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Title of meeting: Cabinet Member for Children and Families Services

Subject: Annual Adoption Agency Activity Report April 2022 - March 2023

Date of meeting: 14 December 2023

Cabinet Member: Councillor Suzy Horton, Cabinet Member for Children Families and Education

Report by: Renee Eddy Service Lead Building Your Futures and Adoption.

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 which have been provided. This report provides the summary information for April 2022-March 2023 updating the previous six-monthly report for the period of 1st April 2022 to 30th September 2022.

2. Purpose

2.1. This report will update the Lead Member on the activity of the Portsmouth Adoption Service for the period from 1 April 2022 to 31st March 2023, 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 Adopt South and provide data to support the outcomes achieved in the previous year 2022/23.

2.4. Lastly it will provide an update on the progress on the priorities set out in the previous report and the priorities for the year ahead.

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)s 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 34 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, 746 children have had families identified. 347 of these children have been children that have been assessed as harder to place. 438 children have been formally linked and 433 families approved.

5.5 During this reporting period families have been identified for 228 children, including matching for 124 children assessed as harder to place. Of these 228 children 127 were Hampshire children; 13 Isle of Wight; 53 Southampton children and 35 children from Portsmouth.

6. Adoption Activity

6.1. The adoption activity for the period of 2019- March 2023 is detailed in appendix 1. The most recent data tells us;

- There were 13 children adopted in the year 2022/2023. There were no children adopted during the first half of this reporting period which in part was as a result of the Somerset ruling.
- Within this reporting period there were 18 children linked with prospective adopters.
- 19 children had placement orders granted.
- 25 children had plans of adoption agreed.
- 6 placements were made under fostering for adoption.

6.2 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 26 foster for adopt placements in total last year, with a significantly larger number of children being adopted in this period. Our ratio of FfA compared well within the region.

6.3 In the year April 2021 to March 2022 there were 23 plans of adoption agreed. The first half of this year showed 3 children, which was a significant reduction in numbers. There has been a significant increase in activity during the second part of this reporting year with a total of 25 children having a decision made by the agency decision maker for adoption.

6.4 During this period, all Portsmouth 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. There were 2 children regionally placed outside of the region from the IoW. 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 with 4 in total providing an income of £124,000.

7 Adopters' Journey

7.1 94 new households have been approved during this year. 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.

7.2 The overall timescales of the stage 2 assessment process were achieved in 3.7 months within this reporting period, which is well within the government expectation of 4 months.

7.3 The ASGLB data shows that Adopt South were the only adoption agency achieving both stages of the adopter journey within timescales. In addition, Adopt South is one of only two regional adoption agencies where the average time between a child entering care and being placed for adoption is within government timescales.

7.4 Regarding the timescales of the overall adoption journey this is averagely 5 months which is 7% less time than in year 3 and is well within the government expectation of 6 months.

7.5 The ASGLB continues to show that Adopt South has the shortest adoption journey of all the 34 regional adoption agencies.

8 Childs Journey

8.1 This reporting year has seen an increase in the number of children's plans across the region being considered by the agency decision maker. Across the region this has been 151 an increase of 12%. Portsmouth numbers increased from 23 to 25 in total.

8.2 There have been 135 placement orders agreed across the region in this reporting period. Portsmouth had 19 children made subject of a placement order which is the same number as the previous reporting year.

9 Adoption Support

9.1 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.

9.2 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.

9.3 Portsmouth adoption support for families includes Family Hub events and services, of which offer the most current needs to families in Portsmouth, which include:

- Support groups.
- Life story workshop.
- Feelings workshop.
- Talking about adoption.
- Sensory workshop.
- Social events for adoptive families.

10 Somerset Ruling

- 10.1 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.
- 10.2 Portsmouth City Council, alongside Adopt South, have planned to ensure compliance with the medical advice in line with this ruling. 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 the first half of this year 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 impacted on the first half of 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 have had 13 children adopted between the second half of 2022/23. This is showing progress since this ruling was been made and children are progressing through the court process.

11 Regional picture

- 11.1 There has been a 12% increase in the number of plans being approved for adoption by the agency decision maker across the region and a similar increase (10%) in the number of placement orders being granted. Portsmouth has not seen an increase in the number of placement orders being granted with 19 children for each year whilst the numbers are nominal.
- 11.2 There have only been 4 disruptions pre-adoption order during this reporting period for the whole region, none-pertaining to children from Portsmouth. There have been 13 since the launch of the RAA. Portsmouth has had one disruption since the launch of the RAA in 2019.
- 11.3 Learning events continue to take place with the RAA to ensure practitioners are aware of any changes needed in practice in moving forwards.

12 For local consideration

- 12.1 For the last reporting period it was highlighted the number of children needing adoption had reduced and Portsmouth had seen a reduction in the number of children with a court agreed adoption plan (Placement Order). Appendix 1 shows that there are now 19 children with a placement order having been granted which

has remained stable during the past two years. Portsmouth Children's Social Care continues to maintain a parallel planning process which is tracked and monitored through the care proceedings tracker and Children we care for 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 18 children who have families identified, 17 are under 2 years of age and one child is aged 2-5. There are no sibling groups identified with families. We need to assure ourselves that we are aspirational for all our children including those harder to place children. Adopt South 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. Ongoing work is enabling the identification of prospective adopters and subsequent matching and there is one child currently in the city waiting for matching. Investment in 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 global majority backgrounds.

13 Review of previous priorities 2022/23

13.1 The priorities for the previous reporting period were;

- 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 ruling.
This has been fully addressed and there is consistent compliance with medical summaries for the court. This is evidenced in the data with the significant rise of 0 children adopted in the first half of this reporting year to 13 children.
- 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.
Early permanence planning has been evidenced through the maintained number of agency decisions for children to be adopted (25). The timeliness of the child's journey to adoption remains strong.
- We will review our permanence planning process to ensure we are aspirational 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.
There is work underway to introduce permanence planning meetings and final care planning meetings prior to final court hearings to provide an additional level of reflection and scrutiny to permanence planning including for adoption. A permanence tracker is being developed that will allow scrutiny at a senior management level to ensure this is progressing
- Portsmouth will be actively involved in a new early permanence work stream being progressed by Adopt South.

This early permanence role and workshop will be in place for the Autumn of 2023 and in the interim the work detailed above will progress early permanence planning.

- Ongoing training will be provided in conjunction with Adopt South to ensure practitioners are updated about recent research and practice, including developing the skills to assess siblings staying together or apart as they move onto permanence.

Training will be scoped at the task and finish group that is being led by the head of service for safeguarding. This will be delivered from September 2023.

14 Conclusion and plans for 2023/24

14.1 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 particularly for those children with complex needs and deemed harder to place.

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 2nd highest number of adopters across all 34 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.

14.2 The Local authority and Adopt South have a strong relationship and have continued to ensure that children identified as needing an adoptive family have been prioritised. There have been some challenging areas. The data in October 2022 showed a reduction in the number of children being adopted which has significantly increased during the latter part of this reporting year. The impact of the Somerset ruling is now an historical one.

14.3 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. This is evidenced through the minimal disruptions that occur and when they do key learning is taken forward.

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

15 Priorities for 2023/24

- To implement and embed a robust permanence tracking process.
- Permanence planning meetings and final care planning meetings to be embedded.
- Training to focus on sibling assessments and early permanence planning.
- Portsmouth to be working closely with the new early permanence workstream and appointed officer in Adopt South in the Autumn 2023.
- To report on the impact of the work for children considered harder to place of adoption to the monthly performance operation board to ensure oversight of impact.


Signed by:

Sarah Daly, Director Children, Families and Education

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:

Title of document	Location
Adoption Activity 2019 - March 2023	End of document
Adoption Scorecard	End of document
Adopt South Progress Summary Report 2022/23	 Year 4 - 2022-2023 - Portsmouth City Cou

Appendix 1 Adoption activity April 2019 – Sept 2022

Year 1 April - 31 March	Adoption orders No. of children adopted	Children's plans for adoption agreed	Placement Orders granted	Children linked with adoptive family	Prospective adoptive families approved	FfA placements	Placements disrupted
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	13	25	19	18	94	6	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

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.

Scorecard figures for 2022 - 23

	Quarter 1 (April - June)	Quarter 2 (July - September)	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.)	0	0	348	551
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.)	0	0	239	163
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	0	0	178	367