Sheffield City Council

Report to the Children and Families Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee
14th October 2019

Report of: **John Macilwraith, Executive Director, People Services**

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Subject: **Adoption Service Annual Report**

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Author of Report: **Vicky Brooke, Adoption Service Manager**

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Summary:

This is a cover sheet for the Adoption Service Annual Report 2018/19. The annual report provides information about the activity and performance of Sheffield City Council's Adoption Service in 2018/19. Strong performance in the Adoption Service is important for the people of Sheffield because it means children who need adoption will have it secured for them in a timely manner, and applicant adopters and adoptive parents will be supported in their journey to and through adoption.

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Type of item: The report author should tick the appropriate box

Reviewing of existing policy	
Informing the development of new policy	
Statutory consultation	
Performance / budget monitoring report	
Cabinet request for scrutiny	
Full Council request for scrutiny	
Call-in of Cabinet decision	
Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee	
Other	**Annual Report**

The Scrutiny Committee is being asked to:

Consider and comment on the content of the annual report

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Background Papers: None

Category of Report: Open

Sheffield City Council Adoption Service Annual Report 2018/19

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 2018/19 and sets out improvement and development work planned for 2019/20.

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

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3. Adoption Activity - Children 2018/19.

3.1 Table 1 below sets out the number of children who have been through different stages of the adoption process in Sheffield in 2018/19 compared to the previous two years:

Table 1

	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
Early permanence placements in year	11	4	5
Children made subject to SHOBPA decision	55	51	76
Children made subject to Placement Orders	41	38	56
Children matched to adoptive families	38	41	52
Children placed with adoptive families	38	44	44
Children adopted in year	40	39	51
Number of disrupted placements	1	2	3

3.2 As can be seen from Table 1, the number of children subject to a 'should be placed for adoption' is slightly higher than the previous year but has not returned to the significantly greater figure of 76 in 2016/17. The number of children adopted is also similar to the previous year. This has gone hand in hand with the growth of the number of special guardianship orders and is a pattern that is mirrored nationally.

3.3 The percentage of children who left care via adoption in 2018/19 was 14.8% which is similar to 2017/18 when it was 14.7%. Both these figures are down from 18.3% in 2016/17 but remain higher than the most recent national average of 13.9%.

3.4 Early permanence placements have grown over the year compared to the previous two years. The service made 11 'Foster to Adopt' placements in 2017/18 compared to 5 the previous year. These are used for children who have not yet had a plan of adoption agreed by the Court but are placed with approved adopters under Fostering Regulations, as a foster placement. We use these placements where it is assessed as extremely likely that the Court will agree a plan of 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. 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. The advantage for the child is that it reduces the number of moves and means he/she is placed with their permanent family at a very young age. Any risk associated with foster to adopt placements is taken by the approved adopters. There is always the risk the plan of adoption may not be agreed, even if this is a small risk. The benefit to the adopter is that they get a child at a very young age that has experienced fewer moves since entering care.

3.5 During the year two of the children placed with Foster to Adopt carers were returned to the care of family members following a change in care plan away from adoption. Following this we have carried out a learning exercise to see if there are any practice issues for the service in relation to these cases and practice generally. An experienced member of the Independent Reviewing Service has scrutinized the cases and themes from this are being be shared across the teams. A key area to reinforce is the need to proactively and thoroughly explore all paternal family members as potential carers for children.

3.6 There was one child whose adoption placement disrupted during the year. The service held a disruption meeting to learn lessons from this disruption and the learning has been shared across the service.

4. Adoption Timeliness

4.1 National scorecards for adoption agencies are based on two primary indicators. These are used to compare performance of adoption agencies both nationally and with statistical neighbours. A low number of days represent good performance for the first two primary indicators which are known as A1 and A2). .

4.2 **A1**- **'average time in days between a child entering care and being placed for adoption':** Our average timescale for this indicator during the year 2018-19 was 351days. This isn't quite as good as the year before when it was 317 days but is still strong performance and 75 days quicker than the government 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 average timescale for this indicator during the year 2018-19 was 159. This isn't as good as last year's performance when it was 122 days. We haven't yet met the Government target of 121 days. However this hasn't impacted upon A1 which is the overall timeframe from entering care to being placed for adoption. Additionally the time lag in this data (children aren't counted until they are adopted) means it does not cover the time since last September when the dedicated family finding team came into being. It is anticipated this will start to improve performance against this indicator. The increase in the use of fostering to adopt placements will also have a positive impact.
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4.4 Timeliness for achieving permanence for all children who enter care remains a priority. The re-organisation of the adoption team and drive to recruit more adopters are both part of this, along with the increased use of Early Permanence Placements. We now hold permanence tracking meetings for all children with the aim of reducing delay. This should impact on performance in a positive way. Unfortunately this won't be seen until the children currently being placed are adopted. There is a time lag in them being counted as children are not adopted for at least 6 months after they are placed.

5. Adoption Activity – Adopters 2018-19.

5.1 There has been a national fall in the numbers of adopters approved in the last couple of years. The gap between the number of children waiting nationally for adoptive families and the number of adopters approved has grown.This led to the decision to make improving the sufficiency of adoptive placements for the children needing them part of the Sheffield Children's Services Improvement Plan.   The information below provides data in relation to adopters.

5.2 Recruitment and approval of adopters

	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17
Number of adopters approved	31	21	29
Number of Sheffield adoptive families with children placed in the year.	25	24	25

5.3 This table shows a significant increase (almost a 50%increase), in the number of adopters approved in the last 12 months. The target was 32 approvals and we were only one short of this.

5.4 Use of inter-agency adopters

- In total, 16 children were placed with adopters approved by external agencies during the year. Of these 10 were with other local authorities adopters and 6 were with voluntary adoption agencies. There is a fee when we place our

children with other agency adopters. For placing a single child with other local authorities' adopters the fee is £27,000. The fee for placing a sibling group of two is £43,000. It is more if we place with adopters from voluntary adoption agencies. The cost last year was £31,000 for a single child and £50,000 for a sibling group of two.

- The agency will quickly agree an interagency fee for children where we have no suitable internal adopters in order to avoid delay for the child. It also means a child leaves care more quickly so achieving permanence more promptly and the costs are off set against this in the longer run.

- At the same time as placing some of our children with other agency adopters, we have provided 5 adoptive homes for 5 children from other local authorities under the same inter agency fee arrangements.

5.5 Recruitment Activity Undertaken.

- The latter part of the year saw an increase in recruitment activity. The website has been updated to include a campaign page and the design of advertising materials has been updated. There has been a communications plan based around the new branding which has included advertising on buses and trams, along with adverts on clear channels and public banners during national adoption week and in the buildup to Christmas. Attendance at local events has continued.

- The above activity saw an increase in enquiries at the start of 2019. This will continue into 2019-20 while plans to regionalize unfold.

- We have started to develop a regional program of Preparation Training for adopters in conjunction with our neighboring local. This is to ensure there is always training available and that this doesn't lead to delay in processing adopters. It is due to go live in 2019-20. Our adopter voice coordinator is part of the working group to try to ensure it is relevant and informative to adopters.

- 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.

- Direct recruitment based on children's profiles took place at Exchange and Activity Days. We also placed children's details on Link Maker and the National Register run by First 4Adoption until it was suspended at the end of the year.

6. Adoption Support 2018-19

6.1 Adoption support work continues to grow and this is 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 an EHC plan/SEN statement. Referrals to the fund in Sheffield have continued to grow. An accredited providers list is maintained regionally through North Yorkshire County Council on behalf of Yorkshire and Humberside.

6.2 There is no clarity about what will happen when the Adoption Support Fund ends in 2020 and this is a cause for concern. Expectations have been created about being able to access therapeutic services for children and families via this route particularly while meeting the threshold for CAMHS services remains difficult. However the future is unclear for both adoption agencies and families in this respect.

6.3 A challenge for the service has been to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of this therapy and we have had to think more clearly about how we measure and evaluate this. Further work is required around this. An additional element highlighted by the regional 'Adopteens' group is that young people are not always clear about why they are receiving therapy and the timing of it does not always feel right. This is a complex area as we know that many families and children have also benefited from the therapy provided via the fund.

6.4 We are currently creating a more robust review and evaluation process of support provided. At the time of writing the service is undertaking a systematic evaluation of the impact of therapeutic support and the wider support offer to adoptive families through surveying the views of all families we work with and who are in receipt of services. However we do have feedback from a large number of adopters about the value of the support provided either directly from this service or via the ASF. We have surveyed families about the support they have received. The majority of feedback is positive and adopters have said that the support provided has helped. There are some frustrations about the delays in providing therapy since, even with the ASF there is a shortage of providers. Additionally adopters can sometimes overestimate the ability of the adoption support team to access resources from other agencies such as education or CAMHS.

6.5 The data below provides information about adoption support referrals during the last year compared to 2017-18.

- **New requests for assessments for post adoption** support made to the adoption support team during the year 2018/19: **88 referrals** were received. Of these 73 resulted in the provision of support. During 2017/18: 60 assessments were requested and 50 resulted in the provision of support. This is a significant increase from last year to this.
- **Adult adoptee support**: there were **40 adults** in receipt of support, not one off advice during the year 2018-19. This compares to 33 during 2017-18.
- Letterboxes contacts: 570
- Adoption allowances: 311
- **Applications to the Adoption Support Fund**: There have been **78 applications** made to the ASF during 2018/19; these include new referrals,

current open cases and further requests for ongoing therapy. There were 80 ASF applications in 2017/18.

6.6 The Adoption Support Fund is only one element of Sheffield's adoption support offer. There are 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. Newsletters are provided to adoptive families to inform them of events and give useful information. There is also a range of adopter led groups with an active WhatsApp group. Adopters also use the Adoption UK Adopter voice Facebook page to share ideas and opportunities. We are also members of New Family Social which provides support and advice to LGBT adopters.

6.7 We have 5 team members trained in different levels of theraplay, which is a therapy aimed at building attachments within adoptive families. They do group and individual work as well as training for adopters. One is a fully certified theraplay practitioner and member of the practicum. She does direct work with families but also through our Stars group, where she teaches theraplay techniques to adopters with young children. This group receives excellent feedback from those that attend.

6.8 Additionally the last year has seen us jointly commission, along with other Yorkshire and Humberside local authorities, an adoption support service from PAC UK/ Family Action/ Adoption UK. This includes the following support services for adoptive families, adult adoptees and birth families:

• Advice line for those affected by adoption: birth families; adopted adults; adopters to be provided 5 days a week for 3 hours a day with two early evening sessions up to 7pm;

• '*ADOPTEENS*' - Support for adopted teenagers and including a website, online chat forum where support can be provided, a Youth Council across Yorkshire and Humber with social events with the aim of using views and experiences to help improve and develop policy and practice.

• Improving the participation of adopters' views (adopter voice) in service development and delivery of services across the region.

• Improving the participation of birth parents in service development across the region.

• Support for adopted adults, schedule 2 counselling and intermediary services

• Pro- active birth parent support and counselling; and

• Independent support for adoptive parents.

6.6 Adoption duty hours have been extended to offer an all-day duty service to members of the public regarding any adoption related matter.

7 Adoption Panel Business

7.1 Business and Meetings

- Sheffield Council operates a single adoption panel which meets every two weeks. There have been **23** panels in the period from 01/04/18 to 31/03/19. One panel was canceled due to insufficient business.

- The panel has recommended **32** approvals of adopters, although the decisions did not all occur in this year.

- There have been **36** matches considered by the panel. 6 of these were for sibling groups of 2 children.

- There have been **2** relinquished child presented to panel for consideration as to whether they should be placed for adoption.

- Panel activity has increased slightly from the year before due to the increase in adopter approvals. However there have been adequate panels to meet demand and no emergency panels have been required. During the year 2017-18 there were **20** panels. There were **44** matches considered and **21** approvals.

7.2 Panel Membership

- The panel has an experienced independent Chair who previously worked for BAAF. The medical advisers to the panel are very committed and knowledgeable in the field of adoption. They provide 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 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. Over the last few years it has been recognised by the Panel that further diversity of panel membership would be welcomed and recruitment to Panel bears this in mind. Additional social work members are always welcome. An adopted adult and a care leaver would be welcome additions.

- 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. She has organised training for Panel and provides regular information on relevant case law or research. She has ensured appraisals and DBS checks are all up to date.

7.3 Quality Assurance

- Panel provides feedback to workers and the agency on the quality of reports presented and the worker's presentation. Since October 2018 this has included newly developed feedback forms which include a grading of the quality of reports in line with OFSTED guidelines. This is collated to give an overview of the quality of reports over time and so that workers and their managers can be given a clear indication of Panel's view of the standard of reports. The table below summarises the grades given for the period since the system was introduced in October 2018 to the end of March 2019:

	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
Child permanence reports	0	9	8	3
Prospective adopter reports	2	14	6	0
Adoption Placement Reports/Support plans	0	11	9	0
Total	2	34	23	3

It should be noted now that no decisions are made on inadequate reports – decisions are deferred until reports are amended and of sufficient quality.

- The overall quality of report has improved but needs further improvement and following discussions between the Panel Chair and the ADM it has been agreed to provide mandatory training to team managers on the effective quality assurance of adoption reports. It is recognised that they are best positioned to drive up standards in this area.

- The Agency Adviser provides robust and thorough feedback on reports which come through for both Panel and SHOBPA ADM.

- It has been agreed by the Assistant Director for Provider Services and the ADM that any reports deemed inadequate by the Panel Chair and Agency Adviser prior to Panel should be stood down.

8. Regional Adoption Agency Update

8.1 Plans for the regionalisation of the adoption services in South Yorkshire have made some limited progress over the year. The four local authorities concerned have continued to look at possible models. A new Project Manager will develop a business case with a view to a regional Adoption Agency going live in 2020.

9. Developments in the Year:

9.1 **Re-structure of the Service**; The adoption team re-structured in September 2018. There is now a dedicated recruitment team. Support to families with special guardianship orders moved away from adoption to the connected person's team in the Fostering Service. There is now an adoption support and family finding team. The family finders are a dedicated group of workers who track children from an early stage. They pick up cases at legal gateway which facilitates early consideration of fostering to adopt as well as allowing them to understand which children are entering care and will potentially need adoptive families. They support children's social workers with the adoption element of the care planning. It is intended that this should improve the child's journey by ensuring that they are well prepared, have good quality information for later life and achieve permanence as soon as possible. It is anticipated that the benefits of this should be seen in our performance indicators over 2019 into 2020. Another element of this restructure has been to introduce an all-day duty service.

9.2. **Children's Improvement Plan**: Adopter recruitment increased and the re-vamped communications strategy saw the website being updated along with a more cohesive recruitment campaign. This went live in January 2019 and will continue into next year to assist with recruitment activity moving forward.

9.3 Alongside this we have looked to increase the frequency of preparation training by working with our neighbour's. Feedback from adopters is a big part of this development.

9.4 In terms of the Children's Improvement Plan the two key elements relating to adoption were to increase the numbers of approved adopters and the use of Early Permanence Placements. Both of these have been achieved. Both are ongoing.

9.5 **Adoption Tracking**: the team manager who supervises the adoption family finders now attends a legal gateway meeting which means tracking children from entering care is easier. They also have developed an effective tracking tool known as a 'traffic light' which helps them follow the progress of care proceedings and assessments. The third element of this is Permanence tracking meetings which replaced adoption tracking meeting in December 2018. These ensure all children who have not yet secured permanence are monitored and from an adoption perspective none are missed.

9.6 **Adopter Voice**: The new adopter voice meetings have been launched, facilitated by our Sheffield Adopter Voice Coordinator. In addition to local adopters input to service development he also brings the regional and national perspective about adopter's experience. We have held workshops on adoption support and the role of the virtual head in adoption. Information is fed into services and updates are provided to the group about how their input has been acted upon. The adopter voice coordinator is part of the working group on developing adopter training and part of the work relating to regionalisation.

9.7 **Signs of Safety**: team members have continued to attend training in Signs of Safety and we have appointed leads within the adoption support team and the recruitment team. As a specialist service there are particular challenges around using this approach but it is being integrated into supervision and work with children. We are still understanding how best to use it in adopter assessments but have plans going into next year to look at how we include this with Signs of Wellbeing.

9.8 **Liquid Logic:** 2018 saw the introduction of a new Integrated Children's System (ICS) in Sheffield. This came into being in July 2018. There are still difficulties with some of the pathways particularly relating to adoption support and built in forms for adopters and children's pathways but these are being worked on. Staff are growing in confidence about using the system although learning all the time. It is hoped that this will make performance and management information more easily accessible. This hasn't yet bought the ability to run reports supporting performance due to pathway improvements being required.

9.9 **Staffing**: The service has had changes of staff. The recruitment team manager left in December 2018 and it took some time to replace her. The permanent replacement took up post on 01/07/19. This has impacted upon the team developments as operational leadership has been dispersed across the service. Additionally we have had three new social workers join the team- two in recruitment and one in adoption support. Filling the vacant posts was not easy with adverts having to go out several times. The reasons for this are unclear. The business support team continues to have high levels of sickness and performance issues which impacts upon business continuity. The team has also been adjusting to a new Service Manager and a new Assistant Director during this year. Both were appointed in March 2018.

10 Developments and Improvement Actions for 2019/20

10.1   Corporate Parenting Strategy-
As per the Corporate Parenting Strategy we will continue to work on sufficiency of adopters and the use of Early Permanence Placements. We have updated the recruitment and communications strategy to support this. We are also in the process of planning roadshows regarding good practice in early permanence placements.

10.2 Signs of Safety
Training is ongoing for all new team members. Sheffield Council has a 5 year agenda to implement the approach. We have workshops planned to look at its application across fostering and adoption recruitment as well as peer mentoring sessions to look at its application to specific cases. It is hoped this will help staff understand the approach and how it might be used in adoption. The worksite leads are actively supporting this. It is ongoing within the service.

10.3 Performance Information
The pathways in Liquid Logic relating to adoption are being further developed and this will support our ability to track performance and support our current methods of data collection. We will continue to work on improving timeliness; particularly in

terms of the length of time it takes from placement order to matching decision (A2), by continuing to embed the role of the family finders. The new adoption support pathway is currently under development.
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10.4 Introduce a Peer Mentoring Scheme for adopters
It is intended to develop a Peer Mentoring Scheme in conjunction with Adoption UK and our neighbouring authorities in South Yorkshire. This is something that adopters have requested in adopter voice meetings and will impact positively on our adoption support offer. The experience of other agencies who have introduced this is that it has reduced the need for higher levels of support and helped stabilize adoptive families. Adopters will be trained to offer this service and the aim is to go live in October 2019.

10.5 Evaluation of Impact of Adoption Support Services:
Further develop the mechanisms for reviewing and evaluating the impact of adoption support services, including those commissioned via the ASF. This will include more of an emphasis on clarity of desired outcomes following assessment of need, review and evaluation against the goals - including the child's voice.

10.6 Continue to drive the Quality of Adoption Reports:
It is planned to roll out the mandatory training for team managers concerning what to look for in good child permanence and prospective adopter reports and learn from Panel grades/feedback. Good quality adoption support plans will also be supported by the introduction of a new pro-forma.

10.7 Regionalisation
A Project Officer has been appointed to finalise the business case for the South Yorkshire Regional Adoption Agency and this will be progressed over the year. The aim is to go live in 2020.

11. Summary

11.1 The last twelve months have seen a continuation of good performance in relation to timeliness from when children enter care to being placed for adoption (A1). We are meeting the national target. Also the percentage of children leaving care via adoption is nearly 15% which is above the national average. Timeliness from court decision to match (A2) has fallen slightly.

11.2 There has been a rise in the number of adopters approved this year and they have primarily provided families for Sheffield children although some have also provided adoptive families for children waiting nationally.

11.3 The team has restructured to help meet targets and develop services. This has included expanding the role of family finders and creating specialist adoption support workers.

11.4 The Adoption Panel has completed similar levels of activity to the previous year- the number of adopter approvals being the key increase. They have taken on a more robust QA role through the grading of panel reports.

11.5 Regionalisation of the adoption services in South Yorkshire has continued albeit slowly, with agreement at Directorate level about how to progress this work. Meetings have taken place with the Department for Education about the regional plans and direction.

11.6 Staff changes have presented difficulties but the restructure of the service has been positive and supported by staff. It has been a busy year and staff have worked hard and responded well to the challenges.

Vicky Brooke
Service Manager, Adoption

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