

**ROYAL BOROUGH OF KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA****OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES.****REPORT BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES –JUNE 2010  
ANNUAL REPORT ON ADOPTION AND PERMANENCE SERVICES**

The purpose of this report is to inform Members about the work of the adoption and permanence team during 2009-2010

**FOR INFORMATION**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Adoption is only ever the plan for a small minority of looked after children, as most return home or are of an age where they have established family relationships. However, although the numbers are not large, securing the future of children through adoption is one of the most significant of the Council's responsibilities.
- 1.2 In addition to adoption, permanence for children can be secured through Special Guardianship Orders, which were introduced as private law orders in 2006 and provide a high degree of permanence without the full severance from the birth family occasioned by adoption. The service is required to report on performance in these areas nationally.
- 1.3 Other permanence options are Residence Orders, which confer parental responsibility on the holder but do not provide the degree of permanence afforded by Special Guardianship, and long term (or permanent) fostering where the child remains looked after in a placement which is intended to see them successfully into adulthood.
- 1.4 The Adoption and Permanence service undertakes work in all these areas and this report covers its work during the year April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2010. The report is required by the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005. Members received a mid year report in September 2009 and information provided in that report is not repeated here.

## **2. PERFORMANCE**

### **2.1 Permanence for Children**

- 2.1.1 Only two children were adopted during the year, both by voluntary agency approved adopters. There were a further three children made subject to special guardianship orders during the year.
- 2.1.2 These low numbers reflect the declining numbers of children looked after in the borough with only 32 looked after children under the age of seven years out of a total of 156 children who were looked after on March 31, 2010. In addition the growing importance of permanent friends and family placements means that adoption was not the appropriate plan for some of the children unable to return to their birth families during the year because of neglect or abuse.
- 2.1.3 The low numbers also mean there are fluctuations each year depending on how court timescales impact on planning with final adoption hearings held some months after placement of the child. Numbers of children adopted in previous years has fluctuated between seven and fourteen per year.
- 2.1.4 Taken in conjunction with the agency's performance on meeting timescales, early and robust permanence planning and timely assessment of friends and family during court proceedings, the decline in the number of adopted children can be seen as a positive trend. Only three children are currently waiting for an adoptive placement.
- 2.1.5 Of the children waiting for adoption, one of these has been linked with RBKC approved adopters, and is expected to be matched in July 2010. Capacity for active family finding for the other two has been restricted as court proceedings are ongoing with birth family members still under consideration.
- 2.1.6 Of the two children adopted in the last year, the first, a girl of five years old, had experienced a previous permanent placement breakdown with a relative and needed an extended period of therapy before she was ready to join her new family. She was adopted by a single woman living outside London.
- 2.1.7 The other child was adopted shortly after her first birthday. She was the second of her mother's children to be adopted, however she was unable to join her sister's adoptive family. She was adopted by a family that reflects her ethnic background and is already adoptive parents to another RBKC child.
- 2.1.8 Of the children made the subject of special guardianship orders, one is living with a grandmother who was already their foster carer and two with their independent fostering agency foster carer. Two looked after

children were also made the subjects of residence orders during the year.

- 2.1.9 Due to the timescales involved these adoption orders relate to children placed with their prospective adoptive parents in the year ending March 31, 2009. In the past year five children were placed for adoption during the year. Three of the placed children were matched with RBKC approved adopters resulting in minimal waiting time after public law proceedings had concluded.
- 2.1.10 All of the placed and adopted children were placed within the national standard of 12 months from permanence decision to adoption placement.

## **2.2 Domestic Adopter Recruitment and Assessment**

- 2.2.1 The year was a successful one for domestic adopter recruitment with five new adoptive families approved during the year and a further seven applications accepted and currently in assessment. For the first time in five years the service has been able to run two preparation groups for prospective adopters.
- 2.2.2 Two hundred and fifty-five enquiries were received during the year, an increase of 28% over 2008-2009. Of these 211 were for domestic adoption, resulting in 12 applications being accepted for domestic adoption assessment. The remainder of the enquiries were for friends and family or special guardianship assessments, intercountry adoption enquiries (14, see below), step parent adoption applications and one enquiry for assessment following a surrogate birth.
- 2.2.3 It is usual for there to be a high attrition rate between first enquiry and applicants going forward or being considered suitable for assessment and the Adoption team made 19 initial visits to assess carers suitability during the year of which 10 followed the very successful information evenings held in September and November 2009.
- 2.2.4 The service has continued to concentrate its efforts on recruiting adopters from the black and minority ethnic communities. Following profile raising events during the summer of 2009, and advertising in the *Metro*, the Adoption Team held an information evening at the Town Hall, specifically targeted at prospective adopters from the black and minority ethnic communities. Over 70 people attended. This strategy is being repeated in the current year with the information meeting being held in June.
- 2.2.5 The November 2009 National Adoption Week recruitment campaign saw another considerable success with approximately 90 people attending and a further 7 potential placements entering assessment.

- 2.2.6 In addition to these larger, advertised meetings the team continues to hold local information mornings every six weeks at the London Lighthouse. These smaller meetings are advertised on the Internet and give prospective applicants an opportunity to discuss their interest in more detail with two members of the adoption team.
- 2.2.7 When there are no RBKC children to be matched with approved adopters they are available to have a child placed from another local authority. In these cases a fee of £13,138 is received by the borough. Most of the approved families have now been matched, with either an RBKC child or a child from another agency. Two approved adoptive families continue to wait for the right child.
- 2.2.8 Adoption team members also assessed four step parents and wrote a total of 27 reports for the court in adoption, special guardianship and care proceedings.

### **2.3 Friends and Family Assessments**

- 2.3.1 Work with friends and family carers spans every area of children and families work and this has been the major area of growth in the permanence service. During the year the service carried out 19 assessments of friends and family for the courts, often at very short notice, with fifteen (79 %) of these assessments resulting in a positive recommendation. There were four assessments where the assessing social worker was unable to recommend a placement or an order. Three families came forward to be assessed as friends and family carers but withdrew during the assessment.
- 2.3.2 Two families offering kinship placements for looked after children but living abroad were assessed during the year by order of the court. One of the families lived in Florida and one in Guyana. Both assessments were positive. One child joined her aunt and family in Florida, leaving care through a special guardianship order. However in the other case the court eventually decided against the local authority's preferred plan and in favour of the child's current foster carer in the UK rather than his paternal relatives in Guyana.
- 2.3.3 The very tight timescales sometimes demanded by the courts and the complex family dynamics within the extended networks make these assessments some of the most complex and skilled work performed by the team. The Senior Social Worker for Friends and Family post, created in 2008, has been insufficient to absorb the volume of this work. Consequently seven friends and family assessments have been outsourced.
- 2.3.4 Some of the friends and family assessments were by way of contingency planning when the prime plan was for children to return to their birth parents under a safe reunification plan. Some assessments

involve relatives who have offered to provide essential respite care to maintain a child either at home or in a foster placement.

2.3.5 The permanence service works closely with the fostering service to deliver this service to children. During the year one social worker post in the fostering team has been designated for supervising approved friends and family foster carers. This social worker is supervised by the Senior Social Worker for Friends and Family in the Adoption and Permanence Team.

## **2.4 Inter-country Adoption**

2.4.1 Although adoption from overseas continues to account for a significant proportion of the Adoption Team's work overall, initial enquiries for adoption from abroad were down by 44% during the year. The agency has a duty to provide this service and charges applicants £4,784 for these assessments and £250 for follow up post placement reports.

2.4.2 Three prospective adopter couples were approved to adopt during the year from Lebanon, Russia and Ethiopia. A further ten assessments were accepted and are currently in assessment. Two families have withdrawn.

2.4.3 The Borough welcomed nine children who were adopted abroad during the year. The countries of origin are Russia (three children), the Lebanon, India, Ethiopia, China, Thailand and the USA. A further child has been adopted in Ghana however she is still awaiting immigration clearance before she can enter the UK.

2.4.4 Inter-country adoption often needs a continuing commitment on the part of the Adoption Team as many of the sending countries (i.e. those that are not members of the Hague Convention on International adoption or on the "designated list) require regular post placement reports.

2.4.5 During the year Adoption Team members or outsourced workers prepared 5 reports in respect of children from overseas who had to be re-adopted in the UK in order for their overseas adoption to be recognised.

## **3 Adoption Support**

3.1 The adoption support service received 56 referrals during the year and conducted seven assessments for adoption support. Seventeen referrals involved adoptees, four were from adopters, nine from other adoption agencies and local authorities, ten from birth families and 16 from other referrers.

- 3.2 The adoption support service provided intermediary services for seven families, responded to 16 information requests, provided access to records and birth record counselling for 26 adopted people.
- 3.3 In addition 16 referrals were passed on to our outsourced contractor, After Adoption. They included three requests from adopted people or their birth families for tracing, 10 for birth family support including counselling for birth mothers whose children have a permanence plan for adoption; and three from adopters seeking general support or support with specific behavioural problems.
- 3.4 An adoption support assistant was recruited to a newly established post and joined the team in November 2009. This has been a considerable asset to the adoption support service enabling the adoption support social workers to increase the number of hours' indirect work with service users.

#### **4 Special Guardianship Support**

- 4.1 During the year the local authority's payment scheme has proved robust in avoiding challenges in the family court about special guardianship support plans. Expenditure on special guardianship allowances has continued to grow although much of this is offset by reductions in the placement expenditure for looked after children.
- 4.2 An RBKC child who becomes the subject of a special guardianship order with an independent fostering agency carer will save the local authority in the region of £400 a week, added to which are hidden savings on the costs of social worker time and other services provided for Looked After Children.
- 4.3 Children whose friends and family or RBKC approved foster carers apply for special guardianship orders attract savings of between £30 and £80 a week, in addition to the hidden costs of supervision and training by the fostering service.

#### **5. Work of the Adoption Panel**

- 5.1 The Adoption and Permanence Panel is constituted by regulation to recommend the approval of adopters, permanence plans for children and the match of children with adopters. Membership includes an elected Member, agency social workers and independent members, including those with experience of adopting or being adopted. It has an independent chair and is attended by legal, medical and procedural advisers.
- 5.2 During the year the panel met on eleven occasions and considered a total of 35 items, including a contentious permanence recommendation on behalf of another local authority in the West London Adoption Consortium.

- 5.3 Twelve children were presented for permanence decision. These included a sibling pair and one child who was presented twice for different permanence decisions. The panel made 13 recommendations for permanence; there were four recommendations for adoption and seven recommendations for long term fostering, including two placements with family members for fostering with a view to special guardianship applications. Two permanence decisions from the previous year were rescinded in favour of remaining with birth parents.
- 5.4 Seven prospective domestic adoptive families were recommended for approval and a further four families were recommended as long-term foster carers for specific children. Three families were approved to adopt from abroad.
- 5.5 Eight permanence matches were recommended for Royal Borough children, five of which were for adoption.
- 5.6 In November the panel had a training session on points to consider when neglect is the main issue in a permanence recommendation.

## **6. Safeguarding**

- 6.1 There were no child protection allegations or concerns about children placed for adoption during the year.
- 6.2 The service received one allegation from a birth parent of a young person who is the subject of a special guardianship order. The allegation was investigated by the Borough in which young person resides and found to be unsubstantiated.
- 6.3 All members of the adoption team and business support team have enhanced criminal records bureau checks that are regularly renewed.

## **7. Resources**

- 7.1 In addition to the Manager, the team is comprised of an Adoption Support Adviser, a senior social worker for friends and family placements, eight social workers and the adoption support assistant referred to above. In addition the team shares the services of a recruitment officer with the fostering team along with a small business support team.
- 7.2 The Adoption Team Manager acted as temporary manager for another service from June 2009 and was therefore available to the adoption service only three days a week during most of the year. In her absence some management tasks were delegated to two experienced social workers in the adoption team.

- 7.3 One of the most experienced workers in the team has concluded training as a practice teacher and in March 2010 the adoption team accepted its first social work student.
- 7.4 Where necessary sessional workers are employed at times of high demand or to cover shortfalls in the team's staffing. They undertake specific assessments, usually of applicants for inter country adoption, or where court ordered friends and family assessments are required within tight timescales.
- 7.5 All the sessional workers are registered social workers and meet the requirements of the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations (2006). All have considerable experience in family placement or child protection. The outsourced work is directly supervised by the Adoption Team Manager in order to maintain the high standards expected of the in-house service. A total of fourteen cases were allocated to sessional workers during the year.

## **8. Budget**

- 8.1 Overall expenditure on adoption services in 2009-10 was £1,853,579. This included expenditure of £576,471 on staffing, £456,784 paid in adoption and residence order allowances and £224,077 in special guardianship allowances to carers.
- 8.2 During the year the adoption service received an income of £75,389 of which £47,068 was in interagency fees; three RBKC approved adoptive families were matched with children from other agencies during the year. A further three RBKC approved adopters were linked with children from other agencies during the year and have been matched since April 2010.
- 8.3 During the year a major development in Family Placement Unit Database has been designing and programming a new finance system to replace the current TROJAN child care payments system for paying carers, including paying adoption, special guardianship and residence order allowances. The adoption support database module became active in September 2009. Data is being loaded to track the agency's provision of adoption support since January 2009.

## **9. OFSTED INSPECTION.**

- 9.1 The agency was inspected by OFSTED in May 2009, in accordance with their three yearly cycle, and received an outstanding rating.
- 9.2 OFSTED made three recommendations to the agency: improvements to later life letters; increase in take up of birth parent counselling and waterproofing the archived adoption records.

- 9.3 As a result the agency has introduced a new procedure for approving and quality assuring later life letters for adopted children. Later life letters are now checked and approved by the Adoption Team Manager or the Adoption Support Services Advisor before the adoption record is closed. Alongside this the adoption team, together with the fostering team, has introduced a life story book template and information and resource packs for social workers and foster carers who are preparing life story books for adopted children. The materials will be launched at a training event on September 17, 2010.
- 9.4 Only a small proportion of birth parents take advantage of counselling services prior to adoption. The agency has reviewed how it can encourage birth parents to take up the opportunity of independent counselling with our external provider, Birth Ties.
- 9.5 Very few RBKC children are relinquished for adoption so it is understandable that most birth parents are unable to engage with adoption counselling during public or private law proceedings, particularly where they continue to hope that they will keep their children. All birth families are offered a minimum of annual letterbox contact after adoption; some birth families may be able to take advantage of independent counselling at the time of the first contact. The service continues to monitor and record the take-up of birth parent counselling.
- 9.6 During the year two birth parents who initially opted for relinquishing newborn children to adoption subsequently decided to keep them following counselling and advice by adoption team members.
- 9.7 Adoption records sent to the archives are now sealed in waterproof envelopes bound with waterproof tape to protect against damage from fire sprinklers.

## **10. FINANCIAL, LEGAL, PERSONNEL AND EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 Children of mixed ethnic background, referred to the adoption and permanence team for permanence planning and possible adoption, wait longest for a permanent family and recruitment campaigns have been targeting BME groups. In order to prevent drift and delay for these children twice during the year children have been re-referred to the adoption and permanence panel for their permanence recommendation to be amended from adoption to long term fostering.
- 10.2 One gay couple has been approved to adopt during the year and has adopted a disabled girl from the Royal Borough. This is an outstanding adoptive home and the couple has asked to be assessed for a second child.

10.3 The Director of Personnel and General Services notes that this is an information report and that it therefore does not contain any proposals that may have Personnel implications.

10.4 There are no legal comments on this report.

## **11. CONCLUSION**

11.1 Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Family and Children's Services are asked to note the contents of this report.

**FOR INFORMATION**

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