Appendix 1: Draft Report

Report of the Children’s Services Select Committee: Improving the council’s adoption scorecard performance: Scrutiny Review 2016/17

Contact:
London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Scrutiny Democratic Services Law and Governance scrutinyinbox@lbbd.gov.uk
This year, Barking and Dagenham Council’s Children’s Services Select Committee (CSS) agreed to undertake a Scrutiny Review on ‘Improving the Council’s Adoption Scorecard Performance’.

Children who are looked after by the local authority, or are in need of an adoptive family, often come from difficult backgrounds or face complexities which make them very vulnerable, and are in great need for stability, love and affection. There is evidence to show that adoption is a good outcome for these children, and that the earlier they are adopted, the better the outcomes for them and their families. As the Council’s performance in the two key indicators for measuring how quickly local children are adopted is below the London and national average, we wanted to find out what the reasons were for this, what the Council was doing to address these challenges and what more could be done.

As well as looking at the data and speaking to various professionals involved in the adoption process, we received a presentation from Professor Julie Selwyn, an expert in the field, to help us understand what questions the Council should be asking to challenge itself and improve practice. We also talked to residents who have been through the adoption process to gain their personal insight.

We learnt that when compared to London, the borough has a higher than average number of children who are in a sibling group, are from an ethnic minority, are older, or have a disability, which can mean that they are ‘harder to place’. In the past, the Adoption Service has successfully placed children considered ‘harder to place’ which has been a good outcome for those children. However, this good practice has had an adverse impact on the Service’s Scorecard performance, which indicates that the Service is far from meeting the timeliness targets for finding children an adoptive family. We therefore feel that the Scorecard performance measures do not accurately portray the true picture, in that these children may have waited longer to be placed, but the Adoption Service’s decision to continue to look for an adoptive placement for these children, rather than deem them not suitable for adoption, turned out to be in their best interests.

However, we recognise that the delay in finding adoptive families for children cannot always be attributed to the fact that the cohort of children looking for adoptive families includes a high number of harder to place children. It is very important that the Council’s Action Plan for the Service is closely monitored to ensure the changes to the culture and practices within the Service to improve timeliness do not lose momentum and are having the right impact. More can also be done to improve the recruitment of adopters, and the timeliness of finding adoptive families for children, and so we have made a number of recommendations which we hope will help address these issues. We also recognise that there are areas for good practice. For example, in recent years, there has been a low adoption disruption rate, there has been good joint working within the East London Consortium on recruitment and matching and, Special Guardianship support and training has been introduced in recognition of the significant increase in activity in this area of permanency planning for children.

Councillor Elizabeth Kangethe
Lead Member, Children’s Services Select Committee 2016/17 – 2017/18
Members of the CSSC 2016/17

The CSSC members who carried out this Review were:

Councillor E Kangethe (Lead Member)

Councillor M Bartlett (Deputy Lead Member)

Councillor S Bremner

Councillor E Fergus

Councillor I Freeborn

Councillor A OluwOLE

Councillor S Ghani

Councillor S Ghani

Councillor D Smith
Contents

Section                                                                 | Page number |
List of Recommendations arising from this Review                        | 1           |
Background to the Review                                                 | 2           |
Scoping & Methodology                                                    | 3           |
Introduction                                                            | 5           |
What is Barking and Dagenham’s Adoption Scorecard Performance?          | 9           |
Why is the Barking and Dagenham Adoption Service not meeting the DfE’s A1 and A2 targets? | 12          |
What is Working Well and What More Can be done?                         | 17          |
Conclusions, Recommendations and Next Steps                              | 20          |
Thanks                                                                  | 22          |
Appendices                                                              | 23          |
Recommendations arising from this Review

For ease of reference, the recommendations arising from this Review are provided below.

The CSSC recommends that:

1. All children, who may potentially be placed for adoption, continue to have adoption plans made by the Local Authority and that these are advocated for during care proceedings;

2. The Chair of the Committee and the Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration write to the Department for Education to make representations regarding changes needed to the way performance is measured to take account of the local context and challenges so that there is a fairer representation of performance;

3. All children have the plan for adoption formally reviewed at 12 months, 18 months and 2 years after the granting of the placement order by the Adoption Improvement Group (AIG) to ascertain whether or not family finding should continue, or whether there should be an application to revoke the placement order. If family finding is going to go beyond two years the rationale for this should be formally recorded;

4. The AIG continues to be held at the current frequency of bi-monthly and the challenge to timely performance remains a focus; and

5. The Strategic Director for Service Development and Integration oversees the implementation of the Committee’s suggestions to improve the recruitment of adopters at 6.2 of this report.
1. Background to the Review

Why did the Children’s Services Select Committee (CSSC) choose to undertake an in-depth review on Improving the Council’s Adoption Scorecard Performance?

1.1 The Council’s scrutiny committees decide what topic to undertake an in-depth review on based on the ‘PAPER’ criteria. The section below explains why according to these criteria ‘Improving the Council’s Adoption Scorecard Performance’ was a good topic to review.

PUBLIC INTEREST

Successive governments have been concerned about the low rate at which children in care become adopted because these children generally have poorer life outcomes than other children. For example, they are more likely to be unemployed, or to become homeless. Members felt that reviewing the rate at which children are adopted in the borough, and the reasons for this, was clearly in the public interest.

ABILITY TO CHANGE

Members felt by reviewing the actions being taken by the Adoption Service and talking to others involved in the adoption process, they could make recommendations that would help improve outcomes.

PERFORMANCE

The Council’s performance for two key measures on the Adoption Scorecard was below the national and London average. Members heard that there were a number of complex factors behind this, and felt it was necessary for the Committee to fully understand the reasons for the delay in some children being adopted and analyse whether the actions and approach taken by officers, were the right ones.

EXTENT OF THE ISSUE

As of the end of January 2017, there were 426 children in the care of the local authority, therefore, making adoption a significant issue to undertake a review on.

REPLICATION

Members were aware that the Adoption Service had set out its action plan to improve performance to the Council’s Corporate Performance Board. Members were clear that a review on Adoption performance would not look to replicate this work, rather it would seek recommend additional areas of action to influence the Service’s outcomes positively.
2. **Scope & Methodology**

2.1 This section outlines the scope of the Review which includes the areas the CSSC wished to explore and the different methods the CSSC used to collate evidence for potential recommendations.

**Terms of Reference**

2.2. Having received a final scoping report at its meeting on 19 September 2016, the CSSC agreed that the Terms of Reference for this Review should be:

1. What is adoption and why is this a good outcome for some children in care?
2. Why is the Barking and Dagenham Adoption Scorecard performance off target and are officers taking the right action to address the issues?
3. How might the views and experience of those adopted and those who adopt help improve our practice?
4. How might the views and experience of others involved in the adoption process help improve our practice?

**Overview of Methodology**

2.3 The Review gathered evidence during the Committee’s meetings held between 19 September 2016 and 8 February 2017. Details of stakeholders and their contributions to this Review are outlined below.

**Scoping Report and Overview Presentation**

2.4 On 19 September 2016 the Council’s Adoption Service delivered a presentation to the CSSC to provide an overview of adoption, including what it means, the government’s agenda around adoption, the key measures of the Adoption Scorecard, the Adoption Service’s performance, issues impacting on performance, and action being taken to improve performance.

**Presentation by Professor Julie Selwyn PhD, CBE**

2.5 On 25 October 2016 Julie Selwyn, a professor of Child and Family Social Work at the University of Bristol, delivered a presentation on ‘The Adoption of Looked after Maltreated Children: Challenges, Opportunities and Outcomes’ which covered a range of areas including:

- The policy framework for permanence in England;
- Adopted children in England,
- Adoption reform;
- The complex needs of children;
- Why adoption and what do we know about adoption outcomes;
- The sense of belonging and permanence,
- Stability and safety;
- Avoiding delay; and
- Early permanence, and the challenges remaining.
Interviews with an Adoptee and an Adopter

2.6 On 21 November 2016, members carried out interviews with a resident who was adopted and a resident who had adopted to gain an understanding of their perspectives of the adoption process and experience.

Session with Others involved in the Adoption Process

2.7 On 6 December 2016 the CSSC met with the Chair of the Adoption Panel, the Council’s Senior Solicitor for Safeguarding, the Group Manager for Looked after Children, Adoption and Prevention Services and a Social Worker to discuss various aspects of the adoption process.

Presentation on the Adoption Scorecard

2.8 At the CSSC meeting on 8 February 2017, the Group Manager for Looked after Children, Adoption and Prevention Services provided a report and delivered a presentation to members on the Adoption Scorecard Performance for 2013 – 2016, which included:

- An overview of the Adoption Scorecard performance;
- The key factors which have contributed to the 2013 -2016 under performance;
- What the Service is doing to improve performance;
- The challenges to being successful;
- An analysis of performance for the 2013-16 cohort;
- Children due to go onto Scorecard for 2014-17;
- Children who are currently awaiting an adoptive family; and
- What the Council could do to promote adoption.

Documents

2.9 During the Review, Members and Council Officers considered the following documents:

- Adoption: A Vision for Change, March 2016, Department for Education
- BAAF Advice notes – if your child is being adopted (and you don't agree)
- BAAF Advice notes – If your child is being adopted (and you don't agree)
- Blogs from First4Adoption website - http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/blog/
Appendix 1: Draft Report

3. Introduction

What is Adoption?

3.1 Adoption is the only legal arrangement where parents lose parental responsibility and the adopters become the legal parents of the child. It can be achieved in the following circumstances:

- Babies relinquished by mothers who do not wish to or are unable to care for their child, and give them up for adoption;
- Care proceedings where children are removed from their families due to safeguarding concerns and the court agrees that adoption is the best care plan for the child;
- Step-parent adoptions to enable the step parent to become the legal parent to the child alongside the birth parent; or
- Family members or foster carers making private applications to adopt children, following, for example, the death of birth parents, or, the child has been under the care of the foster carer for over a year and the foster carer now wishes to adopt the child.

Is Adoption a Good Outcome for Children?

3.2 Care regulations state that social workers must consider permanence, the long-term plan for the child’s upbringing, to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity, and belonging. Permanence can be achieved by reunification with the birth family, family and friends’ care, a special guardianship order, adoption or long-term foster care.

The CSSC heard evidence from Professor Selwyn that permanence for children via adoption can lead to good outcomes for children, particularly if they are adopted at a young age. Children report a greater sense of belonging in adoptive placements when compared to children in foster care. A study by Selwyn et al found that longer term foster placements were more likely to disrupt than the adoptive ones in their sample (the caveat being that the foster children were on average older at placement that the adopted children). The rate was much lower for children who were known to the foster carer and, disruption in both foster and adoptive placements tended to occur in the early stage of the placement.\(^1\)

There is research that shows that adoption provides greater stability than foster care, although this is influenced by factors such as age at placement and the child’s background.\(^2\) Studies also show that once children have been in care for some time, reunification with the birth family is the least successful option of adoption,


foster care and returning home\textsuperscript{3}. Younger children are more likely to return home successfully than those who are older\textsuperscript{4}. A US study comparing children who entered care before the age of one, who returned home, were adopted or remained in foster care, found that the children in foster care has the poorest developmental outcomes on nearly all measures, even though the reunified children had less responsive parents and were in significantly greater poverty. However, children in permanent foster care placements can also do well. \textsuperscript{5}

**The Importance of Avoiding Delay**

3.3 Graphs 1 and 2 below show comparative data on outcomes for children who were adopted with other children and outcomes for adopted children according to the quality of the start of their life and the timeliness of their adoption.

**Outcomes of infant adoptions at age 33**  
**(NCDS data)**

\textsuperscript{3} Thoburn, J and Courtney, M.E (2011) A guide through the knowledge base on children in out of home care, Journal of Children's Services Services, 6, 4: 210-277


\textsuperscript{5} Selwyn, J et al (2006) ibid
3.4 This data shows that adoption can be a good outcome for children, particularly if they are adopted early. Children who have a poor start in life, for example, due to abuse and neglect, and are adopted late, have much poorer outcomes, which is why timeliness in adoption is of crucial importance.

What is the Adoption Scorecard?

3.5 The Coalition Government published ‘An Action Plan for Adoption, Tackling delay’, in March 2012 which introduced a performance scorecard to allow adoption agencies (including local authorities) to monitor their own adoption performance and compare it with that of others.

The Adoption Scorecard is used to measure performance in the timeliness of achieving adoption for children reported as a three-year rolling average and published by the Department for Education (DfE). The two key adoption indicators are:

- **A1** - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted, in days; and
- **A2** - Average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child for adoption and the local authority deciding on a match with an adoptive family, in days.

---

6 Selwyn, J. Charts taken from Presentation to the CSSC, 25 October 2016
The Impact of Caselaw on Timeliness

3.6 Changes in the Family Courts mean that there is an expectation that all care proceedings will be concluded within 26 weeks. It is only in exceptional circumstances that the Courts will allow a case to last longer than 26 weeks.

There has been a series of cases reported in the law reports in 2013 and onwards that has caused the Courts to change the way that they consider care cases where the care plan is adoption. The most important of those cases is Re B-S where the Court gave direction that a care plan of adoption should only be endorsed if the Court was satisfied that “nothing else will do”. This case has had a substantial impact on Placement Order applications (the Court order that allows social workers to begin looking for a new family for a child) and the challenges to Placement Order applications by birth parents. This decision has resulted in extended family members coming forward at a late date to be assessed as alternative carers for a child. This creates delay and impacts upon local authorities’ adoption scorecards as the Courts feel there is no option other than to assess those extended family members, due to the decision in Re B-S.

The decision in Re B-S and the direction that at the end of the care proceedings all Courts have to advise the parents that they have a period of 21 days to appeal any order means that there are an increasing number of appeals by the birth parents. These appeals are often unsuccessful, but once an application has been made to appeal, if the child has not already been placed with prospective adopters, the local authority is unable to place the child until the Court determines the appeal as unsuccessful.
4. What is Barking and Dagenham’s Adoption Service’s Adoption Scorecard Performance?

4.1 This section will discuss Barking and Dagenham’s Adoption’s Service’s performance on the A1 (the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted, in days) and A2 (the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family, in days) measures, compared with the performance of our statistical neighbours, the London and England average, against the DfE’s thresholds. The DfE’s threshold have reduced between 2008 and 2016, making the targets more challenging. There is no indication that there will be a further reduction for 2017.

A1 performance over the last five years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>LBBD</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Statistical Neighbours</th>
<th>DfE Threshold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-2011</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>639</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2012</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>639</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2013</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>608</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2014</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>628</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>547</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>487</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2016</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>To be published March 2017</td>
<td>426</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 As shown in the above table and graph, our rolling three-year average for 2012-15, as published on the Adoption Scorecard, is 658 days; 171 days above the DfE performance threshold of 487 days and 40 days above the London three-year average of 618 days. Barking and Dagenham’s performance is also worse than the national average of 593 days. It is in line with the performance of our statistical neighbours, which have a three-year average of 655 days. In 2013-16 our three-year rolling average had increased to 721, which is 295 days above the DfE threshold of 426 days. Comparator data for 2013-16 is due to be published in March 2017. Commentary on the reasons for this is provided in Section 5.

**A2 performance over the last five years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A2</th>
<th>LBBD</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Statistical Neighbours</th>
<th>DfE Threshold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-2011</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2012</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2013</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2014</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2016</td>
<td>309</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*To be published March 2017* 121

**A2 - LBBD performance compared to the National, London, statistical neighbour and the DfE threshold averages**
4.3 As shown in the above table and graph, our rolling three-year average for 2012-15 as published on the Adoption Scorecard is 236 days, 115 days above the DfE’s performance threshold of 121 days, and 31 days above the London three-year average of 205 days. Barking and Dagenham’s performance is better than our statistical neighbours, which have a three-year average of 250 days, and broadly in line with the national average of 223 days. However, in 2013-16 our three year rolling average had increased to 309 days, which is 188 days above the DfE’s threshold. Comparator data for 2013-16 is due to be published in March 2017. Commentary on the reasons for this is provided in Section 5.

4.4 Given that approximately two thirds of the three year rolling cohort fall into harder to place categories (these categories are discussed further in the next Section), family finding for some of these children has exceeded 18 months. 18 months of family finding is the current measure for the DfE for local authorities to apply for interagency fee reimbursement in recognition of the additional assistance required to family find for complex children. The extension of the interagency fee for children waiting 18 months or more indicates that the DfE are aware that some children will need an extended period of family finding. There is no formal consequence imposed by the DfE for exceeding 18 months, but there is inevitably an impact on the Scorecard and the DfE may make further enquiries regarding performance. Placement Orders, whilst having no expiry date until the child reaches the age of 18, should be formally reviewed at one year to confirm whether or not family finding should continue. There is a tension between the desire to exhaust all family finding options over a prolonged period for harder to place children and the recognition of the impact of this on the Scorecard.
5. Why is the Barking and Dagenham Adoption Service not meeting the DfE’s A1 and A2 Targets?

5.1 In this section we explore the reasons why the Adoption’s Service is behind the DfE’s targets on the A1 and A2 measures.

Delays relating to Care Proceedings

5.2 As discussed in the Introduction, there can be lengthy delays in care proceedings due to the courts requesting further assessments of family members. Sometimes work is undertaken prior to a court hearing in line with good practice (such as, pre – proceedings work by social workers, as is legally required) which may then be marginalised by the Court. The Court then requests further assessments to be done, which is costly, as well as adding delay. There can also be difficulties in obtaining dates for cases to be heard at Court due to the demand for hearings.

Previously, there were internal delays, such as delay in the submission of social workers' reports and other paperwork to our Legal Department and the lodging of the application, which may be attributed to the Services’ workload being disproportionate to the resources of the Council. It is positive that these internal issues have now generally been resolved; however, they do account for some delay in previous years that will impact on the Scorecard. These improvements can be partly attributed to the Adoption Action Plan, particularly the implementation of the Adoption Improvement Group (AIG) where there is ownership of the plan across Children’s Services and the Legal Department. However, work has been taking place to improve performance generally within Children’s Care and Support Services, which has also had an impact. The Adoption Tracker is a tool used by the AIG, the Adoption Team and the Court Progression Officer to monitor and drive the issues of timeliness. The tracker also records reasons for delay.

There appears to be an increase in parental legal challenge to placement orders resulting in delays placing children with adopters. This is an increasing but relatively new practice. A challenge will impact on A2 as despite having a placement order we will be unable to match or place the child with an adoptive family until the appeal has been resolved.

Delays can also relate to the issue of children’s guardians and courts having a say in what course of action should be taken, for example, that social workers should provide further evidence of how many adoptive families and type of families are available for the child, rather than ratifying the social worker’s care plan for adoption and allowing the local authority to progress the placement. Appropriate matches are not always available at the conclusion of care proceedings, particularly for harder to place children and the family finding can take some time.
Delays in Social Care Teams

5.3 Previously, there were sometimes delays when transferring cases between social care teams that undertake adoption work and delays with Independent Reviewing Officers raising permanency planning (including adoption) at the relevant review for children in care. There were also delays which related to the Adoption Team prioritising family finding in a timely way and managing high caseloads. It is important to note that these issues have now been resolved, but have impacted on historical performance. Again, these improvements can be partly attributed to the Adoption Action Plan, and partly to work aimed at improving performance generally within Children’s Care and Support Services.

Delays relating to ‘Harder to Place’ Children in the Cohort

5.4 ‘Soft’ evidence suggests that there is a high number of children in ‘harder to place’ categories in Barking and Dagenham, compared to other London boroughs, which means that family finding takes much longer. Harder to place children include older children, disabled children, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children and children in sibling groups.

This is the issue that impacts most on delay and our Scorecard performance and will continue to do so as there is no evidence that the children currently subject to family finding are considered any easier to place (see 5.6 of this report).

Of the 66 children in our current Scorecard cohort (2014-16), 48 fall into harder to place categories – 72.7%, which is a very high proportion of the cohort.

- BME - 5
- Special needs - 7
- Siblings - 26
- Multiple categories – 10

Whilst it is difficult to benchmark harder to place children from other local authorities as this data is not currently available, anecdotal evidence suggests that other local authorities are not considering adoption for many children who fall into this category. If these children were not adopted, their care plans would be to remain in long term foster care.

As stated previously, the outcomes for children in care are generally poorer than those who are adopted. A further issue to consider is that whilst there has been a change to the Care Planning Regulations 2010, which states that long term foster care should be viewed as an equal option for permanency, we have significant experience of foster carers committing to children and being formally matched at Fostering Panel as a long term placement, but when challenges arise in later years, they end the placement. There are no additional safeguards to ensure the stability of children in long term foster care to short term placements, despite the formal matching process having taken place. Adoption provides a much more secure form of permanency than long term fostering, particularly for children who may present with challenges as they grow older.
5.5 Below is a summary of the amount of children adopted in LBBD in 2015 compared to other local authorities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>Number of Adoptions - raw numbers (Comparator data rounded to nearest 0 or 5)</th>
<th>% of children leaving care who are Adopted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LBBD</td>
<td>721</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical Neighbours</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>390 (Average of 39 per authority)</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>4690 (Average of 31 per authority)</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>460 (Average of 14 per authority)</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tower Hamlets</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newham</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havering</td>
<td>607</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waltham Forest</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redbridge</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data indicates that LBBD is adopting a significant number of children in comparison to our Consortium partners and London. In 2015-16 LBBD was the third highest in London with regards to the actual amount of children that were adopted. The table above indicates that other local authorities’ timeliness performance is better and a possible explanation is that they are only finding adoptive placements for children who are less challenging to place, as anecdotal evidence would suggest.

The reality is that family finding takes much longer for harder to place children and careful consideration must be given to the robustness of adopters to cope and sustain more challenging placements to prevent placement breakdown. Given the significant number of children who fall into harder to place categories in Barking and Dagenham, achieving adoption for them has been a successful outcome albeit that it has taken much longer than the government prescribed timescales. This notion is backed up by the fact that:

- No children have had a placement breakdown in the last three years post the adoption order being granted.
- Only two children have had a placement breakdown in the last three years prior to the adoption order being granted – both broke down during introductions and did not disrupt during placement.
Commentary on Potential Future Performance

Children due to go onto the Scorecard for 2014-17

5.6 These are the children who are currently placed with adopters and will go onto the Scorecard once the adoption orders are granted. These are 10 children which include eight harder to place children:

- 2 sibling groups of 2 (1 group was aged 8 and 10 at time of placement);
- 1 eight-year-old child who is visually impaired;
- 1 young child who has Downs Syndrome; and
- 1 child who may possibly have developmental delay.

The current DfE target is 426 days for A1 and 121 days for A2. However, this target is not achievable for a number of years given the current performance of the Scorecard. Once these children are added to the Scorecard we expect that our performance will worsen as follows:

- A1 – will increase from 783 to 802 days, and
- A2 – will increase from 357 to 371 days.

The case study below attempts to illustrate the issues which may arise when attempting to place a child for adoption and explain why we expect performance in relation to the above cohort, as measured against the DfE’s Scorecard, to decline.

Case Study

Sibling Group A

A sibling group of two, one boy and one girl of White British descent with no special needs, were granted a placement order in 2012. They were 4 and 6 years old at the time that the order was granted. Family finding took place and included exploring LBBD approved adopters, Consortium adopters, advertising in printed publications, searches on the Adoption Register, and considering adopters in assessment who might be an appropriate match. However, no families expressed an interest.

In 2015 the children attended an Adoption Activity Day after intensive preparation to ensure they understood the purpose of the day and that there was no certainty about a match. They thoroughly enjoyed the day and one couple in particular showed a lot of interest in them during the event. The Adoption Team followed this up with the Agency of the couple but after a couple of weeks, they informed us that they were not pursuing a match.

The children had been placed with their foster carer for some years by this time who then put herself forward to be assessed as a special guardian and therefore family finding ceased. The assessment took longer than expected as she met a new partner during this period and although he was not living in the home, he had to be considered as part of the assessment.
5.7 This sibling group’s scorecard figures are 1829 days for A1 and 1715 days for A2. The placement arose as a result of the Adoption Service deciding to make one last attempt at family finding after the placement with their foster carer broke down. The family finding that took place between 2012 -14 had not been successful despite attendance at an Adoption Activity Day where interest was shown by a couple of families. They have now been matched with a couple who are supportive of direct contact with their birth family and have many interests in common and are thriving in their placement. The plan for adoption was progressed, having taken account of the children’s wishes and feelings for a permanent family whilst wanting to maintain links with their birth family. Whilst this was a very positive outcome for the children, the impact of the length of time it took to find a family on the Scorecard will remain until the end of 2019.

Children due to go onto the Scorecard for 2014 - 17

5.8 The cohort of children for whom there is a possible plan for adoption, whom the Adoption Team have been notified of, appear to be a more mixed cohort (harder to place and easy to place children), compared to previous cohorts. However, this must be viewed with caution as we have experience during 2016/17 of a number of babies and young children whose needs appeared to be relatively straightforward early on, but who later developed complex health or developmental needs. There were also adopters who were concerned about committing to taking on children with backgrounds involving parental substance misuse or learning disabilities, until they had a clearer view from the Medical Adviser that there was no apparent impact on the children’s development.
6. What is Working Well and What More Can be Done?

What is working well?

6.1 The Adoption Service has in place an Adoption Action Plan that sets out the actions required for improvement *(to be appended)*. The Action Plan was reviewed by the DfE in June 2016 and was positively received. The points below summarise the progress made as a result of actions in place for improvement:

- There has been a change in culture within the Service which has taken time to embed and staff are now very much aware of the Scorecard performance and how their actions, and delays impact on the timely placement of children. Systems and processes within the Service have improved and there is now a culture of urgency to progress placements whilst remaining aware of the need to ensure that the quality of the placements remains high, with an excellent prospect of success. There is concern that speed of placement should not lead to an increase in placement breakdown, which is particularly important for older children, sibling groups and children with additional needs. Despite the change of culture, the Service is still trying to find adoptive families for a significant number of harder to place children, which inevitably takes longer. Going forward, it will be important to monitor whether targets of all children who are not considered harder to place are achieved and if not, to be clear about the reasons for delay. Historically, there were performance issues within the Adoption Service that impacted on timeliness, but these have now been addressed. We have introduced individual summary sheets for every child which, provides a pen picture of their needs, family finding activity and any barrier, and their Scorecard performance.

- There has been the introduction of the Adoption Improvement Group in 2016, who meet on a bi-monthly basis to track performance of all children who are being considered for adoption, who have Placement Orders, to ensure that actions to find adoptive families are robust. The Adoption Action Plan is also reviewed at this meeting. This Group is chaired by the Director of Operations for Children’s Care and Support and is attended by the Group Managers for Care Management, Adoption, Child Protection and Review Service and the Legal Department.

- All children that we are actively family finding for are discussed at fortnightly Adoption Team Meetings to ensure activity is taking place to find families for children outside of the borough and to identify possible in-house families, including those currently undergoing assessment.

- There has been attendance at specific events aimed at finding families for harder to place children, for example, a national event held Walsall in December 2016 and Adoption Activity Days. The latter are ‘play days’ for children with prospective adopters in attendance. Prospective adopters have an opportunity to meet children in person rather than just see a picture or DVD. The events aimed at harder to place children can encompass all categories that are considered harder to place or can have a focus such as children with a disability or children who are BME. This gives potential
adopter, who are specifically interested in adopting harder to place children, the opportunity to view profiles of children and discuss their needs with social workers of children to assist with decision making regarding possible matches.

- There has been attendance at all East London Consortium family finding events. Working in this way enables Barking and Dagenham to draw from a wider pool of prospective adopters.

- There has been closer working with the relevant children’s social care teams for early notification of children who may be considered for adoption. These notifications are used to explore potential matches within LBBD and Consortium approved adopters and to conduct initial searches on the Adoption Register and Adoption Link so that early matching and placement can progress once the placement order is granted.

- All adopters in assessment are approached for consideration of approval for Fostering to Adopt. This means a child can be placed with prospective adopters while a court hearing is planned or taking place, therefore improving timeliness.

- Lifestory work is an essential part of an adopted child’s journey. All children should have a lifestory book which summarises their history with their birth family, significant events, the reasons why they have been adopted and the period of time between being introduced and being placed with their adoptive family. Older children benefit from direct work to understand their lifestory in order to make sense of it and assist them in settling into their life with their new family. There has been a backlog in the production of lifestory books due to limited capacity within the Adoption Team, which is being addressed by dedicating one member of staff to the production of lifestory books and undertaking lifestory work, in conjunction with the children who are of an appropriate age and understanding. In addition, applications have been made to the Adoption Support Fund for an independent social worker to undertaken therapeutic lifestory work with identified children who require this intervention as a priority.

What more can be done?

6.2 The CSSC endorses the Adoption Action Plan and the Adoption Service’s approach to finding adoptive families for the children in its cohort, despite the negative impact this approach often has on the Service’ Scorecard performance. The Committee, however, felt that more can be done to promote adoption in the borough and surrounding areas, which may help improve the timeliness of adoption of children in some harder to place categories, for example:

- The use of in-house newsletters and other media to promote adoption for harder to place children and the type of adopters we require for our children;

- A focus on the promotion of adoption in Council buildings and events;
Appendix 1: Draft Report

- An internal campaign to include the promotion of adoption within extended family and friends’ networks that may be outside of LBBD, given that we require many families outside of our locality for safety reasons;

- The Council could identify a dedicated resource from the Communications section to specifically support the recruitment of adopters for BME children;

- Training for social workers on understanding the barriers preventing BME groups from adopting and how they can clear misconceptions around Adoption in these communities; and

- Members could be briefed on borough-specific issues regarding adoption so they can promote it to constituents where appropriate.

6.3 The current cohort of children that are subject to family finding all fall into harder to place categories and the cohort of notifications of potential children whose care plan may be adoption are a mixture of young children, some with no identified needs and some in harder to place categories. The Adoption Service will continue to access events for harder to place children and have already booked to attend an event in Manchester in March 2017. The profiles of all children subject to placement orders will be actively pursued and profiles of adopters who may be suitable for other children notified will be collected. Whilst those adopters might not be available in the future, it is important not to miss out on any opportunity to pursue a potential match.

6.4 The continuation of the AIG is essential for the ongoing monitoring and challenge to all teams linked to adoption and to provide detailed evidence of progress and the issues for individual children.

6.5 The challenges within the Court arena are much more difficult to influence. There are continued attempts to keep the dialogue open with Courts and guardians regarding adoption, particularly in relation to the impact of delay regarding parental challenges to placement orders.

6.6 The CSSC had the opportunity to have discussions with an adopted adult and an adoptive mother, both of whom presented a balanced view about adoption, outlining both the challenges and positives of their journeys. There are plans to undertake a specific training session with all team managers in Children’s Care and Support in the summer regarding permanency, and there will be the opportunity for managers to have feedback from these adults. The session will also present the opportunity to hear from a birth mother who has had children adopted and the impact this has had on her life. This will assist managers in considering all aspects of adoption when assisting social workers with care planning. It is hoped that these individuals may be prepared to do further work with social workers in a larger group to enhance their practice with regards to the complex issues of permanency going forward.

6.7 Post-adoption support works well within the Adoption Service, but there are issues of capacity to manage the range of responsibilities within this part of the Service with only 1.5 staff. This leads to waiting lists for the work with adopted adults as the children in placement are prioritised for intervention and support when required. This includes applications to the Adoption Support Fund where criteria is met.
7. **Conclusions, recommendations and next steps**

7.1 LBBD have successfully adopted a significantly higher number of children compared to London, Statistical Neighbours and East London Consortium members, a substantially large proportion of whom fall into harder to place categories. However, this has had an impact on the Adoption Scorecard performance. The performance was scrutinised by the DfE last year who were satisfied with the action being undertaken by LBBD to maximise the amount of children adopted. There is also evidence that the outcomes for children who are adopted are positive and that breakdown of placements for our children is minimal.

The CSSC recommends that All children, who may potentially be placed for adoption, continue to have adoption plans made by the Local Authority and that these are advocated for during care proceedings;

7.2 The Committee believes that the timeliness performance measures in relation to the Scorecard do not portray the true picture in terms of the local context, or and the outcomes for the children, in that adoption is a better outcome, even though they may have waited longer to be placed.

The Committee recommends that the Chair of the Committee and the Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration write to the Department for Education to make representations regarding changes needed to the way performance is measured to take account of the local context and challenges so that there is a fairer representation of performance;

7.3 There has been significant delay with regards to some children being placed with their adoptive families 18 months plus after the granting of a placement order which further impacts on the Scorecard performance.

The Committee recommends that all children have the plan for adoption formally reviewed at 12 months, 18 months and 2 years after the granting of the placement order by the Adoption Improvement Group (AIG) to ascertain whether or not family finding should continue, or whether there should be an application to revoke the placement order. If family finding is going to go beyond two years the rationale for this should be formally recorded;

7.4 The Adoption Improvement Group (AIG) is scrutinising the care plans for all children where adoption is being considered or is the plan, and is assisting in maintaining a focus on the urgency of placing children with their adoptive families.

The Committee recommends that the AIG continues to be held at the current frequency of bi-monthly and the challenge to timely performance remains a focus; and

7.5 Given the number of harder to place children with adoption care plans, there is a need to increase the pool of adopters who have the skills and motivation to meet these children's complexities.
The Committee recommends that the Strategic Director for Service Development and Integration oversees the implementation of the Committee’s suggestions to improve the recruitment of adopters at 6.2 of this report.

Next Steps

7.6 This report will be submitted to the Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration and the Strategic Director for Service Development and Integration, who will be asked to respond to the recommendations. If the recommendations are accepted, the Strategic Director for Service Development and Integration will be asked to draw up an action plan describing how the recommendations will be implemented. In six months’ time, the CSSC will request a monitoring report explaining the progress of the implementation of the recommendations and whether anything could be said of the early impact they have had on the Service’s outcomes.
The CSSC would like to extend its thanks to the following for contributing to this Review:

- Professor Julie Selwyn
- Roy Stewart, Chair of the Adoption Panel
- The Adopter and Adoptee who met with the Committee on 21 November 2016

Members also thank the following Council officers for their support during this Review:

- Joanne Tarbutt: Group Manager, Looked After Children, Adoption and Prevention Services
- Ann Graham, Director of Operations, Children’s Care and Support
- Jane Hargreaves, Commissioning Director for Education and Scrutiny Champion for the CSSC
- Masuma Ahmed: Democratic Services Officer
- Mary Manual, Social Worker, Post Adoption team
- Exarchou Eirini, Senior Solicitor, Safeguarding
Appendices

Appendices will be added for the final version of the report