

Corporate Parenting Board – 6 September 2012

Briefing Note in Relation to the Governments' Adoption Action Plan and Lancashire's Response To It

Purpose of the report and Summary

This report explains some of the ways the Government wants local authorities to manage the care planning and adoption process so that delays for children don't happen. The report also explains what action we are taking in Lancashire to make sure we are doing things in the way the Government wants and most importantly of all says what we are doing to make sure we do things quickly enough for children who need to be adopted. The purpose of the report is to provide the Board with information and the chance to ask questions.

The Government wants the local authority to place children faster with stable, safe and loving families. It has been decided there needs to be some changes made to the law to make this easier. Some changes to the law start on 1 September 2012. The Government have also invented a kind of test called the "Adoption Score Cards". It is a little bit like a school report in some ways but looks at how well or not every local authority in the country is working to place children for adoption without delay. It helps us to understand what we are doing well and where we need to improve.

Key Information and Questions for Board Members

Sorting things out well but quickly for children who need to be adopted can be difficult. A report called "Right on Time" in April this year says that on average it takes two years and seven months before children are adopted after entering care. Most adopted children are aged between one and four years of age when they join their new family, with the average age at adoption standing at three years and 10 months.

The numbers of children placed with adoptive families in Lancashire over the course of 2008 to 2012 are:

2008 - 2009 = 48
2009 - 2010 = 59
2010 - 2011 = 71
2011 - 2012 = 61

Background

We know there are sometimes risks in adoption and we have to manage these risks. Adoption really does work though. For hundreds of children every year their lives are improved by being adopted. It is important though to make sure that we place children with adopters who are able to meet their needs, make them happy and help them to achieve.

Childhood is short and really precious. Most children being placed for adoption have already had a lot of difficult things happen in their life. Social workers know how important it is for children to have settled placements that last at the earliest possible stage. We are already doing many of the things which the Government are suggesting. I know the Adoption Service in Lancashire has more to learn and we can probably do better. Children deserve no less.

The new "Adoption Score Card" published for the first time in May this year measures three things over a three year period. These measures (or tests) indicate how well each local authority is doing.

1. Average time between a child entering care and moving in with his/her adoptive family (in days)

The average in England is 625 days and the average in Lancashire is 676 (target not met)

2. Average time between a local authority receiving Court permission to place a child and the local authority finding an adoptive family (in days)

The average in England is 171 days and the average in Lancashire is 199 days. Our figures are longer than the England averaged over three years, but shorter in 2011; trend is 'improved'.

3. Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (measured as a %)

The average in England is 58% and the average in Lancashire is 47%

The main reason for delay is the time it can take the Court to decide whether or not a child can be adopted. It can take more than a year sometimes. It has been suggested that Courts should finish the process in six months. This should help local authorities to place children for adoption more quickly.

Work we are doing in Lancashire to place children with adopters within 21 months of entering care.

- Improving the way we check and test out what we are doing in the Adoption Service and Children's Social Care and know what we are doing well and where we need to improve.
- Making sure the Adoption Service, Social Work Teams in the Districts and Independent Reviewing Officers work well together to improve and speed up the adoption/care planning process. A plan has been agreed and a group meets regularly to make sure we are doing everything that we have said we will do.
- Improving the way the Adoption Panel works to make sure it does not slow things down. We have a new way for making what is called "The Agency Decision" which means deciding whether a child should be placed for adoption.
- Using ways to find and prepare adopters which makes sure we get the right kind of people for our children who need to be adopted.
- Finding the right adopter for the right child or children as early as possible. We have a traffic light system for every child who needs to be placed with adopters which helps us to make sure we are doing everything we can to find a family as quickly as we possibly can.
- Meeting with Judges to work out how to shorten the time it takes for the Court to make a decision. The Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board is helping with this.
- Use lots of different ways to find enough adopters and make sure that we train them well to care for the children we place with them.
- Work closely with other local authorities and learn from their good ideas.
- We are starting a new way of approving some people as adopters so that children do not have to change placements as often. To start with we hope to get 15 carers who we can have as both Foster and Adoptive Parents.

Conclusion

Some of the action that was necessary for us to take has already been completed. A report will be presented to the Directors in Children and Young People's Directorate on the 26 September explaining what work we have been doing to improve.

Decisions required

The report is for information though questions may be asked of the report author.

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