

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	21 January 2016
Title of report:	Adoption report, adoption service statement of purpose and children's guide to adoption
Report by:	Adoption service manager

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 and children's guide to adoption.

Recommendation(s)

THAT:

- (a) the performance of the adoption service as outlined at appendices a and b to this report be reviewed, any risks to achievement of objectives noted and relevant mitigating actions approved ;**
- (b) the statement of purpose attached at appendix c to this report be approved; and**
- (c) the children's guide to adoption attached at appendix d 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 the 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 who take them into account in their 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;
 - satisfy themselves 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. The adoption service was judged 'Good' by Ofsted in its report of June 2014. 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 and supported throughout and following the adoption process.
6. Nationally published adoption scorecards evidence that the adoption service is meeting targets in the timely placement of children and performance against statistical neighbours is good. 13% of children ceased to be looked after through adoption in the last published scorecard (appendix a).
7. Throughout 2014 and early 2015, the potential for combining services with three other local councils to form a West Mercia partnership or single entity for adoption was explored. By April 2015, having considered the detailed business case Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin decided not to follow this route, but to maintain commitment to a partnership arrangement with a voluntary agency, After Adoption, to secure adoptive placements for those children who are considered hardest to place. Herefordshire has referred three sibling groups.. Herefordshire continues to

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Hilary Hale, adoption service manager on Tel (01432) 383341

work with Worcestershire to deliver joint training to prospective adopters and to explore joint recruitment of adopters and placements for children in line with the government's manifesto commitment to regional adoption agencies delivering all adopter recruitment, matching and support functions by the end of the current parliament..

8. Nationally the number of children with a plan for adoption is decreasing. In 2014 there was a 46% reduction between quarter 2 and quarter 4 in the numbers of orders made by courts to allow children to be placed for adoption. This is thought to be due to changes in case law as a result of appeals in the courts. However, in Herefordshire the numbers of orders made by the court to allow placement of children in adoptive families increased by 60% between October 2014 and 2015 reflecting excellent joint work by the LAC court hub and adoption team. The number of children placed for adoption also increased by 30% in the same period and 23 children left the care system through adoption orders being granted.
9. Recent court hearings locally suggest that the number of children made subject to orders allowing them to be placed for adoption is likely to decrease over the next reporting period, 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. This work is now undertaken by social workers in the child in need teams.
10. The statement of purpose (appendix C) and children's guide to adoption (appendix D) should clearly set out the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and show how the service will meet outcomes for children. Both should be reviewed at least annually and this has not happened since a change to the process for prospective adopters in July 2013.
11. Feedback from adopters assessed, approved and supported by Herefordshire is actively sought by the independent adoption panel and agency via formal questionnaires and this 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 decision maker. The feedback from adopters on the service provided is overwhelmingly positive and their recommendation to others considering adoption is our most valuable recruitment tool.

Community impact

12. 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

13. 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 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.

14. Note: 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

15. The budget for adoption service remains consistent. Income is generated by fees paid for children from other agencies to be placed with adopters approved by Herefordshire and projected income of £54,000 (the fee for two single placements) was built into the 2015/16 budget. 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 approved adopters fell by 15% between 2013/14 and 2014/15 and it has become harder to find placements for them. This creates a potential pressure, which is being monitored.

Legal implications

16. Cabinet must receive reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months to comply with Adoption National Minimum Standards.

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 families of origin and to ensure access to services that will best support their specialist 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 and carefully considering 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: Six monthly report on adoption activity 1 April 2015 to 30 September 2015

Appendix b: Adoption scorecard December 2014

Appendix c: Statement of purpose August 2015.

Appendix d: Children's guide to adoption.

Background papers

- None identified.