 July 2023

**Report by:** Michelle Sanders Interim Head of Service for Children we Care For

**Wards affected:** ALL

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## 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 which have been provided. This report provides the summary information for the six-month period of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

## 2. Purpose

- 2.1. This report will update the Lead Member, and the Cabinet on the activity of the Portsmouth Adoption Service for the period from 1 April 2022 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022, as required by the Adoption regulations.
- 2.2. The Portsmouth Adoption Service is provided directly by the Adoption Team within the Council. The team is responsible for the work with children who have a plan of adoption and works with Adopt South our Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) who find, assess, and support adopters.
- 2.3. This report will describe the work of the in-house adoption team and the RAA and provide data of the outcomes achieved in the 6-month period
- 2.4. Lastly it will provide an update on the priorities set out in the last reporting year and an update in any changes and or additions the coming year.

### **3. Background**

3.1. In 2016 Authorised Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies joined together to form Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs). As a result, Hampshire County Council (HCC), Isle of Wight Council (IOW), Portsmouth City Council (PCC) and Southampton City Council (SCC) Adoption Services came together, along with the voluntary adoption agencies Barnardo's and Parents and Children Together (PACT) to establish the Adopt South Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). Adopt South went live on 1 April 2019.

### **4. Portsmouth Adoption Team**

4.1 The Portsmouth Adoption Team take responsibility for children who have a plan for adoption until the point of the Adoption Order being made. The team undertakes the work that achieves that plan, prepares children for permanence, and concludes the legal requirements that changes a child's legal status to allow adoption to take place. The team comprises of three full time social workers, two part time social workers, a social work assistant and a team leader.

4.2 The social workers in the Adoption Team begin working with children who are identified as needing a parallel plan of adoption as one of the possible permanent outcomes.

4.3 A Parallel Plan ensures that a child who is unable to return to their birth parent(s) or wider family have an alternative permanence plan by means of adoption. This parallel plan avoids any delay in decision making and ensures we are considering both options alongside each other.

4.4 The Adoption Team, work with the allocated child's social worker to gather information about the child and their family. They are responsible for compiling all the relevant documentation which is used to complete a child's permanence report (CPR). This report forms part of the documentation provided to the Agency Decision Maker who is responsible for the consideration and potential agreement of an adoption plan. It must stand the test that nothing else, other than adoption, will reasonably do for a child.

4.5 The working relationship between the adoption social worker and child's social worker enables a smooth transition for the child, should they be made subject to a Care and Placement Order at a final court hearing. It is at this point that the adoption social worker becomes the allocated social worker. Family finding completed during the care proceedings enables a match to be made at the earliest opportunity. A linking meeting is held when a potential family has been identified for the child. The adoption social worker will then meet with the prospective adopters, and the adopter's social worker from Adopt South, and will begin the process of progressing to a linking Panel. Following a successful Linking Panel recommendation, the team begins the work of moving the child to live with their forever family. There is careful and considered work undertaken as to when and how introductions are made. The team work to support the child, their prospective adoptive family, and their birth family to the point of an Adoption Order being made. Life story work and memory boxes are prepared by the team during this period to support them in moving to their forever family and to support their identify in moving forwards.

4.6 Involvement of adopters in the recruitment, assessment, and approval of prospective adopters will continue to be expanded. It is evident that adopters telling their stories and their experiences provides prospective adopters with real life messages as to how they can embrace the adoption experience and support their child(ren) identity. Feedback is regularly sought from prospective adopters and adopters during the assessment and matching stages.

## 5. Adopt South

5.1 The key functions for Adopt South are the recruitment, assessment and support of prospective adoptive families, and the post adoption support services for adopted children and their families. The Adopt South Children's Family Finding team is directly linked to each local authority Children's Adoption Team to ensure suitable potential adoptive families are identified as soon as possible, promoting timely matching and placement for those children. Those children adopted, and their families have access to Adopt South's comprehensive post adoption support service.

5.2 Adopt South compares very well to the other 31 Regional Adoption Agencies. The timeliness of the work remains well within government expectations, enabling children to secure permanent families more quickly and all children during this reporting period being placed with in house adopters.

5.3 The close working relationship between Adopt South and the Children's Adoption Team allows for the early identification of additional support if required. It also allows for children to be placed locally to their area of birth if safe to do so.

5.4 Since the launch of Adopt South, 633 children have had families identified. 274 of these children have been children that have been assessed as harder to place. 386 children have been formally linked and 380 families approved.

5.5 During this reporting period families have been identified for 115 children, including matching for 51 children assessed as harder to place. Of these 115 children 66 were Hampshire children; 3 Isle of Wight; 30 Southampton children and 16 children from Portsmouth.

## 6. Adoption Activity

6.1. The adoption activity for the period of 2019- sept 2022 is detailed in appendix 1. The most recent data tells us;

- There were 18 children adopted in the year 2021/2022. There have been no children adopted during this reporting period which in part has been as a result of the Somerset judgement and some delays for children.
- Within this reporting period there were 16 children linked with prospective adopters.
- 5 children had placement orders granted.
- 3 children had plans of adoption agreed.
- 3 placements were made under fostering for adoption

7. For some young children unable to live with their birth family it is possible for them to be placed in Fostering for Adoption Placements (FfA). These are adoptive families who are also approved temporarily as foster carers for a specific child. Fostering for Adoption can

offer the best opportunity for the child if the court decides they need to be adopted as the child can be placed with an approved adoptive family whilst parents and wider family members are being considered. The child remains in one placement whilst decisions are being made rather than being placed with a foster family and then moved to an adoptive family should the court decide the child needs adoption. Appendix A tells us that there is a steady number of FfA with an average yearly number of 6 over the past three years. This compares well within the region having 13 foster for adopt placements in total.

8. In the year April 2021 to March 2022 there were 23 plans of adoption agreed. This first half of this year shows 3 children, which is a significant reduction in the number of children being considered by the agency decision maker. However, there are various other permanent options for children to provide them with secure and safe care for their minorities. This data may tell us that successful interventions with their family and their wider network have resulted in adoption not being necessary.

- 8.1. During this period, all children have been placed with Adopt South adoptive families which means those children remain placed within the geographical region and those families will already have knowledge of and access to the Adopt South support service. Therefore, adoptive parents are more likely to access early support to avoid any risk of adoption breakdown. Last year there were 4 children regionally placed outside of the region one being a Portsmouth child. The continued placement of children within the region has enabled Adopt South to remain well within budget for any interagency spend. In addition, there has been an income generated on other regional agencies using approved adopters from Adopt south and have met 72% of their yearly income target already.

## 9. Adopters' Journey

- 9.1 94 new households have been approved during the first half of 2022. Stage 1 of the process has a dedicated team and are the only RAA that has so. This early stage in the process of assessment has provided potential adopters with time to understand the needs of children being considered for adoption and the requirement of providing therapeutic parenting. The average length of this assessment stage in this reporting period is 1.6 months, remaining well in the government expectation of 2 months. The team continue to focus on applicants considering placements of siblings and older children and those with additional needs, giving greater scope for placements.

- 9.2 The overall timescales of the stage 2 assessment process were achieved in 3.6 months within this 6-month period, which is well within the government expectation of 4 months.

- 9.3 The ASGLB data shows that the RAA were the only adoption agency achieving both stages of the adopter journey within timescales.

- 9.4 Regarding the overall adoption journey of all four stages the average timescale for the first quarter of this reporting year was 5 months and for quarter 2 was 4.8 months, remaining well within the government expectation of 6 months.

- 9.5 This data tells us that there is a year-on-year improvement with the timeliness of assessing adopters and children being linked and placed with the average last year being 5.4 months and the previous year being 5.5

9.6 The ASGLB continues to show that Adopt South has the shortest adoption journey of all the 31 regional adoption agencies.

## 10. Childs Journey

10.1 The first half of this reporting year has seen an increase in the number of childrens plans across the region being considered by the agency decision maker. Across the region this has been 86 children in total. In Portsmouth this related to 3 children.

10.2 There have been 61 placement orders agreed across the region in this reporting period. Portsmouth had 5 children made subject of a placement order.

## 11. Adoption Support

11.1 Many children placed for adoption come from families with complex backgrounds where they have experienced trauma due to ongoing neglect, families experiencing domestic abuse and drug and alcohol abuse. The adoption support provided includes interventions such as family therapy, play therapy and birth parent counselling. Research tells us of the significant impact on a child's development of early childhood trauma and it is imperative that families can access support in a timely manner. This provides support as they progress through their minority and onto adulthood. Support can ensure an increased resilience for both the child and their adoptive parent(s) to enable children to adjust and repair from their early experiences. The adoption support service has recently been redesigned to create teams to focus on a specific part of the service and shows it is being continually reviewed and developed. The four teams are now:

- The Adopt South Family Hub
- The adopt south family support and assessment team
- The adopt south family connections team
- Adoption support for adults.

Information from the Adopt South Progress Summary Report attached highlights some examples of the support taken up:

- 279 new enquiries
- Positive take up of the consultation service with 12 out of the 18 being used in the first half year
- 48 families attended a family activity event to provide space to come together and build on their adoption support network
- 22 educational psychology consultations have taken place
- 260 children and parents attended the family fun day
- £613, 800 approved for families from the adoption support fund.
- 5,914 active exchanges with additional support to birth families and adoptive parents with 257 virtual appointment and 69 face to face.

## 12. Somerset- Judgment

12.1 In November 2021, Somerset County Council asked for legal advice about the Placement Orders for ten children (who had not yet been matched with adopters), where Adoption Agency Regulations had not been fully complied with. This was particularly in relation to the way children's health information was presented to the Court. There was subsequently a delay for children who were awaiting final orders

of adoption, whilst clarity was sought by Local Authorities in relation to the expectations of the Courts regarding Medical Advisors reports for Adoption. The President of the Family Division handed down the final judgement of the Somerset case in April 2022.

12.2 Portsmouth City Council, alongside the RAA, have planned to ensure compliance with the medical advice in line with this judgement. This requires an assurance of a comprehensive medical summary being included by the Medical Advisor in the paperwork presented to the Agency Decision Maker. During this period Adoption Orders and Placement Orders could not be granted whilst this legal issue regarding medical information was being resolved. However, they could be placed with prospective adopters under a Foster for Adopt arrangement. This prevented delay for some children in forming relationships with their adopters, which is a critical element of promoting early attachment. Whilst compliance with the medical advice has been progressed, this has impacted this reporting period with no children having an adoption order granted. Adoption Orders started to be granted in October 2022, with medical summaries in place, and we know 9 children have since been adopted between the second half of 2022/23. This is showing progress since this judgment has been made and children are progressing through the court process.

### **13. Regional picture**

13.1 There continues to be a decline in the number of placement orders being granted and has not risen in line with the number of parallel plans in place and children plans being approved for adoption by the agency decision maker. COVID has impacted on the court and hearings being delayed holding bi-monthly hearings, alongside the impact of the Somerset judgment. However, the numbers of children formally linked has risen in the first half of this reporting year for children being adopted.

13.2 There have only been 2 disruptions pre-adoption order during this reporting period. There have been 11 since the launch of the RAA.

13.3 Learning events continue to take place with the RAA to ensure practitioners are aware of any changes needed in practice in moving forwards.

### **14. For local consideration**

14.1 The number of children needing adoption has reduced and Portsmouth has seen a reduction in the number of children with a court agreed adoption plan (Placement Order), over the past 18 months reducing from 19 last year to 5 in this reporting period. In 2020/21 there were 16 children. Portsmouth Children's Social Care continues to maintain a parallel planning process which is tracked and monitored through the care proceedings tracker and Looked After Child reviews. This is telling us that work is completed in a timely manner for those children identified as needing to be considered for adoption and have a parallel plan in place. We also know permanence has many possible outcomes and can include placement with birth parents, special guardians, relatives, long-term fostering, in addition to adoption. What requires a review is the confidence that all children unable to return to their birth families have adoption considered as part of their permanence planning. Of the current 16 children who have families identified, 15 are under 2 years of age and one child is aged 2-5. There are no sibling groups identified with families. Regionally 44 children were between 2-5 years of age and 7 were over 5. 15 sibling groups



have families identified. We need to assure ourselves that we are ambitious for all our children including those harder to place children which includes older children, sibling groups and those assessed as having additional needs. The RAA have demonstrated in their regional data that these children can be afforded with a forever family, and it is imperative that these children have the opportunity of a focused period of time where this is explored for them as a parallel plan.

## **15. Areas of development**

15.1 Adopt South continuously updates the recruitment strategy including developing prospective adoptive parents' knowledge, understanding and support to promote matching with the children with complex needs. This work is enabling the identification of prospective adopters and subsequent matching and there is one child currently in the city waiting for matching. Investment to regional adoption agencies will boost adoptive family recruitment, particularly for those children with complex needs and deemed harder to place i.e., older children, sibling groups and children of black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

15.2 In summary the strengths of Adopt South for Portsmouth:

- The recruitment pool is shared across all the four regions and there are less out of area adoptions having to be considered and purchased.
- As a RAA they have the lowest number of children waiting for adoptive families, having approved the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest number of adopters across all 31 RAAs.
- There is immediate access to a wider pool of adoptive families for Portsmouth children across the region.
- Adoptive placements are more localised within the regional area, promoting efficiency in adoption support, particularly specialist local service providers for adoption support.
- We are building on local authority good practice, knowledge, 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.
- Regionalising adoption support enables adoptive families being able to access robust comprehensive support packages to mitigate risk of disruption for children with complex needs.

## **16. Conclusion and plans for 2022/23**

16.1 The Local authority and the RAA have continued to ensure that children identified as needing an adoptive family have been prioritised. There have been some challenging areas, and the key performance data shows a reduction in the number of children being adopted. Whilst this is a national and regional picture, Portsmouth is seeing a more significant decline.

16.2 The continued funding will support adoptive families to provide the care for children who have experienced trauma in their early childhood so that they can settle and benefit from adoption.

16.3 Additional funding will support the need for more adoptive families for children that are harder to place.

16.4 The priorities for the next year are as follows.



- Any potential delays within the court process need to be mitigated to ensure children are placed in a timely manner with their adoptive families. As a result of the pandemic, applications to the court are now heard on a "bulk" listed day rather than individually. We will ensure compliance with timely applications for the bulk listings, including compliance with the Somerset judgment.
- We will continue to identify children through the permanence process so that where the parallel plan is adoption, they can be placed with a family at the earliest point should this be the outcome of the court, alongside all necessary support that may be required. This includes reducing the time between placement order and matching.
- We will review our permanence planning process to ensure we are ambitious in our planning for all children unable to return to their birth families which will include children that are considered harder to place such as older children and those within sibling groups.
- Portsmouth will be actively involved in a new early permanence work stream being progressed by the RAA
- Ongoing training will be provided in conjunction with the RAA to ensure practitioners are updated about recent research and practice, including developing the skills to assess siblings staying together to apart as they move onto permanence.

Signed by (Director):

## Appendices:

### 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:

<b>Title of document</b>	<b>Location</b>
Adoption Activity 2019 - Sept 2022	End of document
Adoption Scorecard	End of document
Adopt South Progress Summary Report Data and Comparisons to projected targets Quarter 1 (April – June 2022)	 Adopt South - Progress Summary R
Adopt South Progress Summary Report Data and Comparisons to projected targets Quarter 2 (July – September 2022)	 Adopt South Year 4 - Q2 2022-23 Shorter



**Appendix 1** Adoption activity April 2019 – Sept 2022

<b>Year 1 April - 31 March</b>	<b>Adoption orders No. of children adopted</b>	<b>Children's plans for adoption agreed</b>	<b>Placement Orders granted</b>	<b>Children linked with adoptive family</b>	<b>Prospective adoptive families approved</b>	<b>FfA placements</b>	<b>Placements disrupted</b>
2019/20	25	27	20	21	34 (Portsmouth number)	2	2
2020/21	18	16	16	19	117 (Adopt South)	5	0
2021/22	18	23	19	10	101	7	0
2022 / 23 (Q1 - 2) April - - September	0	3	5	16	41	3	0

## Appendix 2 - Adoption Scorecards

- 1) Page 9 shows data extracted from the DfE Adoption; Special Guardianship Leadership Board Adoption Scorecards published 24/08/20.  
For full information please see link:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards)

- 2) Government thresholds for children needing adoption timeliness

A1: 426 days - from date child enters care to moving in with adoptive family

A2: 121 days -from date the court agrees to local authority placing a child for adoption to the date the local authority agrees the match for the child with an adoptive family

Government Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB), figures for rolling year 2016-19 (published August 2020)

A1: National England average 433 days

A2: National England average 173 days

Portsmouth timescales for 2020 / 21

Scorecard 10 - 356 days

Scorecard 2 - 200 days

Scorecard 20 - 205 days

Timescales for April 2021 - March 2022

Scorecard figures for 2021 - 22

	Quarter 1 (April - June)	Quarter 2 (July - September)
Scorecard 10 A10 (average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with adoptive family, adjusted for foster career adoptions, for children who have been adopted.)	198	249
Scorecard 2 A2 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.)	112	170
Scorecard 20 A20 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.) - 204	126	71
	Quarter 3 (October - December)	Quarter 4 (January - March)
Scorecard 10 A10 (average time (in days) between a child entering care and moving in with adoptive family, adjusted for foster career adoptions, for children who have been adopted.)	374	804
Scorecard 2 A2 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.)	273	146
Scorecard 20 A20 (Average time (in days) between Local Authority receiving court authority to place a child and deciding on a match to an adoptive family.) - 204	177	620

Scorecard figures for April 2022 - September 22

These scorecards have not been triggered as there have been no adoption orders made in this period.