

**REPORT TO:** Children, Young People & Families PPB

**DATE:** 3 January 2013

**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director, Children & Enterprise

**SUBJECT:** An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay

**PORTFOLIO:** Children, Young People and Families

**WARDS:** All

**1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT:**

Further to the presentation of the outcome of the Adoption Scorecard in May and November 2012, to provide information regarding the changes in adoption practice as a result of the publication of "An Action Plan for Adoption – Tackling Delay" by the Department for Education.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the implementation plan for Adoption Services in Halton is endorsed.**

**SUPPORTING INFORMATION:**

**3.0** The Adoption Action Plan has been published as a result of the Governments activity in relation to Adoption Reform. It sets out

**3.1** proposals for tackling delay in the adoption system and what the Government intends to do to accelerate the whole adoption process. It states that the Government shall: -

- Legislate to reduce the number of adoptions delayed in order to achieve a perfect or near ethnic match between adoptive parents and the adoptive child
- Require swifter use of the national Adoption Register in order to find the right adopters for a child wherever they might live
- Encourage all local authorities to seek to place children with their potential adopters in anticipation of the court's Placement Order
- Radically speed up the adopter assessment process so that 2 months are spent in training and information gathering followed by 4 months of full assessment
- Introduce a 'fast track' process for those who have adopted before or who are foster carers wanting to adopt a child in their care
- Develop the concept of a 'national Gateway to adoption' as a consistent source of advice and information for those thinking about adoption
- Actively measure improvements in tackling delay through the performance scorecard.

**3.2** The Government recognises that there are a range of permanent care options which can give children security and stability through their

childhood and beyond. Alongside adoption, these include long term fostering, Special Guardianship and Residence. The Government is, however, concerned that the number of children adopted continues to decrease. There are approximately 65,000 children in care in England, 15,680 of whom are under the age of 5. In 2011, 3,050 children, including 60 babies, were adopted, the lowest number since 2001.

- 3.3 The Government believes that this performance indicates that adoption is not being identified as a suitable plan for children and where it is, the planning and Court processes are plagued by delay and a mismatch between children in need of adoption and the families approved to adopt them.
- 3.4 The reasons for delay vary. Children enter care older than infancy, may be part of a sibling group, have complex needs and therefore identifying an adoptive family creates challenges. Additionally, protracted Court Proceedings may create delay. The Government believes that some Local Authorities have taken too long in trying to identify an ideal family for a child, when they should search for the best family available as quickly as possible. They also believe that the assessment process for those wishing to become adopters has become too complex and prolonged, and they recognise that there is a need to recruit a greater number of prospective adopters for sibling groups and children with complex needs, which will also require improved support services being available post-adoption.
- 3.5 The Action Plan therefore makes a number of proposals to address these issues which include
- The College of Social Work will be asked to address gaps in training in relation to child development, attachment theory and other relevant research relevant to adoption
  - This has also been identified as a gap in learning for Family Judges and is to be addressed by the Judicial College
  - With effect from 1<sup>st</sup> September, the Adoption Panel will no longer be allowed to consider whether a child should be placed for adoption, to prevent duplication and delay within the Family Justice System. Further review will also be given to the role of Adoption Panel in the approval of prospective adopters and adoption matches
  - Local authorities will establish management systems to monitor family finding, including the role of the Independent Reviewing Manager in monitoring the Local Authorities performance
  - Delay must be avoided by not waiting for adopters of the same ethnic profile as the child
  - All children are to be referred to the National Adoption Register within three months if a potential family has not been identified and all approved adopters, who are not matched with a child within

three months, are also to be referred

- Concurrent planning and fostering for adoption are to be used more widely
- The training and assessment process for prospective adopters will be radically redesigned into a two stage process across shorter timescales
- An Adoption Passport is proposed, guaranteeing minimum levels of support, linked to this potential reform to the tax and benefit system. Priority access is to be sought to CAMHS for adopted children. With an overall need to clarify and improve the consistency of adoption support.

3.6 In order to measure Adoption performance, the Government has introduced the Adoption Scorecard, the first one of which was published in May 2012 and the second in November 2012. As reported previously, Halton met the threshold for both timeliness measures that were in place. The scorecard will be updated annually, highlighting key indicators for the placement of children for adoption and from 2014 the approval of prospective adopters. These will include –

- The time from a child entering care to moving in with their adoptive family (initially set at 21 months but reducing to 14 months within 4 years)
- Those children who waited longer than they should
- The time from Placement Order to matching a child with prospective adopters (initially set at 7 months but reducing to 4 months within 4 years)
- Timeliness of the family justice system and the number of older children adopted

3.7 In response to the Government's proposals so far, an action plan for adoption services in Halton has been developed (Appendix 1). Implementation of this has already commenced but it will require regular review and amendment as more proposals are announced.

#### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The proposals are consistent with ensuring that the best and timeliness service is offered to children requiring adoption placements.

4.2 Children and Families Adoption policies and procedures will be reviewed and amended to reflect practice changes as they are introduced.

#### **5.0 OTHER/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The Government has recently announced that an Adoption Improvement Grant will be made available to each local authority. In respect of Halton, this grant totals £34,000 and must be used to

- Diagnose weaknesses within systems

- Design systems
- Strengthen case management
- Improve workforce skills, and
- Use evidence based improvement to strengthen adoption planning and practice

5.2 Regulatory and legislative changes are still awaited. Once they are known, the plan for Halton's use of the grant will be confirmed to the DFE by the deadline of February 2013. It is likely that the funding will be utilised to improve workforce skills and an appropriate facilitator is being identified.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

### **6.1 Children & Young People in Halton**

The proposals are consistent with ensuring that children are able to live in long term family placement and achieve the security and stability they need in order to thrive.

### **6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

Long term stability for children will impact positively on their life achievements and their contribution to their community.

### **6.3 A Healthy Halton**

Secure and stable placements for children will support their long term health and wellbeing.

## **7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 There is no significant risk involved with the proposals.

## **8.0 List of Background Papers under Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972**

Halton Adoption Action Plan	Rutland House	CT
Halton Improvement Grant	DFE Website	CT
Government's Action Plan on Adoption	DFE Website	CT

**HALTON BOROUGH COUNCIL  
CHILDREN & ENTERPRISE DIRECTORATE**

**ACTION PLAN FOR ADOPTION**

<b>REQUIREMENT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>	<b>BY WHOM</b>	<b>TIMESCALES</b>	<b>PROGRESS</b>
Revised Agency Decision-Maker process for Children in Care Proceedings.	Implement Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendment) Regulations 2012	Children & Families Division	01.09.2012	Completed
	Consult with Medical Advisors	Christine Taylor, Janet Bodie	23.08.2012	Completed
	Brief all Child Care Teams	Janet Bodie	29.08.2012	Completed
Family Justice Review Pre-Proceedings Protocol	Implement Pre-Proceedings Protocol	Children & Families Division Legal Services	July 2012	Completed
	Deliver training to all Children & Families Staff	Clive Baker, Barrister Judge De Hass	July 2012	Completed
Adoption Scorecards	Monitor Management and Quality Assurance information to meet set thresholds which decrease annually 2011 – 2016.	Children & Families Division Christine Taylor, Janet Bodie	Commenced 2012 – 2016	Monitoring system in place via Performance Section

REQUIREMENT	ACTION	BY WHOM	TIMESCALES	PROGRESS
	<p>Children entering care and moving in with adoptive family thresholds 2010/2013 639 days decreasing to 2013/2016 426 days.</p> <p>Local Authority receiving Court authority to place a child and matching with adoptive family 2010/2013 213 days decreasing to 2013/2016 121 days.</p> <p>Quarterly monitoring systems to be implemented.</p>	<p>Children and Families Division</p> <p>Children and Families Division</p> <p>Adoption Service Performance Management Team</p>	<p>2013 2016</p> <p>2013 2016</p> <p>2013</p>	
Match children without delay	<p>Monitoring of Adoption Scorecards – Quarterly Management information.</p> <p>Share – understanding and awareness with teams.</p> <p>Rigorous Family Finding process and early identification of children to be placed for adoption.</p> <p>Consider diverse range of families based upon assessed needs of child.</p>	<p>Children &amp; Families Division Janet Bodie and Christine Taylor</p> <p>Legal Services Janet Bodie</p> <p>Adoption Service</p>	<p>In place</p> <p>Ongoing monthly and review</p> <p>In place</p>	<p>Monitoring system in place via Performance Section</p> <p>Early alert system in place , monthly family finding reviews. In place</p>

REQUIREMENT	ACTION	BY WHOM	TIMESCALES	PROGRESS
	<p>Robust recruitment strategy to attract prospective adopters.</p> <p>Referral to National Adoption Register 3 months</p>	<p>Shared Service arrangement Cheshire West and Chester &amp; Knowsley, Adoption 22 – Interagency working</p> <p>Adoption Service</p>	<p>July 2013</p> <p>In place</p>	<p>Quarterly meetings to review progress. Recruitment for National Adoption Week 5- 11<sup>th</sup> November 2012 implemented. In place</p>
<p>Prospective Adopters – reduce preparation and assessment process timescales</p>	<p>Implement new timescales and revise preparation and assessment process/materials</p> <p>Commence new format of Assessments</p> <p>Referral to National Adoption Register at 3 months</p>	<p>Adoption Service</p> <p>Adoption Service</p> <p>Adoption Service</p>	<p>April 2013</p> <p>2013</p> <p>In place</p>	<p>Await publication of new timescales and relevant documentation 2013</p> <p>Addressed via team development session November 2012 and revised format awaited In place</p>

<b>REQUIREMENT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>	<b>BY WHOM</b>	<b>TIMESCALES</b>	<b>PROGRESS</b>
Concurrent planning	Implement process for prospective adopters to be approved as foster carers	Adoption Service Fostering Service	April 2013	Upon publication of new regulations
Fostering to Adopt  early placement of children with prospective adoptive families	Revision of recruitment materials, preparation and assessment process	Adoption Service Fostering Service	April 2013	Upon publication of new regulations to support process
OFSTED – new Inspection Framework National Minimum Standards – Adoption	Meet requirements of Inspection Framework 3 yearly inspection to be undertaken 2013	Children & Families Division	April 2013	Final version of the framework awaited
Adoption Support Service Development	Review Adoption Support provision of service based upon assessed need of individual.	Adoption Service	Regular monitor and review	In place
CareFirst 6	Improve range of service provision to be delivered  Development of system to improve information systems.	Shared Service arrangement Cheshire West and Chester and Knowsley  IT Services Adoption Service	July 2013  Mid 2013	Quarterly review of arrangement  CareFirst implementation plan in place and subject to review