

Mid year report of the Adoption Agency

Introduction. This update report covers the period from 1st April to 30th September 2016, and captures services developments and performance

What is going well?

Children placed

Children with adoption plans are placed in a timely way: the average number of days from receiving authority to place to matching was 208 days for this period, a very similar figure to 2015 and lower than the national average. 73% of children adopted within the period were placed within 18 months of first becoming looked after.

We place most of our children with families assessed and approved by Surrey-which is indicative that we are able to recruit and approve the right families for our children.

A further factor that underpins performance has been the increased use of foster2adopt placements where the child remains with the same carer. We provide additional training on this for our adopters with the outcome that in the first 6 months of 2016-17 4 new foster2adopt placements were made.

Adoptions completed:

26 children were adopted from care in the past 6 months, meaning that they are no longer designated 'looked after children', and the adoptive parents can exercise full parental responsibility. This is a positive outcome for both children and prospective adopters.

Projected figures for adoption orders over the whole year are currently in the region of 43 children, slightly fewer than last year reflecting fewer new adoption plans.

Increased range of Adoption support

We stay in touch with significant numbers of adoptive families through newsletters, a secure website, and events. This helps us to promote support with regards to adoption issues.

There has been sustained and rising demand for assessment of adoption support needs meaning that 45 assessments were provided within the first 6 months of the year and support agreed (or continued to existing cases) for to 281 young people and their families.

Support offered includes help with regards to contact with birth relatives, support and with regards to the additional challenges of adoptive parenting, life story work and therapeutic support for the child.

We have continued to build upon adoption support providers and to agree packages of support using funding from the Adoption support Fund. As well as individual packages of therapeutic work, we have commissioned 4 specialist parenting courses for adoptive families.

We also offer a fortnightly Parent and Toddler group for adoptive families and 3 children's and Youth groups for adopted young people, enabling them to meet others who were adopted.

Adoption South East Regional Partnership:

In response to the government directive to regionalise adoption provision, we have created a partnership with East and West Sussex County Councils and Brighton and Hove City Council. The new partnership (Adoption South East) will develop a shared recruitment strategy, and share information and training sessions to make better use of resources.

What are we worried about?

Fewer children were referred to us for adoption than in previous years

11 new cases in the past 6 months, compared with 31 in 2015-6. We have therefore looked at reasons for this. We know that locally our sharpest rise in looked after children involves older children and young people, whose needs would not be likely to be met through adoption.

However, taking account of this we are also aware that Surrey has had a lower rate of adoptions than its statistical neighbours for children under 7, which is the cohort from which most adoptions arise. This seems to be because of a local tendency to place children with relatives or connected persons, rather than with adoptive families. We are currently looking at our permanency planning processes to ensure that we do consider adoption where it is an appropriate option within care proceedings.

Delay in decision making.

Delay can occur at various points in the child's journey, including before, during and after care proceedings, and although we perform well in national performance data for timeliness we are aware that delays in deciding to initiate care proceedings can impact on the age at which a child who is subject of an adoption plan can be placed in a permanent home.

The number of children who wait for a family following the court process is relatively low, individual cases can impact on performance figures (which deal in average timescales.) For example, children who need to be placed in sibling groups of 3 or more or who have significant health issues are often only placed following a nationwide search and in a small number of cases each year the search may be unsuccessful resulting in a change of plan. It is important that there is a clear narrative in each case where timescales are longer to facilitate understanding of efforts made to secure a family.

Adoption breakdowns.

One recent adoptive placement failed very shortly after the child joined her new family in an out of area placement. The adopters who were identified following a nationwide search for a family requested the child's removal within days, seemingly in response to a realisation on their part that they had made an error in seeking to adopt this child.

Although rare, adoption breakdowns are always a cause for reflection as we try to identify learning and plan once more for the child's future.

Older children who return to care following adoption.

Although most adoptions have a very positive outcome, a small number of adolescents with complex needs are accommodated annually following the breakdown of relationships with their adoptive families. Typically this happens in adolescence.

Many (but not all) of these young people were not known previously to us, having moved into the area following adoption. Engaging with these families sooner and creating effective networks of support for them across agencies remains a priority.

What needs to happen?

Permanence planning /permanence policy

A permanency policy is currently being developed to take account of all routes to permanency including adoption, and the processes which underpin this. A more consistent approach to care planning and thinking about outcomes such as adoption to be promoted.

Role of the Quarterly Adoption Forum

Strategically, The Quarterly Adoption Forum will continue to monitor numbers of children with adoption plans and the timeliness with which adoption is achieved (or plans changed) and benchmark this against performance of statistical neighbours.

The Forum can and does commission investigation of issues such as decision making in care cases, and disseminate learning. Currently there is ongoing investigation as to the relative use of SGO and adoption.

Preventing Adoption breakdowns.

A post order commissioning group has been established to bring together leaders from across the services to clarify support pathways, identify gaps in provision and cement partnerships.

Specifically within the adoption service, additional effort is being made to encourage adoptive families to 'stay in contact' with the aim that families refer themselves early for targeted support, mindful that early intervention is likely to be the most successful.

For children placed within our borders by other local authorities we are aiming to develop a relationship with those families through improved notifications processes and providing n access to our mailing list and secure website for adopters.

We are also planning a 'checking in' process with families following adoption to remind them of their entitlement to seek an assessment of need throughout the young person's childhood.

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