

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	20 July 2017
Title of report:	Adoption Service annual report 2016-17
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 adoption service performance and approve related documents.

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;**
- (b) that the statement of purpose attached at appendix b to this report be approved; and**
- (c) that the children's guides attached at appendix c 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 detail the conduct and standards required for Adoption Services and as such are taken into account during inspections by Ofsted.
- 3 Standard 25.6 states that the executive of the council:
 - 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 of the council formally approves the statement of purpose and children's guides and reviews them at least annually.

Key considerations

- 5 The annual report sets out the activity and performance for the Adoption Service during 2016-17. The adoption service has successfully placed 18 children with adopters including sibling groups, older children and some with complex needs. There has been an increase in Placement Orders granted from 11 in 2015/16 to 24 in 2016/17 which will enable more children to enjoy the love and security of a forever family without the stigma of being a looked after child.
- 6 The Department for Education published 'Regionalising adoption' in June 2015 and 'Adoption: A vision for change' in March 2016, outlining plans to radically redesign the whole adoption system- the structures, systems and workforce. In order to deliver their vision new service models were proposed, delivered through Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) working together to deliver adoption services. By 2017 local authorities are expected to have effective plans and proposals in place and by 2020 all local authorities are to be part of a RAA, or will have delegated their adoption functions to a RAA. Herefordshire is currently in discussions about joining Adopt Central England (ACE) currently comprising of Warwickshire, Coventry, Solihull and Worcestershire. A formal decision report will be presented to Cabinet in due course.
- 7 The statement of purpose has been updated to reflect changes within the staffing structure and service.

Community impact

- 8 Protecting children and giving them a great start in life and promoting their mental health and emotional wellbeing are priorities for the council and the Children and Young People's Plan. 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. 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.

Equality duty

- 9 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.
- 10 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

- 11 The financial performance of the service was included in the directorate's out-turn report for 2016/17. For this period the adoption service budget was £663k and reported an overspend of £176k as a result of purchasing inter-agency placements and facing a loss of income as a result of the wider changes to adoption services which has reduced the market for purchasing adoptive placements. The use of inter-agency placements enables the service to meet national expectations regarding the adoption of older children or those with more complex needs, including sibling groups. The Council has been able to submit a claim to be able to recoup £54k costs from a central government fund. Although it is expected that this will be agreed confirmation has not yet been received and therefore this income would be set against 2017/18 budget.
- 12 The adoption service has, for some years, had an income target of £74k on the basis that the service will be able to sell placements to other authorities. As noted above, over recent years it has been very challenging to achieve this target. The service did sell 2 placements during the year realising an income of £45k. Further consideration of this income target will form part of future budget planning.
- 13 As part of the application to join Adoption Central England (ACE), we expect to be asked to accept a funding formula which will determine our financial contribution to ACE and reflect the likely true cost of providing a service within the new organisational climate which is designed to reduce the use of inter-agency placements.

Legal implications

- 14 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

- 15 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.
- 16 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.
- 17 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. The service continually seeks to improve the quality of practice and service. We must carefully consider how the prospect of regional adoption agencies would impact on outcomes for Herefordshire children and families and we will ensure that these are kept central during service planning.

Consultees

- 18 The adoption service annual report was discussed at the children's scrutiny committee on 5 July 2017; they are supportive of the annual report and acknowledged that it is a statutory requirement.
- 19 The committee have requested that the annual report for 2017/18 is presented to them as a draft; to enable them to give the report due consideration and make any recommendations to the cabinet member young people and children's wellbeing for consideration.

Appendices

Appendix A: Annual adoption report 2016-17

Appendix B: Statement of purpose May 2017

Background papers

- None identified