

AGENDA ITEM 6

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| Cabinet | FP/805/03/12 |
| Date: 24 April 2012 | |

Essex Adoption Agency Ofsted Inspection 2012

Report by Councillor Sarah Candy, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Enquiries to Officer Dave Hill, Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families

Purpose of report

To inform Cabinet about the outcome of the recent OFSTED inspection and consider the action plan designed to address the three practice recommendations.

Background

The Essex Adoption Agency was the first service to achieve Beacon Status in 2002/2003 within Essex County Council. It has maintained a consistently high standard of service including achieving its Public Service Agreement (PSA) target in 2004/05 resulting in over £1 million being awarded to Essex County Council. In its two previous Ofsted inspections in 2005 and 2008, the Essex Adoption Agency was awarded Good (strong) and in February 2012 Good with Outstanding features. The full report is attached at Appendix 1.

The Inspection

Prior to the inspection, the Agency completed a comprehensive self assessment which the inspectors regarded as positive but realistic.

The Agency prepared comprehensive evidence for each of the Adoption National Minimum Standards including a range of resources and support materials. The inspectors were particularly impressed by the life story books and the robust management monitoring systems providing timely information on both adopters and children moving through the system. Feedback forms were sent out to a wide range of professionals and service users, all of which fed into the final outcome.

During the inspection week, the inspectors interviewed a cross section of managers and practitioners from across children's services, four adoptive parents, and a birth father. The Family Finders and Post Adoption Teams also gave presentations which were well received and afforded the inspectors the opportunity to speak with adopted young people in an informal setting.

These extracts highlight some of the positive features from the Ofsted Inspection Report:

- There is a clear focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption. It is a well managed service both strategically and operationally and has made significant developments and improvements to its practice since the last inspection.
- The service undertakes good assessments for prospective adopters that prepare them well to look after children.
- The service provides excellent post adoption support to children and adults affected by adoption.
- The service carries out its responsibilities effectively through staff who are passionate about their work on behalf of those children who need safe, caring adoptive homes.
- It is a service that recognises its shortfalls and demonstrates a commitment to improvement.
- There are some situations where timescales have not been met. Where any delays are evident these are identified early and action is taken to remedy the situation. Every attempt is made to prevent drift in the adoption process.

The Adoption National Minimum Standards are grouped under a number of different outcomes which are individually rated. The inspectors rated the provisions as follows:

- 'Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe' Good
- 'Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do' Outstanding
- 'Helping children make a positive contribution' Good
- 'Organisation' Good

The Ofsted Inspectors were satisfied that the agency had addressed the one statutory requirement and fulfilled the recommendations from the 2008 Ofsted report.

Ofsted Recommendations 2012

1. Ensure adoption panels make a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopters formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)

Current normal capacity based on the current teams would be a total of 63 Prospective Adopters Reports (PARs) a year. We will have approved over 70 adopters by the end of this year. In order to meet the projected demand we would

be looking to increase adopters approvals to 100 per year. 64 families were approved in 2010/2011, an increase of 40% on the previous year.

| Data for Adopters as at 30/09/2011 | Prospective Adopters Approved |
|---|--|
| 2006/2007 | 55 |
| 2007/2008 | 49 |
| 2008/2009 | 47 |
| 2009/2010 | 46 |
| 2010/2011 | 64 |
| 2011 to 14/03/2012 | 66 |

By the end of this financial year we will have achieved a further 15% approvals on last year. It is of note that there has been a 15% decrease in matches in the last year, suggesting that we were at capacity a year ago and that if we push on one front another is starting to suffer.

As a result of our successful recruitment strategy, the service is working at optimum capacity to assess and approve a sufficient number of adopters for the children being referred; looking for matches for 96 children while at the same time supporting 63 adoptive placements.

Action Plan:

- Notwithstanding the Government's Action Plan for Adoption, the Essex Adoption Agency is working to condense the process by making time savings at every stage of the process in order that prospective adopters are considered by adoption panels within 8 months.
- We will expand the Adoption Traffic Light system to provide earlier warning systems when cases are slipping behind the targeted timelines. This will be monitored through the Service Manager – Adoption and will be addressed with team managers in supervision.
- We will fast track prospective adopters who appear to have the capacity to meet the needs of a harder to place child or children.
- We have initiated and will pursue discussions with senior managers and elected members to increase staff resources in the adoption service in order to meet timescales and respond to the need for an increased number of adopters.
- We will seek to develop a pool of “as and when” social workers in order to increase capacity.

2. Ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the proposed placement of a child with particular prospective adopters within six months of the adoption agency's decision-maker deciding that the child should be placed for adoption (NMS 17.8)

With the dramatic increase in the volume of work over the past four years, the Agency is now working to maximum capacity at a time when referrals of children are escalating and time scales are likely to be reduced still further by government. It is entirely positive that the outcome of adoption is being planned for Essex children but the increase in work volume continues to be a real challenge.

| Data for Children as at 14/03/2012 | Children referred by Childcare Teams | Children recommended for Adoption by Adoption Panel | Matches recommended by Adoption Panel | Children placed with prospective adopters | Adoption Orders granted by the court | Children withdrawn due to change of Care Plan | Children's disrupted adoptive placements |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| 2006/2007 | 114 | 74 | 69 | 66 | 73 | 15 | 6 |
| 2007/2008 | 128 | 75 | 54 | 56 | 67 | 20 | 2 |
| 2008/2009 | 151 | 67 | 47 | 49 | 45 | 19 | 4 |
| 2009/2010 | 160 | 106 | 54 | 54 | 57 | 38 | 0 |
| 2010/2011 | 165 | 93 | 96 | 94 | 46 | 113 | 5 |
| 2011 to 14/03/2012 | 204 | 102 | 68 | 61 | 87 | 89 | 1 |

In the financial year to March 2011, 94 children were placed for adoption, an increase of 43% on the previous year. Over 210 children will have been referred by the end of March 2012 with a minimum expectation to recommend 110 children who in turn will require matches, placements and Adoption Orders.

In four years, the Essex Adoption Agency, utilising the same workforce is producing over 50% more work in terms of family finding, support of adoption placements and approval of adopters. Whilst some of this has been achieved through streamlining of processes and improved practice the workforce have been working over capacity for well over a year. All of the above continues to have a knock on effect on the volume of work in the Post Adoption Team, including adoption support, contact, schedule 2 counselling and intermediary services for birth families.

Whilst the Looked After Children population is falling, we still need to increase the percentage of children placed for adoption in Essex as this is below the national average.

Essex places more children aged 5 years and over than the national average. By virtue of these children's more complex needs and age, family finding can take longer.

NI61 is the percentage of looked after children placed for adoption within 12 months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption. The NI61 performance indicator for 2010/11 was 60.9% which is disappointing. However over the last 3 years the average is 67%. If we exclude children over the age of 18 months, i.e. do not include the older and hard to place children, then the indicator rises to 94% for 2010/11.

NI61 for 2012/2013 based on placements this year predicted to be 73% which is in line with the national average and Essex's statistical neighbours.

Where the Agency is unable to identify prospective adopters able to meet or promote most of the child's needs including ethnicity, culture, religious or language within Essex we approach the Adoption Register and local consortium simultaneously. The Agency makes no distinction between purchasing placements from voluntary agencies and local authority agencies.

The average disruption rate over the last 3 years has been less than 5% compared to the national average of 20%.

Delays within care proceedings, sometimes caused by the late submission of expert reports, have presented real challenges for all involved. Such delays have an impact on planning for children and achieving timely outcomes. In 2009/10 there was a significant increase in the time taken to obtain a Placement Order following the decision that adoption should be the plan for a child. This was as a result of the court agreeing to further court reports at the Issues Resolution Hearing. There were 10 children who took more than 6 months to obtain a Placement Order after the Agency Decision. 7 out of the 10 children would have met the NI61 target if a Placement Order had been made within 2 months of the decision which would have led to a much improved result on this performance indicator for 2009/10.

Action Plan:

- We will hold monthly tracking Traffic Light meetings with adoption team managers to track the progress of all children on referral to the adoption agency; take action to reduce delay wherever possible and suggest possible matches 'outside the box'.
- The Service Manager - Adoption and the Service Manager for Independent Reviewing Officers will meet to plan very early tracking and planning for all children in care aged under 3. Bi-monthly meetings will be held in each of the four quadrants attended by child care and adoption managers in order to consider the plan for all children in care, take appropriate action and monitor progress through the independent reviewing officers. This is leading to earlier referrals of children to the adoption service.
- Early consultation meetings have been established with adoption managers and senior practitioners for child care social workers considering referring a child for adoption.
- Adoption team managers attending child care team meetings in order to address any barriers that are causing delays for children being referred for adoption.

3. Ensure that the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters; and the completed life story book at the latest within ten working days of the adoption ceremony. (NMS 2.7)

The Statutory Guidance recommends that the production of the life story book should be co-ordinated by one social worker, preferably the child's social worker and should be given to the child and prospective adopters in stages.

The child's birth parents, family, foster carers and other people who know the child should be encouraged to be involved in putting together the contents.

The purpose of the life story book is to help the child explore and understand their early history and life before their adoption.

Action Plan:

- The Adoption Service has this year provided training in each of the quadrants with regards to producing the new style of life story books which are easier and quicker to produce and also more user-friendly. The response to the training has been very positive with staff feeling more confident with regard to producing the books.
- The Adoption Service will continue to provide regular training to support the childcare teams.
- The Independent Reviewing Officers will notify team managers and service managers of the due dates for the completion of all life story books.
- Childcare Team Managers will check prior to the second statutory review and celebratory work and celebration hearing that the work has been completed.
- The Independent Reviewing Officers will notify team managers and service managers and where necessary escalate to Directors of Local Delivery all cases of life story books which are overdue so that remedial action is taken immediately.

Finance and Resources Implications

As resources reduce the Schools, Children and Families directorate; is increasingly targeting services to help support the most vulnerable. The Adoption Services are provided within existing resources allocated to the directorate; any further resources required to deliver the action plan above will be achieved by more effective alignment of the directorate resources.

There are therefore no direct financial implications arising from this report.