

<b>Committee(s):</b>	<b>Date(s):</b>
Community and Children's Services Safeguarding Sub Committee	24 <sup>th</sup> September 2013
<b>Subject:</b> Government reform of the Adoption Process	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Director of Community and Children's Services	<b>For Information</b>

### **Summary**

This report will inform Members of the Government's proposals for Adoption and how these changes are being progressed in Children's Social Care.

The Government has brought in new legislation to raise the profile of Adoption and increase the number of children adopted. All local authorities are required to review their adoption services in order to increase efficiency and productivity in relation to adoption. To this end a new shorter assessment process for potential adopters has been introduced. In line with this the courts have also been asked to bring in a more streamlined and effective way of working so that the local authority obtains the necessary orders to enable them to place the child for adoption. Adoption plans no longer need to go to the Adoption Panel but can be agreed by the Agency Decision Maker, before being agreed in Court. The Agency Decision Maker in the City is the Assistant Director People Services.

The new regulations to address these reforms are effective from the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013.

The report highlights that the City of London has changed its practice from outsourcing assessments of potential adopters, to having our own Social Workers, with the support of an adoption specialist, undertake these assessments. This has the dual effect of skilling up our social work workforce in a specialist area of work and, provides an opportunity to generate income following the completion of assessments.

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to note this report

## **Main Report**

### **Background**

1. The Government set out the plans for a reform of Adoption in March 2012 when *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* was published.
2. In this document the Government outlined the necessity to increase adoptive families to meet the growing number of children with complex needs requiring adoption. The *Action Plan* outlined the following issues.
  - The Government believes that adoption is the best option for children who cannot be returned home to their parents. It is felt that more children can benefit from adoption.
  - There were too few adoptions taking place, only 60 babies were adopted in 2011, and just 3,050 children found homes through adoption. The number of children at the end of March 2012, waiting for a new family, was over 4,600.
  - Children are being prevented from being placed with adopters earlier, due to delays in the adoption process, causing harm and delay to children.
  - Children were waiting too long, because social workers were trying to find a “perfect” match for a child, in particular the right ethnic match.
  - The court process to obtain a placement order was taking up to 2 years. The average wait between entering care and moving into an adoptive placement is 1 year 9 months.
  - Adopters were finding the process too bureaucratic and were being turned away unnecessarily.
3. In May 2012 the Government introduced Adoption Scorecards, which each local authority will have to complete regularly so that their performance on placing children and the assessment of prospective adopters will be monitored, and the results published.

### **Current Position**

4. The Government has outlined a number of changes they want to see happen. These changes aim to increase the recruitment of

adopters for all types of children, including disabled children, those who are older, ethnic minority children and sibling groups.

5. New Statutory Adoption Guidance has been published and takes effect from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013. This sets out the new proposals for a faster assessment process for adopters in two stages. An initial stage where the checks and references are taken up and a second stage where they move onto the assessment. The timeframe for the two stages should be no more than 6 months. Previously assessment reports have taken up to a year to be presented to the Adoption Panel for approval. This was frustrating for the potential adopters, and resulted in children waiting longer to be placed.
6. Children become available for adoption by becoming looked after either on a voluntary basis or via a court order. Children are rarely relinquished at birth. The local authority has to apply to the court for a Care Order and a Placement Order to enable them to progress an adoption plan for the child. The child can then be matched with an adoptive family at the Adoption Panel.
7. The Court process from the time a child has become looked after, and the decision is made that the child should be placed in a permanent home, should now take no longer than 26 weeks. This will be the timeframe to obtain the Care Order and the Placement Order, so that the child can be placed for Adoption. Traditionally the court processes have been lengthy with several assessments of the birth family members, even in cases where there had already been previous negative assessments. This has meant cases being in court for up to two years on occasion, whilst the child waited to be placed for adoption. The new timescale should shorten the delay.
8. The Government has eliminated the need for social workers to take the child's case to the Adoption Panel for a decision as to whether a child should be placed for adoption. The Agency Decision Maker will now make this decision, and the courts will make the final orders. This will enable the decision making process to be speeded up, and reduce duplication in decision making. The role of the Agency Decision Maker in the City is held by the Assistant Director People.
9. The City has in recent years had applications from potential adopters who wanted to adopt from abroad. These applicants were assessed by independent social workers, and the City's social workers therefore did not get the experience of assessing potential

adopters. The social work team has now started to take on the whole adoption process.

10. In 2012 the City had two adoption Orders granted by the courts. One was a domestic adoption i.e a child that had been placed by the City, and the other a child who had been adopted from overseas. Currently four applicants are in the process of assessment. Two are domestic adopters and two are overseas adopters planning on adopting a second child. A further two initial enquiries are also being dealt with.
11. The social work team are being skilled in taking on adoption assessments by an experienced adoption consultant, with the aim to increase the number of adopters assessed.

## **Options**

12. The Government proposals for reform prioritises the need for local authorities and independent adoption agencies to rise to the challenge and recruit more adopters to meet the needs of the children waiting. This will mean removing barriers to recruitment of adopters, by effective marketing, and eliminating delay by having a more robust assessment process. They have provided local authorities with an Adoption Grant to enable them to implement the reforms.
13. The City is in a position to expand the adoption service, and increase the number of Adopters recruited. These adopters will be placed on the National Adoption Register, if the City does not have the appropriate child for them. The placing local authority will pay the City for the use of their adopter, at the current rate of £27,000. The City is in a position to respond to the reform proposals, having employed a consultant that has been available to advise, and train staff on adoption issues, and to be available whilst the assessment is being done. As the staff gain more skills in adoption work the output of assessments will increase.

## **Implications**

14. The social work team is currently small with 3 Qualified Social Workers covering all aspects of early intervention, targeted and specialist statutory work. Should the volume of the work increase, there is the potential to develop the service even further to include more post adoption support. The costs would be off-set by

potential income from increased numbers of completed adopter assessments.

## **Conclusion**

15. The report aims to provide members with a brief update on the Government's proposals for adoption services. The proposals to increase the number of potential adopters recruited, to ensure that the number of children adopted is increased. To this end a new assessment process has been introduced to make the assessment a shorter process. In line with this the courts have also been asked to bring in a more streamlined and effective way of working so that the local authority obtains the necessary orders to enable them to place the child for adoption.
16. The new regulations to address these reforms are effective from the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013. The department is seeking to increase the number of adopter of adopters recruited.

## **Appendices**

- None

## **Background Papers:**

**None**

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