

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14th September 2012

ACTION PLAN FOR ADOPTION TACKLING DELAY

Purpose of Report

1. To inform Members of the Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee of the changes within the adoption service following the publication of the Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay.

'Background'

The Action Plan for Adoption was published in March 2012 following significant interest in government and media over the preceding two years and in response to reports by:

- 1) Martin Narey, the government's Special Adviser on Adoption
- 2) An Expert Working group report set up through the Association of Directors of Social Services
- 3) The family Justice Review report, published during 2011

There are 3 main areas addressed which impact directly on the Adoption Service and the wider functioning of Children's Social Care, all of which relate to the speed and effectiveness of different aspects of the service. This report outlines the main challenges posed by the Action Plan, the current position within North Yorkshire and the plans to develop the service where needed.

1. Child Care Planning

The Action Plan challenges Councils to increase the speed with which decisions are made about whether a Looked After Child should be adopted and when such a decision has been made, the speed with which they are placed with their adoptive parents. This challenge to councils runs in tandem with the challenge to Courts to complete care proceedings within 6 months of an application being made. This will involve procedural changes as well as changes to current practice at all stages of the adoption planning process.

- 1) The great majority of children placed for adoption are subject to care proceedings. Assessments about whether a child can remain with or return to birth parents will need to be completed within a shorter period so that a clear plan can be presented to the court within the 6 months period.
- 2) In order to place children more quickly, a number of measures are proposed to speed up the process of finding the right family. This will involve both procedural and practice changes.

The North Yorkshire Adoption Service is reasonably well placed to respond to this aspect of the Action Plan:

- 1) In the recently published league tables which measured the speed at which children are placed for adoption, it was placed at an average of above average position.
- 2) A 2 year training program to improve understanding of and practice in permanence planning is to be rolled out throughout all Children's Social Work Teams. This will have a significant impact on the quality and timeliness of assessment work and on the long term nature of planning.
- 3) A management tracking system which now covers all stages of a child's journey from initially becoming looked after through to be adopted is well established and can be developed to include the additional challenges from the Adoption Action Plan. This ensures shared oversight and management support for each child for whom adoption is the plan.
- 4) Discussions are underway to propose adjustments to the focus of some adoption social worker posts to increase the speed of family finding and adopter assessment work (see below)

2. Adopter Recruitment

The Government proposes a significantly faster process for the preparation and assessment of Prospective Adopters. The final changes will be subject to change of regulation which is expected early in 2013 and a consultation about this is planned for the Autumn 2012. The current intention is that it will take no more than 6 months from an initial enquiry to becoming an approved adopter. This is a very significant increase (this is currently achieved within between 12 and 18 months) and there are concerns about the thoroughness which such a tight timescale will allow. Whether this timescale will stay or not remains to be seen but it is clear that the recruitment and assessment process will need to be much faster as a whole. North Yorkshire's service is reasonably well placed:

- 1) The speed of the recruitment from enquiry through to approval has improved over the past 2 years due to changes in the process and social worker practice. This is being further reviewed with assistance from the Business Improvement Team.
- 2) A revised model of assessment has been developed which is more structured and evidence based.

3. Performance and Inspection

The Action Plan introduced a "score card", which will be published annually and will measure performance of each adoption agency against nationally determined target timescales. The intention is that the target will reduce over a 4 year period.

The government plans to make changes to the OFSTED Inspection regime to incorporate adoption service inspection within a wider Looked After Children Inspection which will include Looked after Children, Fostering and Adoption. Overall it plans to develop a graded inspection outcome to better reflect the achievement of outcomes for children.

North Yorkshire is currently within the target threshold and is deemed to be in an improving position. (See Score Card – appendix 1)

A meeting is planned in September with Court Judges and other key personnel to work towards a shared understanding of respective roles designed to contribute to faster process in both interlinked services.

4. Conclusion

The intention of the Adoption Action Plan is to enable more children to achieve a sense of stability and permanence through adoption and to reach this point faster. Many of the measures proposed in the Action Plan are to be welcomed and bring together government aspiration with the aspiration and best practice in adoption services. There are however risks which emanate from the need to achieve greater speed without reducing the quality of the work need to achieve secure and permanent adoptive family arrangements. A number of actions to address these are in train or planned

- 1) **Timeliness and quality of Care Planning:** Children have a right to live with their birth family if their needs can be met. Assessment as to whether that potential exists within a timescale which is appropriate for a particular child creates inevitable tensions. There is a need to ensure assessments are sound, evidence based and are completed quickly but comprehensively.
 - a. The tracking systems in place will ensure that each child's progress will be known and monitored at senior and practitioner level;
 - b. The Permanence Planning training program will help to increase levels of confidence and skill which will help with both quality and speed;
 - c. The review of the adoption team structure will help to increase both speed and quality of family finding.
- 2) **Timeliness and Quality in Adopter Assessment:** Adoption is essentially a child care service and children being placed for adoption typically have significantly greater needs than children in birth families. Consequently they need parents who can meet those greater needs as well as fulfil their own wish to have a family. Assessing whether they have that capacity is complex and delicate but essential if adoptions are to be secure (It is estimated that 1/5 adoptions break down). The time needed for adopters to learn about adopted children's need and to be prepared and carefully matched with a child whose needs they can meet varies from parent to parent and care must be exercised to ensure timescales.
- 3) **Adoption Support:** The increase in numbers of children to be placed for adoption and the increase in speed, however carefully managed, is likely to carry an increased need for support following place and at any point after the adoption order. The Action Plan does not indicate the provision of additional resources and the likely increase for support in North Yorkshire, which has steadily increased over the past 5 years, will need to be quantified and resourced. Subject to further work to review this, it may be that this is an area in which some level of growth is needed.

5. Recommendations

Members of the Committee are requested to note and comment on the information in this report.

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Background Documents: None

Annexes: North Yorkshire Score Card

2012 ADOPTION SCORECARD

Local Authority Scorecard

North Yorkshire

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Children, Young People and Families Directorate