

Corporate Parenting Panel

21st April 2015

Adoption Services Update, Adoption Scorecard and Service Risks

Recommendation

That the Corporate Parenting Panel considers the report, as detailed below.

1.0 Adoption Services Update

- 1.1 Since the introduction of the 2011 Government 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' Warwickshire County Council as an adoption agency, has introduced a range of measures to ensure that its service is compliant with the new requirements and that adoption performance has improved across the board.
- 1.2 Invariably adoption involves a complex legal process whereby the local authority is pursuing both a Care and Placement Order in respect of the child/ren concerned. A range of assessments are required to inform this decision made by the Agency Decision Maker (Head of Service Children's Social Care and Safeguarding), following advice, that adoption is in the child's best interests. Further there is now a requirement that the legal processes are concluded within a 26 week period.
- 1.3 Adoption Services therefore relates to a wide spectrum of activity across front line Children's Teams, the centralised Adoption Services Team and adoption support services. For the period 2013 – 2015 the Government has made available to each Local Authority area the Adoption Support Grant to support the transformation process. In year one the grant was specifically assigned to adoption related work. In Warwickshire this primarily met additional staffing costs both within the Adoption Services Team and Children's Teams so that the step change in performance timescales could be achieved and the supply of approved adoptive parents increased. It was also used to improve the independent support services to birth parents and family members. In year two the grant was used more flexibly and has supported both adoption and special guardianship order arrangements.

1.4 The key changes that have affected Warwickshire's services have been:

- The introduction of the adoption scorecard that shows national comparisons against key performance indicators. The scorecards are produced twice a year and the recent scorecard attached is for the period April – September 2014.
- The introduction of the 2 stage adopter led assessment process. The first two months are spent on training and information gathering – a pre-qualification phase – followed by four months assessment period. This change has been supported by the addition of 2 social worker posts until March 2016.
- The introduction of 'fostering to adopt' arrangements whereby children are placed with their prospective adoptive parents prior to the making of the placement order. Warwickshire Policy is approved and operational. In addition a Siblings Policy has been introduced.
- The equalising of interagency adoption fees between local authority and voluntary adoption agencies. This relates to the costs involved should Warwickshire seek to place children with a family approved by another adoption agency and vice versa.

1.5 Over the period 2014/15, the number of children approved for adoption decreased following a high number in 2013/14. However a significantly higher number of children have been placed for adoption and the number of adoption orders granted has increased. In year two there has been a slight decline in the number of household approved to adopt, although the majority of children are placed with Warwickshire approved adopters. (See Appendix 1)

1.6 Within the current year 2014/15 15 siblings groups have been matched with their adoptive parents and from these 9 sibling groups of two or more children have had adoption orders made. 17 adoption orders have been in respect of these children aged over 5 years. Warwickshire Adoption Services has actively participated in Adoption Activity Days, a new initiative whereby prospective adopters can be 'introduced' to children with adoption plans. From 3 events 34 children were featured and 16 have secured families through this route. Consequently, interagency adoption activity and costs have increased rising from 7 children in 5 placements in 2013/14 to 19 children in 13 placement in the current year 2014/15.

1.7 The most recent Adoption Scorecard for December 2014 (attached), shows average performance scores. Warwickshire was on average 6 days from the threshold for placing children with their adoptive parents. This is a reflection of the higher number of children placed for adoption who are siblings and older children where placements take longer to secure.

1.8 The second indicator is showing the average timescale to placement once the placement order is granted was longer for this period – however it is significantly quicker at 143 days than the England average which stands at 217 days. The percentage of children adopted from care is provisionally reported as **19.2%** of Warwickshire's looked after children against the most recent England average of 14% and previous year performance of 16.8%.

1.9 Some comparative data is available for this period as at 30.9.104, from the West Midlands Regional Adoption Leadership Board (See Appendix 2). Alongside Staffordshire, Warwickshire is showing the highest increase in adoption plans for children (in that 6 month period) and is performing in line with most other agencies in terms of placement timescales for adopters from the point of their approval.

2.0 Adoption Support – an area for service development

2.1 From May 2015 new requirements in respect of adoption support are expected. Work piloted in 10 sites across the county has developed an approach for accessing a central Adoption Support Fund for therapeutic services alongside a prototype for personal budgets for adoption support.

2.2 Information has recently been made available and in the first year the Government is making available £19.3m for the adoption support fund. Thereafter it will be funded jointly by Local Authorities and the Government. The structure and level of the local authority contribution is to be announced during the course of 2015/16.

2.3 Every local authority is required to publicise its Adoption Passport that outlines adoptive families' rights and entitlements to adoption support. Adopted children now have the same priority as looked after children when it comes to school admissions and from the age of 2 years are now eligible for free early education. Schools also receive the enhanced pupil premium for adopted children.

2.4 The Local Authority is planning for a substantial increase in the demand for therapy services. This is to grow local capacity to secure high quality and sustainable provision. Early work suggests that some services might be accessible through an existing framework agreement with providers of mental health services to children in schools, and the existing contract with MIND/RELATE who deliver emotional health and wellbeing support to looked after children and those who are adopted. Work has continued sub-regionally to scope current adoption support services and to consider how the three local authorities can work collaboratively in providing a range of provision either directly or through joint commissioning arrangements.

2.5 The immediate challenge relates to staffing capacity to meet the assessment requirements, whereas there is a longer term financial risks to meet the expectations and costs to a larger population of adopted children and young people who have an entitlement to assessment for services. Recent research emphasises the importance of appropriate support to adoptive families during the 'teenage years' of placement to minimise the risks of disruption and a more comprehensive approach to this needs to be developed.

3.0 Service Risks

- 3.1 It is evident that **An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay**' supported by the 2 year Adoption Support Grant has had a national impact on raising the profile of adoption and ensuring that adoption plans are more swiftly progressed for looked after children. The Government has reported a 63% increase in three years and Warwickshire's adoption activity levels have contributed to this increase. The government is closely monitored agency performances and issues are highlighted at the National Adoption Leadership Board and cascaded down at a local level. OFSTED also inspects adoption services as part of the combined Children's Services inspection.
- 3.2 Both front line Children's Teams and the Adoption Services Team have adapted their practices and are compliant with new requirements and adoption activity has increased and performance improved.
- 3.3 There are 5 potential service risks for the agency to monitor on an ongoing basis so that appropriate remedial actions can be taken.

Risk 1. The number of children adopted declines.

This is monitored by the Senior Leadership Team (Children's Social Care and Safeguarding) on a quarterly basis. Adoption needs to be understood as one of a range of permanency measures for children who are unable to return to their families. The number of children adopted needs to be understood in the context of the profile of the looked after population and of those, how many have secured permanency via other routes such as special guardianship orders invariably to relatives. Processes are in place to monitor effective planning for looked after children and cases are escalated if there are concerns about potential delay. Any decline in the number of children adopted in isolation, would not be concern when it can be understood in the context of the profile of the whole looked after population.

Risk 2. Reduction in the number of approved adopters/impact of higher interagency costs.

This is a potential risk from April 2016 when the staffing in the Adoption Service team will reduce by 2 social workers (20%). The strategic choices will be to recruit the same number of adoptive families (50-60 households) but within longer timescales that will be reflected adversely in the scorecard. This will impact on the reputation of the service, or to recruit fewer adoptive families but within timescale. This impact of this might be reduced placement choice and an increase in interagency costs. The monitoring of adoption activity over the forthcoming 12 months will inform the most appropriate approach.

Risk 3. Demand for adoption support services and availability of services

The Adoption Service has the equivalent of 2 social workers to respond to the full range of adoption support services requests which includes direct work with children and adoptive families, birth records counselling with adopted adults and the range of training and support events for adoptive families. The

service will be required to complete the assessment for therapeutic services and then process these through the central Adoption Support Fund. The demand will need to be monitored post 1 May 2015 and immediate short term measures put into place if the requests for assessment exceed staffing capacity. The related issue is the availability of therapeutic services to meet this demand. Whilst sub regional work has started to map services and existing service providers such as Journeys can be enhanced, a decision will need to be made within the next 6 months on whether the local authority, as an adoption agency, should employ its own therapist or commission additional services.

Risk 4 – Financial

From April 2016 a contribution from the Local Authority will be required for the Adoption Support Fund. The amount and impact of this will need to be addressed.

Risk 5 – Adoption disruption and high cost of specialist care

Warwickshire has a low adoption disruption rate with a small number of placements not progressing beyond the introduction stage. With the significant growth in adoption placements it is only to expect that services will come across more adopted children and their families experiencing difficulties particularly during the teenage years. Recent research has highlighted that the risk of adoption disruption is higher in teenage years when nearly 2/3rds of disruptions occur with the average age of the young people being 12 yrs. – 13 yrs. Some of these young people are readmitted into care and require specialist residential or health care provision due to their extreme needs. Through the sub region this is an area for service development where investment may be required.

4.0 Summary and Conclusion

- 4.1 The Service has demonstrated that it can recruit a high number of adopters to meet its needs. It has been successful in placing sibling groups and older children for adoption. Adoption performance in 2014/15 has been exceptional.
- 4.2 This will be significant transitional year as a key funding stream has ended and new requirements come into place. Adoption activity across the board will be monitored and actions taken, as appropriate, within the available resources. A key task however will be to have a more detailed review of the arrangements for assessing and providing adoption support services across the age range when the impact of the new requirements become evident.

Background Papers:

None.

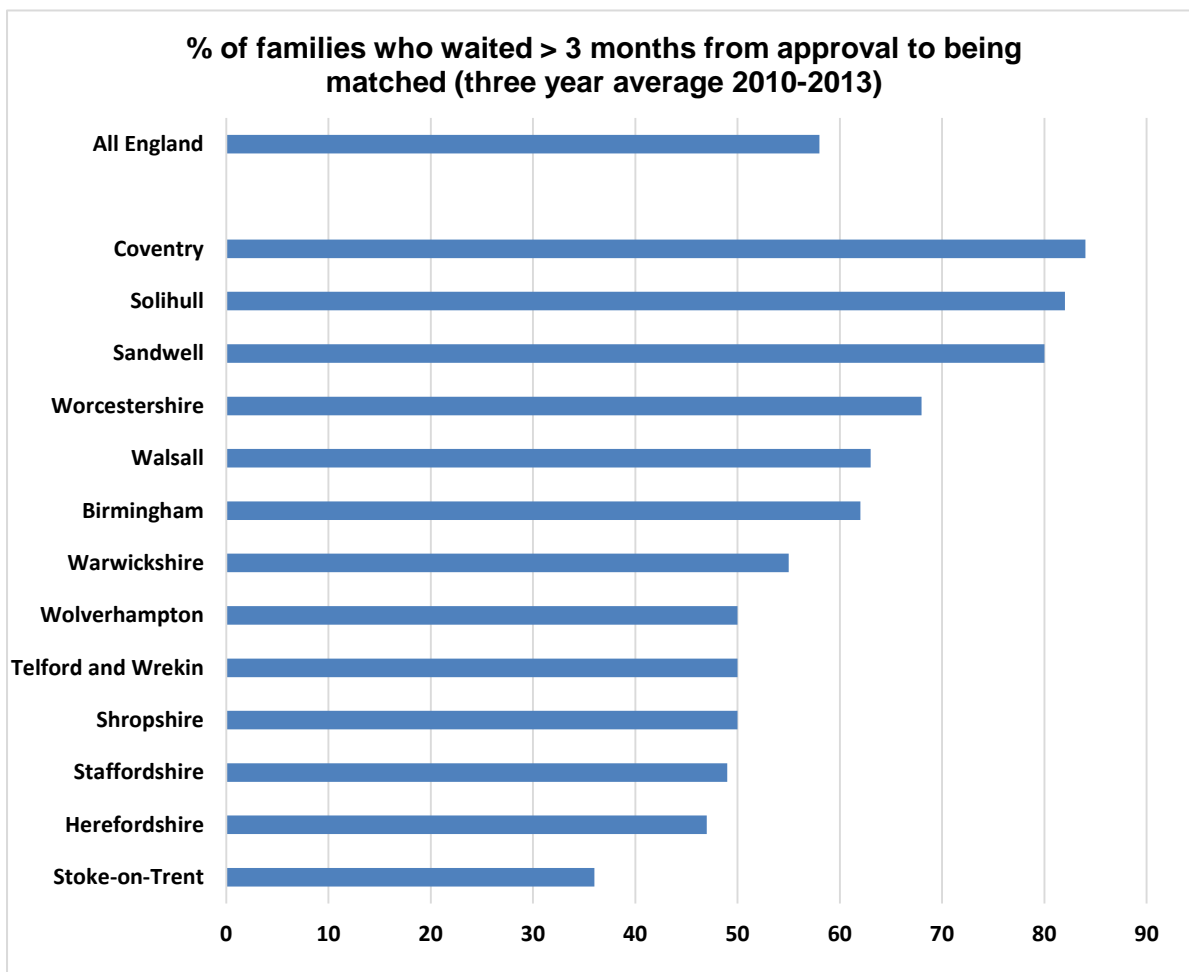
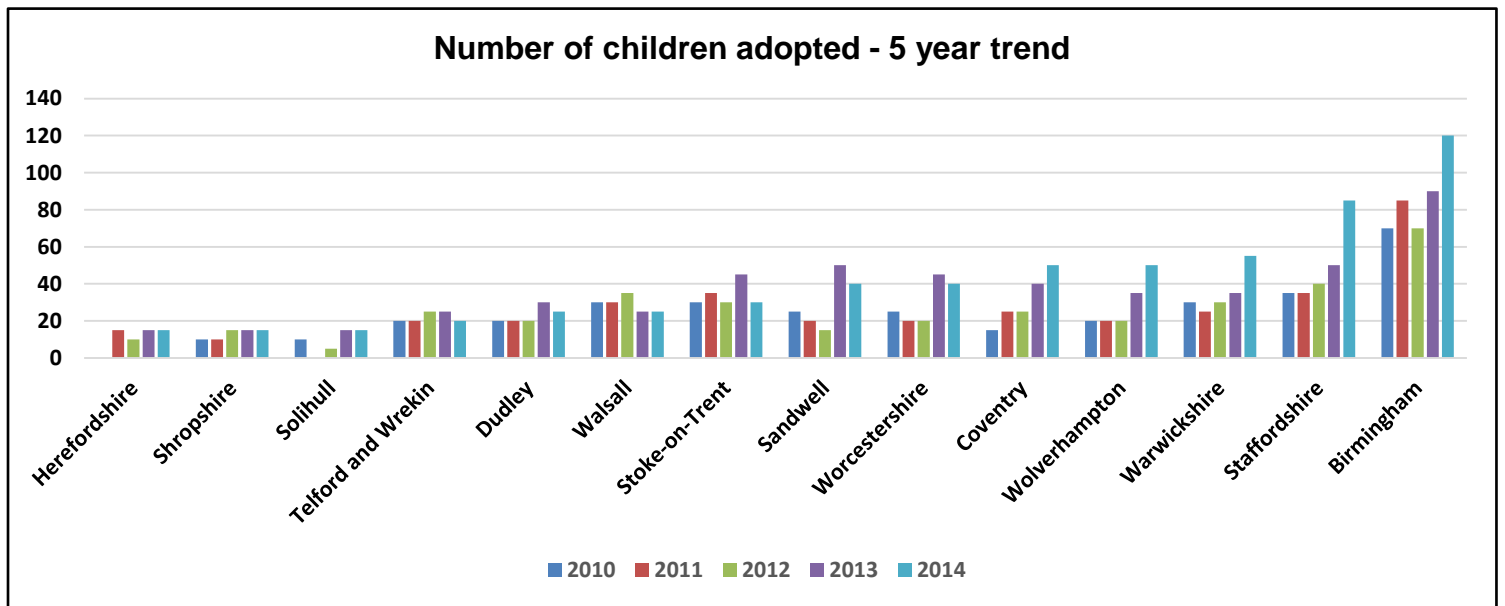
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Warwickshire Adoption Activity Trends 2011 – 2015

Year	Number of enquiries to adopt	Adoption Information Packs sent	Number of applications to adopt	Number of households approved to adopt
2011 -2012	181	102	43	38
2012 - 2013	165	100	67	49
2013 - 2014	200	132	83	65
2014-2015	179	112	71	59

Year	Number of children approved for adoption	Number of children 'matched' with adoptive parents	Number of adoption orders granted
2011-2012	62	34	31
2012-2013	65	45	33
2013-2014	95	54	51
2014-2015	70	77	63

Extract West Midlands Adoption Performance - Quarter 2 2014

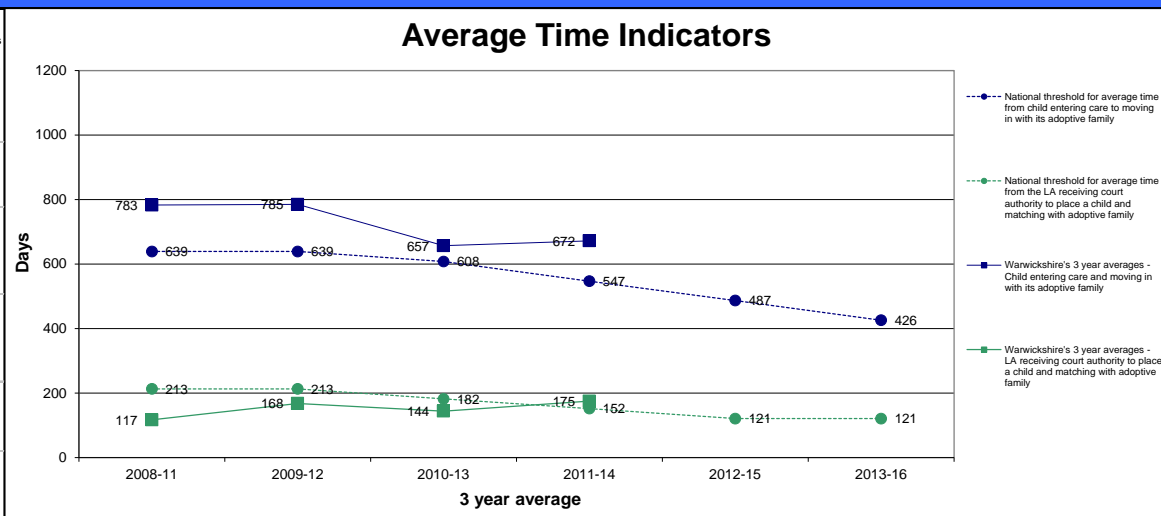


Adoption Scorecard

Choose Local Authority

Children

	Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted (days)	Average time between a local authority receiving court order to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family (days)	Children who wait less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)
LA's 3 year average (2011-14)	553	143	125 (55%)
1 year trend - Improvement from 2013 to 2014	Average time in 2014 was longer than in 2013	Average time in 2014 was longer than in 2013	n/a
3 year trend - Improvement from 2010-13 to 2011-14	Average time in 2011-14 was longer than in 2010-13	Average time in 2011-14 was longer than in 2010-13	n/a
England 3 year average (2011-14)	628	217	11,360 (51%)
Distance from 2011-14 performance threshold	6 days	Threshold met	n/a



Adopters

	Number of approved adoptive families as at 31 March 2014	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2013-14 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child
LA average	80	60
England	5,795	58

Related Information

	Adoptions from care (number adopted and % leaving care who are adopted)	Number and % of children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption	Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. Where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days)	Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (number adopted and % of BME children leaving care who are adopted)	Adoptions of children aged five or over (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted)	Average length of care proceedings locally (weeks)	Number of children awaiting adoption (as at 31 March 2014)	Number of children awaiting adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2014)	Number of applications for approval as an adopter still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March 2014
LA's 3 year (2011-14)	120 (13%)	10 (5%)	482	10 (4%)	20 (3%)	50	75	70	50
England 3 year (2011-14)	12,530 (14%)	3,230 (12%)	525	1,910 (8%)	2,790 (5%)	48	6,370	4,680	4,245

