

Sheffield City Council: Annual Adoption Report for 2017/18.

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 This report is the Annual Report of Sheffield City Council's Adoption Service. The report details the activity and performance of Sheffield's Adoption Service for 2017/18 and sets out improvement and development work planned for 2018/19.

2. Introduction

2.1 Sheffield City Council Adoption Service's remit is to recruit and approve prospective adopters, match and place children with approved adoptive families, and to provide adoption support to adopted children, adoptive parents and adopted adults.

2.2 It is a legislative requirement that the service provides reports on its activity and performance to Elected Members at least every 6 months

3. Adoption Activity - Children 2017/18.

3.1 There have been fewer children adopted in Sheffield over 2017/18 compared to 2016/17 and fewer children with adoption plans agreed for them this year compared to last. This reflects the national picture, with the number of children being adopted nationally decreasing for several years now. There are complex reasons for this including case law and a fall in the number of adopters approved and waiting.

3.2 Table 1 below sets out the number of children who have been through different stages of the adoption process in Sheffield in 2017/18 compared to 2016/17:

Table 1

	2017-18	2016-17
Early permanence placements in year	4	5
Children made subject to SHOBPA decision	51	76
Children made subject to Placement Orders	38	56
Children matched to adoptive families	41	52
Children placed with adoptive families	44	44
Children adopted in year	39	51
Number of disrupted placements	2	3

2.3 Early permanence placements are where children who have not yet had a plan of adoption agreed by the Court are placed with approved adopters under Fostering Regulations, as a foster placement. This is known as 'Foster to Adopt'. We use these

placements where it is assessed as extremely likely that the Court agreed plan will become adoption for a particular child, and we want to place the child with its forever family as early as possible in his or her life, and ideally straight from birth. The approved adopters foster the child, until such time as all assessments are complete and the Court has awarded a Placement Order, at which point the child becomes legally placed for adoption with the family. We only use these placements for a small number of children in particular circumstances, to reduce risk. However, any risk associated with foster to adopt placements is taken by the approved adopters, who will have the child removed if the Court does not agree the adoption plan. For the child there is no added risk as in the standard process for adoption she or he would have had a placement move from a short term foster carer to a return home to birth or extended family anyway. The service made 4 Foster to Adopt placements in 2017/18 compared to 5 the previous year.

2.4 As can be seen from Table 1, the number of children subject to a 'should be placed for adoption' decision reduced significantly from 76 in 2016/17 to 51 in 2017/18 and the number of children adopted reduced by 12 in the same period. Adoption is not the right plan for all children who come into care, and where it is safe to return children to their birth families this should be pursued and seen as a success. However, for children who cannot return home we should seek the best alternative permanence for them and we will be striving in 2018/19 to ensure that all children where adoption is the right plan are supported to secure it.

2.5 The percentage of children who left care via adoption in 2017/18 was 14.7%. This was down from 18.3% in 2016/17 but was higher than the most recent national average of 13.9%

2.6 There were two children whose adoption placements disrupted in 2017/18. These two were a sibling group placed in the same adoptive family. The service plans to hold a disruption meeting to learn lessons from this disruption but this has been delayed while we address complaints made by the adoptive family.

4. Adoption Timeliness

4.1 National scorecards for adoption agencies are based on three primary indicators. These are used to compare performance of adoption agencies both nationally and with statistical neighbours. A low number of days represents good performance for the first two indicators (known as A1 and A2) while a high percentage is good for the third indicator (A3). The indicators are based on a three year average; however, a far more accurate indication of the current performance of an adoption service is to look at the performance on these measures for the most recent year.

4.2 **A1- 'average time in days between a child entering care and being placed for adoption'**: Our 3 year average performance in Sheffield for 2015-18 was 446 days. This is an improvement on the period 2014-17 when the 3 year average was 500 days. However, very positively, performance in the reporting year only has improved significantly to an average of 317 days demonstrates key improvements made within the service. This is a strong performance and 109 days quicker than the Government's target of 426 days.

4.3 A2 – ‘average time in days between placement order being granted and the decision to match with adoptive families: Our 3 year average performance in Sheffield for 2015-18 was 231 days This is also an improvement on the period 2014-17 when the 3 year average was 273 days. Again very positively, the performance for 2017/18 only has improved considerably to 122 days. This is 109 days quicker than our 3 year average performance and just 1 day short of the Government target of 121 days.

4.4 A3 – ‘percentage of children who wait less than 426 days between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family’. Our 3 year average performance for 2015-18 was 62%. This is good and is an improvement on 2014-17 when the average was 55%. The average for the reporting year only has improved to 70%, demonstrating continued improvement.

4.5 There has been a strong focus on improving adoption performance over the last 18 to 24 months and this now shows in improved timeliness detailed above.

5. Adoption Activity – Adopters 2017-18.

5.1 As outlined above, there has been a national fall in the numbers of adopters approved. This has been the case in Sheffield too and has led to the decision to make improving the sufficiency of adoptive placements for the children needing them part of the Children’s Services Improvement Plan. The information below provides data in relation to adopters.

5.2 Recruitment and approval of adopters

- 21 adoptive families were approved in year 2017-18. There were 29 approved 2016-17.
- 24 adoptive families had children placed in the year (21 with Sheffield children). There were 25 in 2016-17.
- 17 families where adoption orders were granted in the year (all with Sheffield children),
- 12 adoptive families withdrew from process. These were for reasons such as bereavement, starting a new job and requiring time to put finances in order.
- 1 adoptive family had their application refused at stage 1 in the year. This was on medical grounds.

5.3 Use of inter-agency adopters

- In total, 23 children were placed with adopters approved by external agencies during the year. There is a fee when we place our children with other agency adopters. For placing a single child the fee is £27,000. The fee for placing a sibling group of two is £43,000.

5.4 Recruitment Activity Undertaken.

- The service continued to promote the adoption at local events and festivals in the council throughout 2017/18. Sheffield Adoption Service has also continued to be part of the 'One Adoption Hub' (previously known as the Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium), which promotes adoption services across the region via its website. South Yorkshire local authorities have continued to collaborate under this umbrella to provide information evenings for adopters in the region and a duty system for enquirers. However, further evaluation is required of the effectiveness of this arrangement.
- The need to bring recruitment in Sheffield back up towards previous levels is recognised in the service improvement plan. Ambitious targets have been set to increase the numbers of approvals over the next two years. This includes foster to adopt carers.
- Where enquirers are interested in inter-country adoption they are directed to Adoption Yorkshire which is a voluntary agency who provide specialist advice to those wishing to adopt children from abroad. Sheffield commissions this service along with other members of the One Adoption Hub.

6. Adoption Support 2017-18

6.1 Adoption support work has increased significantly, supported by the nationally available Adoption Support Fund for families in need of therapeutic support. The fund has been extended until 2020 and now covers adopted people up to the age of 21(25 with a EHC plan/SEN statement. Referrals to the fund in Sheffield have more than doubled over the last 12 months.

6.2 The drive towards promoting adoption as a route for permanency for looked after children, including those who are older, sibling groups and children with more complex needs has gone hand in hand with the recognition that those families will need support over the years to help them support their child with issues arising from early trauma or harm. The growth in both indirect and direct contact is another element of this. The result is that the number of referrals for support has grown and the data below reflects this trend.

- On 31st March 2018 the number of families in receipt of post adoption support: 87. 7 funded by agency. 80 through the ASF
- Requests for assessments during the year – 60. Of these 50 resulted in the provision of support
- Number of families in receipt of pre-adoption support as of 31st March 2018: 20. (Funded by the service: 1. Funded by another LA or VAA: 1. Funded by another route e.g. ASF: 10.)
- Number of families in receipt of adult adoptee support, not one off advice: 33. (Funded by agency: 31. Funded via another route: 2.)
- Letterboxes contacts: 550+
- Adoption allowances: 306

6.3 Sheffield has a number of support groups and activities in place to assist children of every age range (including teenagers), as well as their parents. The Adoption Fun

Days in summer and the Christmas Party are well attended popular events. Regular newsletters are provided to adoptive families to inform them of events and give useful information.

6.4 There are plans to extend the 'core offer' to adopters and develop post approval training/workshops to help prepare adopters for the task ahead. Additionally we support adopted adults to access their adoption records and sign post them to services that can help with searching and tracing birth family where this is desired.

6.5 Birth family members are also provided with support and advice around contact and other matters relating to the adoption. They are signposted for intermediary services where required to specialist agencies in the area.

7 Adoption Panel Business

7.1 Business and Meetings

- Sheffield Council operates a single adoption panel which meets every two weeks. There have been **20** panels in the period from 01/04/17 to 31/03/18.
- The panel has recommended **21** approvals of adopters
- There have been **44** matches considered by the panel. 5 of these were for sibling groups of **2** children.
- There has been **1** relinquished child presented to panel for consideration as to whether they should be placed for adoption.
- The fall in recruitment and numbers of children placed for adoption means that the Panel has been less busy than in the previous year. During the year 2016-17 there were **24** panels, including 2 extra emergency ones. There were **52** matches considered and **28** approvals.

7.2 Membership

- The panel has an experienced independent Chair. The medical adviser to the panel is very experienced and knowledgeable in the field of adoption. She provides comprehensive and clear advice to the agency and to Panel- as well as adopters. Legal advice is readily available as required. Both the Chair and Agency Adviser have good relationships with both these advisers.
- The central list is sufficient to meet need. It is in line with regulatory requirements. There are long standing, committed members who are very knowledgeable and they have a range of skills and experience, although certain groups are underrepresented. It is recognised by the Agency Adviser that further diversity of membership would be welcome.
- The Agency Adviser has a long history in children's services and the field of adoption. She has good knowledge of the regulations and legal context of

adoption. She has provided panel members with regular updates on cases as well as informing them of relevant case law and research.

7.3 Quality Assurance

- Panel provides feedback to workers and the agency on the quality of reports presented and the worker's presentation. An example of this is feedback on the need for some workers to develop their analysis in prospective adopter reports. This led to training and presentation at a recruitment team away day.
- However it appears that reports from the panel back to the agency have not been consistent over the last 12 months and this is being addressed by the Adoption Service Manager. It is also planned to develop the feedback forms to grade the quality of reports in line with OFSTED guidelines so workers and their managers can be given a clear indication of Panel's view of the standard of reports.

8. Regional Adoption Agency Update

8.1 Over the period of this report a lot of joint work took place with neighboring local authorities to prepare the way for the One Adoption South Yorkshire Regional Adoption Agency. This was to be hosted by Doncaster in the original proposal. However plans did not go forward on this basis as both Sheffield and Rotherham local authorities were not satisfied that the proposal was right and in their best interests. As a result the process has been delayed. An alternative model has been developed by Sheffield and Rotherham and is currently being considered as a potential way forward.

9 Developments in the Year:

9.1 These were mostly based around preparing for regionalisation. The work will not be wasted but will inform the next stages of the work.

9.2 Over the year there continued to be a drive towards improving timeliness for children requiring adoptive families and this can be seen in the improved performance around the key government targets.

9.3 Sheffield has been one of the key authorities to integrate latest research into transitions of children from foster care to adoptive family. The last 12 months has seen this become more embedded into practice, although there is further work to be done in terms of promoting this and getting both foster carers and children's social workers on board.

9.4 The Sheffield Adopter Advisory Board went live, with the aim of allowing adopters experiences/voice to inform service developments. This has had mixed results and is being merged into a new regional adopter voice group to try to attract a bigger audience.

9.5 The service has had significant management change towards the end of the reporting year. Both the Service Manager and Assistant Director with responsibility for the Adoption Service left during the year and were successfully replaced with new officers.

10 Developments and Improvement Actions for 2018/19

10.1 Children's Service Improvement Plan

- The developments over next 12 months will be led in large part by this plan. The elements relating to adoption relates include developing a sufficiency of adopters to meet the needs of the children waiting. Clear targets have been set to increase the numbers of approved adopters over the next two years. The aim is to approve 32 in 2018/19 and 48 in 2019/20. There is an updated recruitment strategy to support this. The strategy will involve examining each part of the current process from initial enquiry onwards to see how we may improve and attract more adopters.
- The other element of the service improvement plan that relates specifically to adoption services, concerns the increasing the use of Early Permanency Placements for children. So far in 2019/20 we have already seen an increase in the number of children placed with EPP carers (2 placed in the first quarter and more planned, which compares favorably to the total of 4 last year), but we plan to build upon this.

10.2 Signs of Safety

- Training is ongoing for the service. All team members will receive training in this as part of Sheffield Council's 5 year agenda to implement the approach. This is seen as being particularly useful in adoption support and a champion from that service will be identified to support the process of integrating signs of safety into the team.

10.3 Performance

- The ability to track performance will become more robust over the year, with much clearer performance measures for the service. Meetings will take place at both a team and director level to monitor this. The introduction of Liquid Logic to the authority will make it much easier to have accurate management information than the current system allows.

10.4 Re-structure of the Service

- There are plans in place to re-structure the adoption team and these are currently going through the achieving change process. It is proposed that certain functions relating to support for special guardians and private fostering will transfer to a newly created connected person's team which will also include connected carers. This will be managed by the fostering service. There will be a new dedicated recruitment and assessment team to support our efforts to increase the number of adopters approved. This will leave a specialist adoption support service and prepare the way for regionalisation. The plan also includes development of the family finding role to support children's workers who might be unfamiliar with adoption care planning and

allow them to share their expertise in this field. They will be involved more pro-actively in support plans and the transition process.

10.5 Develop Adoption Support Services

- It is intended to develop the 'core offer' to approved adopters by offering additional training and workshops for the task ahead. We are also looking at the possibility of being part of a shared commissioning process for adoption services at regional level across Yorkshire and Humber which would further develop our offer to adopters, birth family and adopted adults.

10.6 The Adoption Panel

- The reporting and quality assurance functions are being reviewed to make them more regular and robust so they can inform the work of the agency. The diversity of membership will also be addressed. Panel members, along with social workers, will be offered the opportunity to attend training around disruptions in adoption placements as there has been a slight increase over the last year.

10.7 Regionalisation

- Finally, the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency will be progressed over the year. Assistant Directors from Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster are meeting to agree how we take this forward.

11. Summary

11.1 The last twelve months have seen a significant improvement in timeliness for children with a plan of adoption. The annual data (rather than the 3 year average), shows we are meeting the Department for Education targets.

11.2 There has been a fall in the numbers of adopters approved and the number of children being made subject to adoption plans. However there has been a big increase in the levels of adoption support requested.

11.3 The Adoption Panel has not been as busy as in previous years as a result of fewer children being matched for adoption and fewer adoptive families being approved.

11.4 Regionalisation of the adoption services in South Yorkshire stalled in 2017/18 but there are now plans to take this piece of work forward, although the model will be different to that originally proposed.

11.5 Changes in the Adoption Service Manager and Assistant Director have affected progress over the second half of the year but these positions are now filled. There have also been a number of staff vacancies and sickness both within the adoption teams and business support services. There are still vacancies but these are currently being advertised and the situation is much improved. This will support the planned developments for the year ahead.

11.6 There service has clear plans and is now well placed to address development areas such as adopter recruitment and regionalisation.

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