

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	01 December 2016
Title of report:	Adoption report and adoption service statement of purpose
Report by:	Cabinet member young people and children's wellbeing

Classification

Open

Key decision

This is not a key decision.

Wards affected

Countywide

Purpose

To review the effectiveness of the adoption service.

To approve the adoption service statement of purpose.

Recommendation(s)

THAT:

- (a) the performance of the adoption service as outlined at appendix A to this report be reviewed, any risks to achievement of objectives noted and relevant mitigating actions approved; and**
- (b) the statement of purpose attached at appendix B to this report be approved.**

Alternative options

1. Under the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014 (NMS), Cabinet should receive updates on the management, outcomes and financial state of Herefordshire Council's adoption service; it is open to Cabinet to identify additional or alternative actions to improve performance, but in doing so regard must be had to the resource implications of additional actions.

Reasons for recommendations-

2. The NMS are issued by the Secretary of State under sections 23 and 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000 and are issued for use by Ofsted which takes them into account in its inspections.
3. Standard 25.6 states that:
 - The executive side of the local authority
 - receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months;
 - monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users;
 - satisfies itself that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.
4. Standard 18.3 states that:
 - The executive side of the local authority formally approves the statement of purpose and children's guides and reviews them at least annually.

Key considerations

5. Seven councils within the West Midlands have been inspected by Ofsted under the single inspection framework and Herefordshire was one of three whose judgement for adoption was 'Good', with two 'Requiring Improvement' and two judged 'Inadequate'. Adoption was noted to be promptly considered when children cannot live with their families and court proceedings are rapidly completed so that children can quickly settle into permanent families. People interested in adopting children were judged to be well prepared.
6. Nationally, published reports evidence that the adoption service is meeting targets in the timely placement of children, with Herefordshire being one of the top ten performers in the country. An unprecedented 29 looked after children were adopted in 2015/16.
7. The Department for Education has outlined plans to radically redesign the whole adoption system. New service models are proposed, delivered through Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) working together to deliver adoption services. By 2017, local councils are expected to have effective plans and proposals in place and by 2020 they will all be part of a RAA or will have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA. Herefordshire, Birmingham and three voluntary adoption agencies are exploring the potential of forming a RAA with an initial focus on the

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
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provision of support to adoptive families in the region and ensuring 'the adopter voice' is central to any model.

8. Recent court decisions nationally and locally suggest that the number of children made subject to orders, which allow them to be placed for adoption, has decreased resulting in fewer children being placed for adoption. Robust and well informed evidence from social workers is required by the courts in respect of the assessment of sibling relationships and the capacity of family members to offer satisfactory permanent care.
9. The statement of purpose (appendix B) should be reviewed annually and clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the adoption agency, showing how the service will meet outcomes for children.
10. Feedback from adopters who have been assessed, approved and supported by Herefordshire Council is actively sought by the independent adoption panel and agency via formal questionnaires. Feedback is shared with the adoption panel which has a role in quality assuring the work of the adoption service and safeguarding and family support service and reporting this to the agency. Comments from adopters on the service provided is overwhelmingly positive and their recommendation to others considering adoption has been our most valuable recruitment tool.

Community impact

11. The government published an 'Action plan for adoption: tackling delay' in March 2012 and several later initiatives have promoted adoption as the optimum permanence option for children unable to be brought up within their original families. Protecting children and giving them a great start in life and promoting their mental health and emotional wellbeing are priorities for the council. It is accepted that the sooner a child is placed for adoption, the better the outcome, hence the imperative to avoid delay in securing placements for children.

Equality duty

12. The adoption service welcomes applications from those wishing to adopt, from all sectors of the community and is ambitious in seeking adoptive placements for children whatever their level of need. This is reflected in the statement of purpose and recruitment strategy. We have successfully recruited and placed children with single adopters, same sex couples, adopters who are registered disabled and adopters from the Black and minority ethnic (BME) community. We prioritise applications from those hoping to adopt children who are considered harder to place such as sibling groups, older children and children with additional needs.
13. Under Section 149, the "General Duty" on public authorities is set out thus:
 - "A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -
 - eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct ... prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic

and persons who do not share it."

Financial implications

14. There are no financial implications for this decision.
15. Income may be generated by fees paid for children from other agencies to be placed with adopters approved by Herefordshire Council, which is a projected income of £54k (the fee for two single placements). The increased oversupply of adopters nationally has meant that more agencies are able to place their children with their own adopters. In Herefordshire, the numbers of prospective adopters approved has remained constant from 2014/15 to 2015/16 and it has become harder to find children for them, particularly if they live within Hereford. This creates a potential pressure, which is being monitored.

Legal implications

16. Under the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014, Standard 25.6, Cabinet must receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months. Cabinet is to monitor the management and outcomes of the service to satisfy itself that the agency is effective and achieving good outcomes and complying with conditions of registration. They must also consider if any follow up actions from the previous six months report have been complied with. The statement of purpose and children's guides should be formally approved and reviewed at least annually, it is therefore not required at this time but is good practice to review it at the same time.

Risk management

17. Without an effective adoption service, looked after children would spend longer in the care of the local council. This would be detrimental to their wellbeing and life chances and would not support the objective of 'protecting children and giving them a great start in life'. If the support needs of adoptive families are not met, children may return to the care system. An effective adoption and looked after children's service is important to ensure that we are able to offer a robust and timely approach to securing permanence for children unable to be brought up safely within their own families and to ensure access to services that will best support their individual needs.
18. The recent trend of fewer orders being granted by the court to permit children to be placed for adoption is likely to impact upon the numbers of children leaving the care system via adoption.
19. The adoption service has consistently been judged 'Good' by Ofsted. If the service is not effective, this will affect the overall judgement of children's wellbeing and thus the reputation of the council. We need to ensure that the service maintains this judgement and minimise any reputational risk by ensuring children's social workers are equipped to provide well evidenced assessments and permanence plans that are accepted by the courts. We must carefully consider how the prospect of regional adoption agencies would impact on outcomes for Herefordshire children and families.

Consultees

20. Members of Herefordshire's adoption panel, which is independently chaired and comprises independent and professional members with experience of adoption.

Appendices

Appendix A: Annual adoption report April 2015 to April 2016

Appendix B: Statement of purpose August 2016

Background papers

- None identified.