

Committee:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date:	21 st April 2009
Subject:	Adoption Service
Responsible Officers:	Gail Hancock, Head of Service - Safeguarding, Family Placement & Support Peter Tolley, Service Manager Placements
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Christine Bednell, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
Exempt:	No
Enclosures:	None

Section 1 – Summary

This report outlines the Adoption Services provided by Harrow Council Children's Services.

REPORT FOR INFORMATION ONLY

Section 2 – Report

Statement of Purpose for the Adoption Service is as follows:

Aims

1. To ensure that the needs, wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process
2. To ensure that where it is not possible for Looked After Children to be reunited with their birth families they are provided with a permanent, stable

alternative family

3. To ensure that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents (including those wishing to adopt a child from overseas) are welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information.
4. To ensure that birth families are treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process and have access to adoption services

Objectives

1. To ensure that all Looked After Children have permanency plans in place by their second Statutory Review
2. To ensure permanency plans are robustly monitored and implemented in line with legislation and National Standards
3. To work with our partner agency "Coram Family" to ensure all Looked After Children, where the plan is adoption, are matched with suitable adopters within an appropriate timeframe
4. To develop a range of adoption support services including practical, financial and therapeutic services, in partnership with other agencies
5. To ensure that Harrow Adoption Service employs staff with appropriate and sufficient skills, knowledge and experience to deliver the adoption service

Principles

1. The needs, rights and welfare of children are our paramount concern
2. Every child is entitled to a permanent family throughout their childhood, which should meet all their needs in terms of religion. Ethnicity, language, physical, social and emotional development and that promotes a supportive lifelong relationship.
3. We recognise the lifelong implications of adoption for all parties and, in partnership with other agencies, offer comprehensive support services to adopters, carers and adopted children and adults
4. We understand the importance of birth parents and relatives of the children we place. We promote a practice where children grow up with the knowledge and understanding of their birth family so as to have a complete sense of their identity. Unless there are serious safeguarding issues we support direct and indirect contact with birth relatives and provide them with support to enable this to take place.

Legal Framework

The Legal Framework governing the Local Authority's responsibilities to provide adoption services is the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The Cabinet Office introduced this following a complete review of adoption in February 2000. A Government White Paper "Adoption – a new approach" was published in December 2000. This outlined a commitment to modernise the adoption system, make it work more consistently and promote greater use of adoption where appropriate. It replaced all previous adoption legislation

The key principles of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 are as follows:

1. The needs and welfare of children must be at the centre of the adoption process.
2. The need to avoid undue delay in planning for permanence and adoption when children cannot be cared for by their own birth family.
3. The Act widens the options for permanence by extending Residence Orders to 18 years and by introducing a new permanence option called Special Guardianship Orders.
4. The Act widens the range of people who can be considered as prospective adopters by allowing unmarried couples to adopt jointly and also places a duty on local authorities to ensure that the support and financial assistance needed is available to people affected by adoption.
5. The Act also states that local authorities have to take a life long view of adoption and sets out clear responsibilities regarding post adoption support and the release of sensitive and identifying information held in adoption records.

Permanency Planning

All Looked After Children are required to have a permanency plan by their second CLA Review i.e. 4 months after becoming looked after. This is to ensure that there is minimal delay in decision-making and to enable children to develop appropriate attachments to their carers and a sense of security, stability and identity

Permanent options include the following;

1. Reunification home with birth family
2. Adoption
3. Special Guardianship
4. Residence Order
5. Long term Fostering

Parental Responsibility

Adoption, Special Guardianship and Residence Orders are legal orders granted by the Court and these give the carers/guardians parental responsibility (PR).

An Adoption Order gives absolute and exclusive parental responsibility which would mean the birth parents would lose their PR whereby the adopters become the legal parents

With Special Guardianship Orders and Residence Orders the carers gain PR but this is not totally exclusive to them as birth parents retain nominal PR.

Adoption is a life long arrangement whereas Special Guardianship Orders and Residence Orders expire when a child is 18 years old.

Long term fostering is an arrangement where a child remains looked after by the

local authority. The identified foster carers continue to care for the child on a long term basis. In this situation the local authority may have acquired PR as a result of a Care Order or may continue to work in partnership with the birth parents who retain their PR.

The Harrow - Coram Adoption Partnership

Harrow has entered into an unique partnership with Coram Family (a voluntary adoption agency) regarding the provision of domestic adoption services. The partnership began on 1st March 2007 following a successful pilot phase, which began on 1st September 2006

Coram provide a Team Manager, a Senior Practitioner and a administrator who work together with Harrow socialcare staff.

The terms of the service specification of the partnership are as follows;

1. Residents of Harrow Council who wish to adopt children in the UK are referred to Coram. They will be counselled and given information about adoption and the children available for adoption through Coram (including Looked After Children in Harrow for whom adopters are sought). Where appropriate they will then offer preparation, training and assessment via Coram.
2. Coram are responsible for family finding for Harrow's Looked After Children in respect of whom a 'should be placed for adoption' decision has been taken. This will involve working closely with the child's social worker in Harrow to ensure that the child is prepared, necessary work with the birth parents and other relatives has been undertaken and all assessments are up to date and complete
3. Matches with adoptive families will be first sought among the families approved by Coram adoption teams which cover a wide geographic area and which recruit adopters from a range of ethnic, racial, religious and cultural backgrounds. Where necessary, matches will be sought via interagency placements using the West London Adoption Consortium, the National Adoption Register and focussed advertising and family finding.
4. The Coram Team Manager will be closely involved in the permanence planning process for children looked after by Harrow where there is a possibility of an adoption plan being made. She will chair all Permanency Planning Meetings in respect of these children and monitor the progress of assessments and counselling of birth parents, relatives and the children concerned. These meetings occur on a six weekly basis. She will also attend Harrow's monthly Care Proceedings & Permanency Tracking Panel to which she will provide written up-dated reports on all the children Coram are working with.
5. Harrow's Placement Service Manager will chair all selection meetings where adoption is the plan and Coram will provide clear reports and will attend alongside the child's social worker to help determine the selection

- where more than one family is being considered for a child
6. The selected family will be presented for a match with the child (ren) concerned to Harrow's Adoption and Permanency Panel where a formal recommendation will be made to Harrow's Agency decision maker who is Paul Clark, Corporate Director - Children's Services.
 7. Support during introductions, and once children are placed, should be clearly documented in the Adoption Support Plan which is presented to the Adoption & Permanency Panel alongside the matching report. Coram will provide a range of post adoption support services to their adopters. Harrow retains responsibility for providing financial support and for provision of education and health resources. Harrow also retains responsibility for providing adoption support services to residents of the borough who need an adoption support service but where Coram were not involved in making the placement.

Concurrent Planning

Harrow also has access to Coram's Concurrent Planning Project which enables babies to be placed with a foster carer who may become the child's eventual adoptive parent if reunification is not possible. Concurrent carers are approved as both foster carers and adopters so as to enable babies to be placed early and to remain with their carers.

Evaluation

The contract with Coram Family is initially for three years with provision for a review after two years. Service Managers from both agencies meet regularly to monitor the partnership and to address any practice issues as they arise.

This is a unique partnership, which has attracted national interest. The DCSF has funded a research project into the partnership. Julie Selwyn from the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at University of Bristol, has recently published her evaluation report about the Harrow - Corama Adoption Partnership which is very positive. This is likely to be used by other local authorities considering a similar partnership arrangement.

The Adoption Support and Kinship Care Team

Harrow Council also has its own in house Adoption Support and Kinship Care Team (ASK Team). The ASK Team consists of one Team Manager, four Social Workers and one Life Story and Letterbox Coordinator.

The ASK team are responsible for the following areas of work:

1. Inter-country Adoption

The ASK Team Manager is responsible for coordinating all enquiries, preparation training and assessments regarding Intercountry adoption. If the team have capacity to undertake the assessments they will allocate within the team. If not they will be allocated to a sessional worker. All

assessments will be managed by the ASK Team Manager. All intercountry adopters attend the preparation group facilitated by the Intercountry Adoption Centre. The financial arrangements for intercountry adoption are agreed with the West London Adoption Consortium

2. Kinship Care

The ASK Team is responsible for all kinship assessments for Looked After children and for taking these assessments to the appropriate panels for approval. All permanent arrangements, Adoption, Special Guardianship and Long Term Fostering need to be presented to the Adoption and Permanency Panel

3. Special Guardianship Order Assessments

The ASK Team is responsible for all SGO assessments whether Kinship or non kinship and for completing the reports for Panel and Court.

4. Relinquished Babies

The ASK Team have case responsibility for relinquished babies and the counselling work with birth mothers and family. They are also responsible for liaising with CAF/CASS, so that formal consent to adoption can be obtained, and for completing all the appropriate reports so a 'should be placed for adoption' decision can be obtained. Once the Duty and Assessment Team have identified that there is a relinquished baby for adoption they transfer the case to the ASK Team who take over responsibility for the aforementioned casework

5. Post Adoption Support Assessments

All requests for post adoption support assessments are managed by the ASK Team Manager who allocates them within her team. These include requests from approved adopters who live in Harrow and those who have had children placed by Harrow within the last three years.

6. Long Term Fostering Assessments

All assessments of Long-Term Foster Carers are undertaken by the ASK Team and are taken to the Adoption and Permanency Panel for approval. The ASK Team are also responsible for all the family finding for children where long term fostering is the plan. The ASK Team Manager will chair regular Permanency Planning Meetings for all children awaiting long term fostering.

7. Support to Birth Families & Birth Relatives

The ASK Team are responsible for offering support to birth parents or birth relatives affected by adoption. We may also use the expertise of other agencies, such as After Adoption or the Post Adoption Centre, where necessary and appropriate.

8. Birth Record Counselling

The ASK Team are responsible for undertaking all Section 51 counselling and all work regarding birth record counselling

9. Coordination of Contact

Within the ASK Team there is a specialist Contact Coordinator who coordinates all post adoption contact arrangements. They liaise with all parties to ensure all forms of contact, direct and indirect, are managed appropriately and are in the best interests of the child. Following the refurbishment of the ground floor of the former Silverdale Children's Residential Unit, we now have an in-house Contact Centre. This provides a family friendly environment with experienced contact supervisors.

This centre is being further developed to become a Children's Centre, in partnership with Early Years and Extended Community Services, to provide specific and targeted services for children in Harrow. Additional services will be provided at the centre following the refurbishment of the first floor of the building.

10. Advice to Other Professionals

The ASK Team provide advice, support and training to other professionals in all aspects of adoption and permanency planning and promote robust and timely care planning.

The Adoption and Permanency Panel

The Adoption and Permanency Panel is constituted to meet the requirements of both the Adoption and Fostering Regulations so as to consider all forms of permanency ,adoption, special guardianship, residence orders and long term fostering

The Panel will consider the following;

- Recommendations for children to be placed for adoption
- Approval of adopters
- Matching children where the plan is adoption with approved adopters
- Recommendations regarding other forms of permanency – Special Guardianship, Residence orders and Long term fostering
- Significant changes to a child's adoption/ permanence decision eg from adoption to long term fostering

The Panel can also give advice regarding care planning and permanency

The Panel membership consists of an independent Chair and both independent and agency members. An elected member is also on the panel

The Care Proceedings and Permanency Tracking Panel

This Panel monitors the progress of all care proceedings and tracks each looked after child requiring adoption, or other forms of permanency, to monitor the progress of their plans and to avoid drift and delay. The Panel considers legal issues, care & permanency planning casework arrangements and resource/placement management issues. The Panel identifies through an early alert system children who may become subject to care proceedings, those that are subject to care proceedings and those where a final care hearing has taken place and where the Care Plan for adoption and permanency needs to be implemented.

The West London Adoption Consortium

Harrow is a member of the West London Adoption Consortium along with Ealing, Hillingdon, Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster and Hounslow. The Consortium meets six times a year to discuss shared areas of development and exchange ideas and good practice. There is a rotating chair of the Consortium and Harrow are currently chairing.

Ofsted's Adoption Inspection

All adoption agencies have regular inspections by Ofsted. These occur every three years. The last inspection in Harrow was in September 2008. The service was judged to be satisfactory with the management and organisation being up-graded and judged as good.

It was noted that all the previous inspection recommendations and requirements had been addressed. We have an action plan in place for the requirements and recommendations from the September 2008 inspection

There were two new statutory requirements following the inspection. These were as follows;

- 1) That all sessional staff are subject to the same robust recruitment procedures as permanent staff. *This is now in place.*
- 2) That staff who prepare reports on adopters are suitably experienced in adoption work. *We have since appointed a Senior Practitioner in the ASK Team who is supervising all this work. This requirement is now met*

We had ten recommendations as follows;

- 1) That all assessments are rigorous and analytical. *All members of the ASK Team have been on assessment training and all assessments are supervised by the Senior Practitioner or Team Manager to ensure standards are maintained. We have also appointed a Training and Development Officer in the Fostering and Adoption Service.*
- 2) Develop the Health and Safety questionnaire to cover weapons, poisonous plants and hanging cords. *This has been completed.*
- 3) To implement the system for renewal of CRB checks. *This has now been agreed with Shared Services.*

- 4) Implement a strategic approach to adoption support. *The new Senior Practitioner is developing these services. We now have an Adoption Support Group and an Adoption Newsletter for distribution to adopters. We also have membership of the Post Adoption Centre.*
- 5) Implement a more effective service for birth parents, which addresses the need for support independent of the child's social worker. *The Post Adoption Centre offers this service and we have ensured that this service is offered to all parents whose children have a plan of adoption.*
- 6) Ensure that all children have a high quality life storybook, which clearly explains the reasons for their adoption. *This is now in place and is addressed through the Permanency Planning Meetings and the Lifestory and Letterbox Coordinator.*
- 7) Implement a more strategic approach to the support and services offered to birth relatives and adopted adults. *We now have a clear system.regarding these services which is managed by the ASK Team Manager.*
- 8) Ensure our policies and procedures are updated in line with our current practice. *These are currently being reviewed and updated.*
- 9) Ensure the nominated manager has a suitable management qualification. *This is in place for April 2009.*
- 10) Ensure files on sessional workers contain all the required information. *These have all been updated.*

Harrow's Performance - Successful Outcomes for Children

The partnership with Coram Family, the success of the Panels and the benefits of having a permanent staff group has lead to significant progress in our adoption performance.

Our Key performance indicator relates to the percentage of Looked After Children who become adopted, or who were made subject to a Special Guardianship Order. The following illustrates the significant progress made over the last 3 reporting years;

- In 2006/07 Harrow's performance was 2.73%
- In 2007/08 Harrow's performance was 14%
- In 2008/09 Harrow's performance was 20%

The 2008/09 performance is now one of the highest in the country and has meant that Looked After Children in Harrow are having permanency secured for them within reasonable timeframes and benefitting from the opportunity to develop lifelong attachments and a sense of security and identity which are prerequisites for fulfilling their potential.

We have also developed our post adoption services for young people, adopters and birth parents to ensure that everyone involved in adoption will receive reasonable assistance and support

Section 3 – Further Information

None provided

Section 4 – Financial Implications

The Harrow - Coram Adoption Partnership is funded via the existing Placement Service budget. Effective management and robust financial monitoring of the contract have ensured value and no overspend year on year. The 2009/10 allocated budget for the Harrow – Coram Adoption Partnership is £265,000.

Name: Emma Stabler, Finance Business Partner – Children’s Services	on behalf of the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 7 th April 2009	

Section 5 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact:

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Background Papers:

Executive Summary of Evaluation of the Harrow - Copram Adoption Partnership undertaken by the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at Bristol University (2009) funded by DCSF