

Meeting:	Joint Meeting of Lifelong Learning and Health and Social Care
Date:	January 18 2006
Subject:	Adoption Inspection, September 2005
Responsible Officer:	Paul Clark, Director of Children's Services
Contact Officer:	Richard Marks
Portfolio Holder:	Margaret Davine (Social Care and Health) and Bill Stephenson (Education and Lifelong Learning)
Key Decision:	No
Status:	Public

Section 1: Summary

Decision Required

To ask Members to support the proposed actions in response to the inspection recommendations.

Reason for report

To update Members on action taken in response to the CSCI Adoption Inspection report.

Benefits

Taking action to improve the Adoption Service in line with Harrow's strategic priorities and inspection recommendations.

Involving adopters and prospective adopters in the service.

Delivering improvements on key performance indicators for the CPA / JAR.

Fulfilling Harrow's statutory obligations under the Children Act 2004.

Cost of Proposals

Cost of activity to deliver proposals is contained within the existing budget of Children's Services / People First.

Risks

The difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified and experienced staff – this is a national problem and a costly and competitive market.

Implications if recommendations rejected

Failure to meet the CSCI report's recommendations would impact upon the quality of the service provided to children, adopters and prospective adopters in Harrow, and would also damage the council's performance in the CPA / JAR.

Section 2: Report

2.1 Brief History

The CSCI undertook an inspection of Harrow's Adoption Service in September 2005. The key messages arising from the inspection report are detailed below.

What the service does well:

1. The service has a team of dedicated staff who work hard to ensure children are matched and adopters are supported within the limited staffing resources;
2. Adopters who were interviewed or completed the inspection questionnaires said they received good preparation training and assessments from their social workers;
3. Harrow has a child focused Adoption & Permanence Panel, and the Independent Panel Chair brings knowledge and professional expertise to the role;
4. The Adoption & Permanence Panel is supported by an excellent Panel Administrator;
5. The post of Life-Story & Letterbox Co-ordinator is beginning to make a positive impact on the lives of children, adopters and birth families;
6. The senior management of Harrow's Adoption Service has evaluated the strengths and needs of the whole agency and demonstrated their knowledge of how they need to improve. They have developed a number of strategies to improve standards across the service;
7. The management team are accessible to social workers and responsive;
8. All social workers have regular case supervision;
9. The Elected Member responsible for Children's Services provides good support to the adoption service.

What the service could do better:

1. The lack of a stable workforce is impacting upon the quality of service offered to children, adopters and birth families;
2. A clearer process needs to be developed concerning the care planning for children;
3. A system needs to be developed within the borough's recruitment strategy to address the needs of children who have been identified as needing adoption;
4. Staff need better access to Legal Framework training and access to Child Protection training;
5. Harrow must ensure that the Induction Pack for social workers provides information on safeguarding, care planning and permanence;
6. Staff must be provided with information regarding the practice implications of the Adoption & Children Act 2002.

Action plan addressing the statutory requirements set out in the inspection report:

The Inspection measured the council's performance against 29 outcomes and standards (each having up to 14 subsections). We successfully met all of these with the exception of four elements which require further development:

- The agency assesses and prepares adopters;
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency;
- The agency has sufficient staff with the right skills/experience;
- The agency maintains personnel files for members of staff and members of the Adoption Panel.

To assist the council in addressing these four areas, the CSCI set seven statutory requirements to ensure that timely action is taken.

Following helpful discussions and representations with the lead inspector in November, the CSCI acknowledged they had inadvertently included the last area requiring further development within the Statutory Requirements. The CSCI have subsequently withdrawn this item.

On November 9th, the CSCI were sent a detailed action plan setting out how the council has already and/or will ensure that the statutory requirements are addressed by March 30th 2006. As this was submitted before we concluded our discussions with the lead inspector regarding the issue of personnel files, this is still included within the action plan.

From reading the action plan (which is attached to this paper), you will see the council has already successfully completed the vast majority of the 28 action points we set ourselves. The council remains on target to complete the remaining five action points by March 30th 2006.

During a further discussion with the lead inspector in December, the council's considerable progress since the September inspection was acknowledged - particularly:

- The implementation of the Workforce Strategy;
- The implementation of the Legal Framework training;

- The multi-agency Adoption & Children Act training event held on 6th December;
- The positive impact the Childcare Panel is now having upon child care planning;
- The integration of the new Adoption & Children Act procedures into the Children's Services Procedures Manual.

The inspector went on to say that, had she undertaken the inspection at the end of the year, then she is confident she would have been able to give an even more positive report - particularly as the council would have already successfully addressed the three areas requiring further development by this date, through its own initiative.

Finally, the introduction this month of the Permanency Tracking Panel (whose membership consists of the Group Managers for First Contact, Provisions, & Legal) will ensure that the critical strands are monitored and supported, to enable the timely progression of Permanency Plans for children looked after.

2.2 Options considered

N/A

2.3 Consultation

The CSCI's recommendations were partly based on interviews with service users, including adopters, prospective adopters and children. The action plan is linked to successful plans in other local authorities recently inspected.

2.4 Financial Implications

Cost of activity to deliver proposals is contained within the existing budget of Children's Services / People First.

2.5 Legal Implications

The new Children Act, Adoption Act and associated guidance require a considerable increase in knowledge and therefore training for staff to keep up to date.

2.6 Equalities Impact

The recruitment of adopters from our diverse communities has been successful.

2.7 Section 17 Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Considerations

N/A

Section 3: Supporting Information/Background Documents

The action plan to deal with CSCI report (attached).

