

Leicestershire & Rutland Adoption Agency Annual Report 2016 – 2017



Introduction

Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Adoption Agency. It undertakes statutory and regulated responsibilities relating to adoption and has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Rutland County Council.

This report is therefore issued by the Leicestershire & Rutland Adoption Agency.

Under the 2011 National Minimum Standards 25.6 all Adoption Agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive¹ regarding the activity and work of the Adoption Agency and Adoption Panel.

This report is the annual statutory report to 31st March 2017.

Executive Summary

The Adoption Agency implemented a recruitment freeze in April 2015 which was subsequently lifted in April 2016, based on the number of children with adoption plans and the number of available carers. The Agency continued to respond to spontaneous enquiries and as a result 73 potential adopter households attend 5 open evenings between May 2016 and 31st March 2017.

In relation to Leicestershire's performance, the Adoption Agency continues to provide a good service to children and adopters within our service. The scorecard helps the Agency to benchmark against national performance. A summary of this performance is listed below:

- Performance measure A1- Leicestershire Adoption Agency's average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family is 517 days. The England average is 558. This is a positive position for Leicestershire Adoption Agency
- Performance measure A2- The average time between Leicestershire receiving court authority to place a child and Leicestershire Adoption Agency deciding upon a match to an adoptive family is 195 days. The England average is 226 days
- Performance measure A3- Children who wait less than 16 months between entering care and moving in with their adopted family currently stands at 68%. This is significantly better than the England 3 year average of 55%.
- Measurements against 'Adopters' indicate that Leicestershire adopters wait for less time than the England average before being matched after approval (68% compared to 73%)

¹ The Executive in Leicestershire is the Lead Member and Scrutiny Members

Consistently, across all indicators, Leicestershire present as performing better than the three year average for England.

Leicestershire is in line with the England average for placing children over 5 years old, however there has been an increase in the number of older children coming through to ADM and there needs to be a specific recruitment campaign for adopters who would consider matches with older children and sibling groups. The Adoption Agency is also working the Specialist Adoption Agency Service (SAMS) and the Regionalisation of Adoption to trial matching of harder to place children across the region. Summary of adoption activity is provided below:

- 25 Adoption Orders were finalised for children in this period. All 25 were Leicestershire children, including 1 interagency match
- 10 Adopters were approved in this period. All are white British
- 31 children have been placed with their prospective adopters during this period (28 Leicestershire children and 3 Rutland)
- 21 children were adopted by Leicestershire County Council approved adopters, 7 Leicestershire Children and 3 Rutland children via the inter-agency process
- 5 sibling groups placed – 4 sets of 2 sibling groups, 1 set of 3 sibling group

At the 31st March 2016 there were 37 children awaiting an adoption placement. The Adoption Agency estimates that 70 new adopters will be needed to undertake good matching for this number of children, as well as provide families for children with more complex needs. This is an ambitious target.

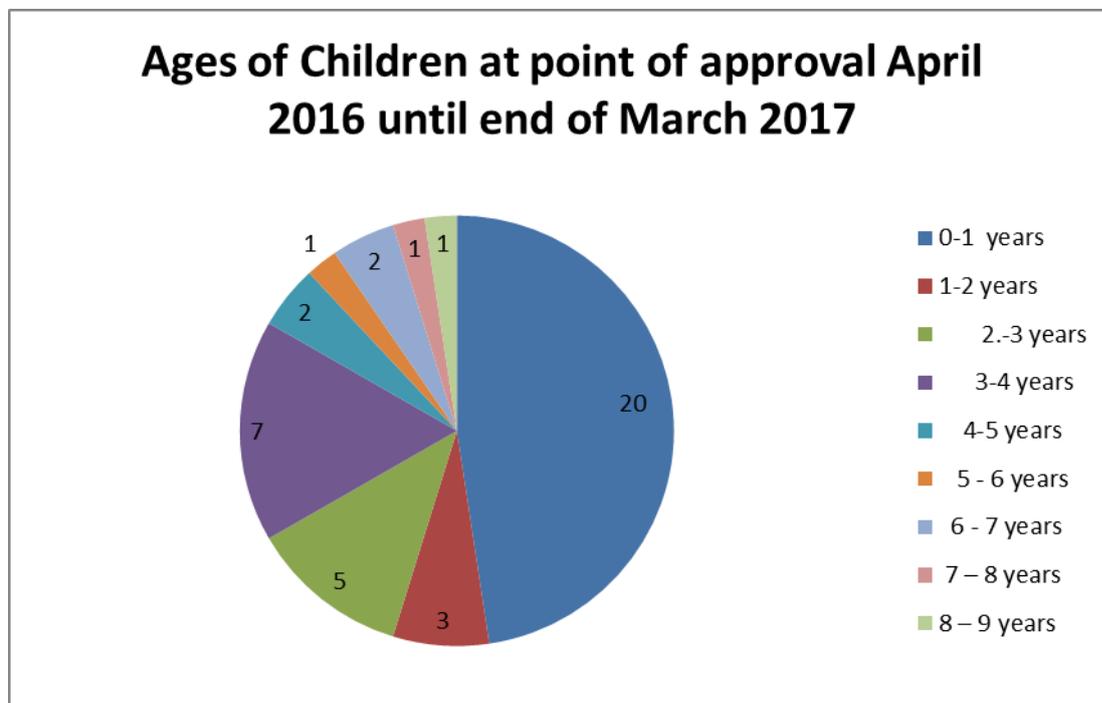
Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Adoption Plans

Eleven adoption panels were held during this period and 42 children were presented to the Agency Decision Maker for an adoption plan. Of the 42 children considered by the Agency Decision Maker, 90% met the National Minimum Standard timescale of coming to panel within two months of adoption being agreed as the plan. Those outside the timescale are due to deferment for technical reasons acceptable under the regulations. The requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 were fully met.

At the point of approval for adoption, most of the children were under the age of 1 years of age. 7 children were over the age of 4 years.

10 adopters were approved in this period. All are white British.

Chart 1 – Ages of children at point of approval for adoption



Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Children Placed and Adopted

31 children have been placed with their adopters during this period (28 Leicestershire Children & 3 Rutland Children). 21 children were placed with prospective adopters assessed and supported by Leicestershire and Rutland Adoption Agency.

Local authorities can decide to place a child with an adoptive family that was assessed and approved by a different adoption agency (this can be another local authority or a voluntary adoption agency (VAA)). In these cases, the agency will charge a fee to cover the costs of recruiting, assessing and approving the adopters. 7 Leicestershire children & 3 Rutland children were matched and placed through inter-agency adoption in this period.

25 Adoption orders were finalised for children in this period, giving full parental responsibility for a child to the approved adopters, made on their application to the court. These were all Leicestershire children. 24 children were adopted by Leicestershire County Council approved adopters, 1 via the inter-agency process.

Finding a home for siblings is difficult because of the inherent complexities of their needs and the skill required to meet the siblings' different needs. Often one of the siblings is significantly older. Nationally, there is a shortage of prospective adopters for 'harder to place' children and there are small numbers of prospective homes for large numbers of sibling groups across the country. During 2016-17 Leicestershire and Rutland Adoption Agency placed 5 sibling groups- 4 sets of 2, 1 set of 3.

Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Adoption Approvals

To be approved as an adopter, the prospective adopter attends training and works with a social worker to determine whether he or she is suitable to become an adoptive parent. This assessment and relevant checks (police, health and references) are presented to an adoption panel, which makes a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) as to whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child. Once this process has been completed and the ADM reaches a positive decision, the applicant is approved as an adopter.

During the period 2016-17, 10 adopter households were approved. 2 completed within the six month timescale. 4 households asked for a break before continuing to Stage 2 & 3; for the other 4 the Adoption Agency asked for a break before continuing to stage 2. This is considered good practice in order to resolve underlying issues and support the applicants in making this very important and life changing decision.

Recruiting new adopters was 'frozen' until April 2017, aligned to national patterns and trends relating to the Courts decisions relating to permanency plans. Ofsted's feedback, following the inspection in November 2016, is that this pause in recruiting did not impact on the children waiting for adoption. The Adoption Agency has used inter-agency adoption well during this period to ensure that children and prospective adopters are well matched to one another's' needs and circumstances.

10 sets of adopters approved in this period are White/British.

The recruiting of adopters is reviewed quarterly to ensure that we remain clear about the needs of our children and that we recruit to these needs. To this purpose, the

Adoption Agency uses the pre-proceedings and adoption tracker to determine demand, as well as national and comparator authority data, patterns and trends.

The requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 were fully met for all assessments.

Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Quality of Reports

60 Child Permanence Reports (CPRs) were considered by the Agency Decision Maker to agree adoption plans for children. Adoption plans were agreed for 42 children during this period. There were occasions when further information was required and therefore a child's plan had to be considered on more than 1 occasion. This accounts for the difference between the number of child permanence reports considered and numbers of decisions made. In addition, some CPRs have been read more than once because required amendments have been completed and returned before family finding can commence. The quality of the reports was variable as advised by the Agency Decision Maker. Practice sessions for childcare social workers to improve the quality of the reports are to be repeated during 2017-18 and work with SAMS and the Regional Adoption Agency Project Team (RAAPT) will help the Adoption Agency embed best practice across the service. Furthermore, a team manager's quality assurance tool has been introduced, the impact of which will be determined in the next reporting period.

33 Prospective Adopters Reports (approvals and matched) were presented to the Adoption Panel during this period. Panel felt they were all good and raised only minor issues.

Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Children Waiting for Adoption

At the 31st March 2017 there were 18 children awaiting an adoption placement.

Family finding is being actively pursued with placements being sought via the National Adoption Register, the local East Midlands Adoption Consortium and Link Maker. The Adoption Agency is also participating in a regional pilot with SAMS and the RAAPT pilot to determine the merits of closer working and cross agency matching.

At the point of an ADM decision being given to agree a care plan of adoption, children are profiled by members of the Permanence Team and are then, if appropriate, an anonymous profile is placed on *Link Maker* (an electronic tool that joins-up children's social care across the UK to increase placement choice for children, and to improve use of data and collaboration between local authorities and providers).

The full profile of the child is released at the point that a Placement Order is granted by the Court. The Adoption Agency always seek to place with Leicestershire adopters initially; if this is not successful a search within the East Midlands Consortium is progressed with a national search only being completed if no suitable adopters are identified after this point. Leicestershire is clear that matches between children and adopters should be based on the adopters' ability to meet the needs of the child and is a child centred and child led process. We have been successful in matching and have not needed to participate in national exchange days or adoption activity days.

In this period we successfully matched 3 children referred by Rutland County Council.

On 31st March 2017 we had 7 adopter applicants in stage one and a further 6 in stage two of the assessment process.

3 children were placed under *Foster for Adoption* protocols; a sibling group of 2 and a single child (Fostering for Adoption places a child or children with approved adopters who are also approved as foster carers. During the fostering stage of the placement the courts are deciding what is in the child's best interests but the local council have already decided that adoption is the right plan). Another child was placed under Regulation 24 of the 2010 Care Planning Regulations with their elder full sibling and adopters.

Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Adoption Disruptions

There has been 1 adoption disruption during this period. In this case, the child returned to the care of the local authority.

Year to 31st March 2016 relating to Post Adoption Support

Pre and post adoption support is provided in a number of ways within Leicestershire for a number of reasons, such as to help our adopters parent in a way that takes into consideration the trauma their children have suffered or the impact that that care has had on their child's health and development.

The adoption social worker offers support up to three years post adoption order, especially in cases where adoption breakdown or disruption is a threat. After this 3 year period, locality led support is available to families at risk of adoption breakdown – this includes active intervention, signposting to support networks and providers, respite and, accommodation of the child or children in the most extreme cases.

Some adopted children and their families require specialist counselling and therapy to help them make sense of their experiences and losses. To 31st March 2017, the Adoption Agency drew down £366,544 from the Adoption Support Fund to pay for direct interventions with adoptees and their families in Leicestershire. This is a

decrease in the amount that was applied for in the previous financial year as that was in excess of £400,000, but reflects the funding cap that came into effect during this period.

Some of the most complex cases may be co-worked by other social work or early help team with support from the Post Adoption Support Worker depending on the level and complexity of need. In such cases an assessment will be conducted and an application may be made for appropriate therapeutic services through the Adoption Support Fund.

Birth Parents are routinely offered support prior to the adoption of their children to help them understand why adoption has been chosen as the appropriate plan for their child and to help them contribute to that care planning. This support is offered through a leaflet provided at the point of ADM ratifying a care plan of adoption. Such requests are presented to *Placement and Additional Resource Panel* where an application for an independent support person will be presented by this service. Similarly, if a birth parent or birth family requires counselling to help them deal with the loss of their child, the Permanence Team will complete an assessment and present the recommendation for support to the *Placement and Additional Resource Panel*.

Post Adoption Support still requires further work and was identified as an area that required improvement in the Ofsted inspection in November 2017. In direct response to this a Child Care Support worker has been appointed. This worker makes a placement visit 6 weeks after the point of placing and will provide a series of visits to ensure that adopters feel supported in nurturing their relationships with their children. Telephone contact will also be made with adopters at 6 months, 12 months, 18 months, 24 months, 30 months and 36 months. The Adoption support plan will be routinely reviewed throughout this period to ensure that it remains appropriate and relevant to the needs of the child and supports adopters to meet those needs.

Birth Records Counselling has maintained a steady waiting list and has been well-managed within the service during this period.

Intermediary services where adopted children are supported to find and meet their birth parents are not carried out in house in Leicestershire. Some initial advice may be given but as with other local authorities, the Adoption Agency signposts adoptees who request this service to third sector agencies.

The demand for Post Adoption Support continues to grow, with specific demand increasing for older children.

The Adoption Agency is working with business partners to improve on-line information to encourage families to self-help and to attend adoption support groups, and to make use of the Virtual School where schools require advice and support. In addition to this, the Agency has introduced a Newsletter to help adopted families feel connected and to make 'reaching out' easier. The newsletter will highlight adoption events sponsored by the Adoption Agency, to encourage sharing and support amongst families who have experience and knowledge.

About the Permanence Team

The role of the Permanence Team is to undertake all family finding for children who need permanence via the adoption route. They also family find for adopters post approval and support adopters through the placing and supporting children through to Adoption Order. This work also includes family finding for long term fostered children.

In addition to day to day operations, the team is very committed to ongoing developmental projects such as:

- Life Appreciation Days
- Permanence planning of children in long term foster care
- Further embedding of the Signs of Safety methodology in their practice.
- Increased involvement in the completion of *sibling together or apart* assessments
- The use of *Theraplay* and *Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy* principles to ensure that the Permanence Team can appropriately support adopters to understand the needs of our children and parent them therapeutically.
- The introduction of an Adoption Support Worker who will offer regular contact with adopters post the final order for three years, to ensure the adoption support plan remains appropriate and to help adopters implement their training and link with support networks.

Adoption Panel

Adoption panels operate to meet the needs of children looked after by the Local Authority, their birth parents or guardians and those who may wish to adopt a child. Panels therefore, perform an important role in assisting the Adoption Agency to reach the best possible decision in respect of whether a child should be placed for adoption; the suitability of prospective adopters or the termination of approval of a prospective adopter; and whether a child should be placed for adoption with a specific prospective adopter/s.

The Adoption Agency's Panel members come with a variety of skills and experiences, and make recommendations after thoughtful scrutiny of relevant paperwork and lengthy discussions with social workers coming to panel. The Panels operate with transparency and have the best interest of the child at the core of all decisions.

The Adoption Agency has 11 independent adoption panel members consisting of 2 males and 9 females and 3 female social workers. All are White British, with the exception of 1 male and 1 female who are British Asian.

There is one panel chair and one vice chair.

There is one panel advisor who delivers advice to both the adoption and fostering panels. This arrangement is under review, based on demand. Meetings between panel chair, the panel advisor and the service manager take place every 4 months.

11 Adoption panels were held during this reporting period.

There has been a decrease of 7 panel members since 2016 as members have left for varying reasons. Panel member's annual reviews are completed by the panel advisor and panel chair.

Rutland Arrangements

We continue to provide adoption services for Rutland County Council under a Service Level Agreement. The Service Level Agreement has been reviewed and agreed from April 2017.

During the reporting period, 8 Rutland children were matched with adopters by this agency.

The Assistant Manager meets with the Rutland County Council nominated officer to review performance.

Statement by the Agency Decision Maker, Helen Gronhaug

"The ADM role has now been in place as a stand-alone post since August 2014. The past year has seen changes in terms of line manager reporting and governance. Since March 2016, the ADM reported to a Head of Service which was initially independent of line management of locality and adoption services. ADM has subsequently been managed by the Assistant Director. This has provided greater clarity in terms of accountability and governance of the ADM decision making, particularly in relation to ensuring the effectiveness of the ADM's quality assurance function. Working with the Head of Service for Field work has supported and strengthened the tracking of individual cases in ensuring follow through of work required by ADM. The ADM now has now joined the escalation meetings held between the Assistant Director and IRO service. This provides a structure for

ensuring individual case related issues and thematic areas are shared with senior management so that required actions are tracked and followed through. The effectiveness of the ADM role in providing positive challenge and quality assurance was recognised within the Ofsted Inspection 2016.

The independent position of the ADM allows for a valuable opportunity to gain an overview of children's care planning and outcomes through oversight of adoption and fostering panels; children's adoption plans as well as foster carer reviews. This allows for the identification of practice and policy themes. This has led to ADM being involved in further practice development (Permanence Practice summit and SGO task and finish group). Since March 2016, ADM sits as a Permanence Panel member which enhances the overview of children's permanence planning across the authority. ADM's quarterly reporting has yet to be established as an integral part of Permanence Panel reporting. A review of Permanence Panel work from March 2016 until July 2017 will be presented to SMT along with an overview of the thematic areas drawn from ADM business. It is intended that this will form part of the department's action planning in relation to permanence as an identified priority area for improvement.

Key issues identified during this period have included some slippage of practice in terms of active twin tracking once a Pack A has been requested. This has led to a delay in adoption medicals being booked. The agency's compliance with adoption regulations required this to be addressed to ensure that adoption medical advisor's reports were available in time for ADM to consider the proposed adoption plan. A practice standard has been introduced to address this.

ADM continues to provide detailed quality assurance feedback for individual CPRs presented at the point of an adoption plan decision. Further presentations to provide feedback on areas for further development to improve quality of CPRs have been delivered by ADM and Assistant Service Manager for Adoption to locality service managers and team managers. There is a need to strengthen the quality assurance function provided by team managers in order to reduce the level of detail of feedback given by ADM. Further work to improve the quality of CPRs through workshops within localities has been identified.

Care planning of sibling groups remains an area for development to ensure issues of "Together or Apart" are considered at the outset of a child's journey. It has been identified that a practice standard is needed to provide guidance on how and when to make an informed decision about completing a formal sibling assessment. This should ensure that information gathering is purposeful from the start of care planning and provides a robust evidence base for decision making.

Analysis has been completed of the children who have been presented for adoption between January-May 2017. This highlighted a much greater proportion of children being put forward for adoption from Locality 3 compared to other localities (14 out of

20 families presented). In reviewing the request for Pack As, this has shown a similar pattern. Further analysis is needed to understand the reasons for this difference between localities.

There is further work needed to ensure matching reports evidence the strengths and vulnerabilities within the match being proposed. Support planning is an area for improvement to ensure all that is known about the child and adopters' needs are reflected in a support plan. There is a need to be as explicit as possible about the impact of the children's health development and lived experience (acknowledging the impact of neglect and trauma) on short and long term needs and thus what capacity is implied for the adopters.

In terms of Panel functioning, there is a need to ensure their quality assurance function is more robustly carried out. For example, there have been 3 occasions when evidence of adopters' reviews has not been available to Panel but the importance of the adopters' review process in ensuring adopters remain suitable to adopt has not been recognised. A further match has been delayed because work to explore the possibility of a child being placed with an already adopted sibling has not been completed before presenting a match to Panel.

It has been recognised that Adoption Panel has not had access to a legal advisor for some time. This has been raised with Legal Services to ensure Panel papers are scrutinised and there is legal oversight on all cases presented to Panel, even if a legal advisor is unable to routinely attend.

Achieving adoption plans for children who might be considered harder to place, specifically older children or children with disabilities is an area identified for improvement. It is hoped that the work of SAMS will assist our practice in this area."

East Midlands Adoption Consortium (EMAC)

The Adoption Agency of Leicestershire and Rutland continues to be a member of EMAC. Central government is keen to see the success of such arrangements and so we have made a commitment to this group of 9 local authorities and 3 Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAA) since coming into post last August.

The Adoption Agency has been part of the Regionalisation Adoption Agency Programme and has been pro-active in ensuring that good practice that is child centred is embedded in the future vision. To the end, practice leads continue to engage and contribute to RAA work stream programs and will be making changes to align current practice to best practice identified in these work streams.

The Regionalisation of Adoption

"It is a core proposition of the Department of Education's Regionalization Program that adoption services need to be delivered at greater scale through the creation of a

single pool of children and adopters within each region. However, the East Midlands region covers an area of considerable size, and is very diverse, and services still need to be accessible to children and adopters within a reasonable distance. ... Learning from the development of the EMRAA project to date, and from other projects, indicates that there is a need to align services across local authorities prior to integration... Based on the outputs of the operational work streams, the Project Team will prepare a service description and a project plan for each of the following deliverables:

- Adopter Assessment
- Home finding and Matching
- Childrens Permanence Teams

The project team will provide regular updates to the sub regional PGB regarding progress against the project plan.”

Business Case for Establishing the RAA Pilot in LLLR,
Prepared by the RAAPT

The Adoption Agency has not yet received agreement to integrate with services across Lincolnshire, Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, but remain committed to contributing to the planning processes and making the best end decision for children of Leicestershire.

OFSTED Inspection

The Ofsted inspection during November 2016 identified that the Adoption Agency is ‘good’ with assessments of prospective adopters and our matches between adopters and children were timely and appropriate.

The Agency had already completed a self-assessment and had identified that our Post Adoption Support offer needed to be more robust and Ofsted echoed this finding.

In response to this we have appointed a child care support worker who provides practical and emotional support to adopters in the early stages of a child being placed, further support phone calls at 6 months, 12 months, 18 months 24 months, 30 months and 36 months.

We also provide Post Adoption support through our social workers and applications to the Adoption Support Fund and sponsor a range of events to encourage adopters to talk to one another, share experiences and offer advice. A Christmas party was held for adopters and their children in December 2016. The team received positive responses to this and further events are planned for 2017/2018 including the development of a quarterly newsletter. In addition to this, the Agency will be

contributing to a website to ensure that the Adoption Support Offer is accessible to all.

Officers in charge

The modernisation of the adoption team has been very successful, and, in line with the changes to adoption assessment, the two stage process has been in place since July 2013 and is proving successful.

The service is overseen by an Assistant Service Manager, Michelle Robinson, who supports the Service Manager, Joss Longman, who is responsible for the full Fostering and Adoption integrated Service. These officers report directly to the Head of Service, Nicci Collins, and the Assistant Director Sharon Cooke.

Statement of Purpose

The Statement of purpose was reviewed and uploaded to the public facing Leicestershire County Council Website in January 2016 and will be reviewed annually.

Key message from Assistant Service Manager, Michelle Robinson

“Adoption has been a key part of the Government Agenda since 2012 and has seen significant change.

There is a significant drive to increase the amount of children who are able to achieve early permanency via fostering to adopt. This is an implicit feature of our assessment and training programme to ensure that all adopters are fully informed of the risks and benefits of offering such placements. We routinely ensure that adopters have the opportunity to hear from others who have offered this type of placement within their training.

Leicestershire continues to work pro-actively with other Local Authorities and Voluntary Adoption Agencies within the Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies process as Leicestershire remains committed to the needs of our children and ensuring that they continue to receive a high quality service.”

Michelle Robinson

Assistant Service Manager – Permanency

July 2017