

14 July 2015		ITEM: 9
Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee		
Adoption and Permanence Services Partnership		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children's Services		
Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter – Head of Children's Social Care		
Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton – Director of Children's Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides the framework for the local authority in implementing plans for the adoption of children. Section 3 of the Act places a duty on local authorities to maintain an adoption service within their area and sets out the minimum facilities that must be made available in the provision of the service.

The local authority is not obliged to provide all the facilities itself but may make use of the services provided by voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies or other suitable service providers.

Thurrock as of yet has not fully developed a programme for 'fostering to adopt' to promote early permanency and avoid changes in placement for children. As a single agency it is not considered viable for Thurrock to fully develop such a programme successfully and therefore partnership arrangements are required to achieve maximum benefit.

In order to increase the pool and diversity of prospective households and maximise post adoption support, Thurrock is looking to form a strong partnership with a leading adoption agency with a strong track record of adoption support.

In the context of significantly changed market conditions there is a need to ensure continuing, timely high quality assessments and placements for children and resilient services for adopters. There is also the need to address inspection requirements in ways which can ensure flexible management and deployment of social work resources as well as addressing the need for permanence planning in conjunction with the Children's Social Care teams.

At Cabinet on the 8th July it was proposed that Thurrock enter into a partnership with Coram for a 3 year period through a grant agreement, in line with appropriate delegated decision making levels for the Council. This will enable benefit realisation for Thurrock's children, timely delivery and responsiveness to the agenda for change/improvement and identified key performance indicators.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That members of the Overview & Scrutiny comment on the development of a partnership by way of a grant agreement to provide an integrated programme of activity to optimise adoption outcomes for children following the decision at Cabinet on July 8th.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 provides the framework for the local authority in implementing plans for the adoption of children. Section 3 of the Act places a duty on local authorities to maintain an adoption service within their area and sets out the minimum facilities that must be made available in the provision of the service. The Education and Adoption Bill (2015) builds on the 2002 Act proposes new power for the Secretary of State to require local authorities to work together or work with an adoption agency.

2.2 The local authority is not obliged to provide all the facilities itself but may make use of the services provided by voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies or other suitable service providers.

2.3 It is with regard to this option that this report is provided to consider the options for delivery of some elements of the adoption process and make recommendations for the future delivery of these.

2.4 Thurrock is a small adoption agency and has previously benefited from economies of scale by being part of an adoption consortium with Southend and Havering Councils. Following a decision by Havering Council to withdraw from the consortium, Thurrock has a memorandum of understanding in place with Southend. This is a viable arrangement in the short term but does not provide Thurrock with the capacity to make significant developments and advances in the field of adoption both locally and nationally.

2.5 Thurrock have been successful in the generic recruitment of prospective adopters but needs to be able to target recruitment to meet the needs more specifically of children needing adoptive families and to expand the options of permanency via adoption to meet the needs of older children, children with disabilities and children with complex needs.

- 2.6 On currently published data (Adoption Scorecard) children in Thurrock, on average between 2011-14, waited 710 days between becoming looked after and being placed with an adoptive family. It is the desired outcome of partnership arrangements that Thurrock will be able to accelerate the current rate of improvement and bring the average times that children wait below the England average.
- 2.7 Thurrock as of yet has not fully developed a programme for 'fostering to adopt' to promote early permanency and avoid changes in placement for children. As a single agency it is not considered viable for Thurrock to fully develop such a programme successfully and therefore partnership arrangements are required to achieve maximum benefit.
- 2.8 In order to increase the pool and diversity of prospective households and maximise post adoption support, Thurrock is looking to form a strong partnership with a leading adoption agency with a strong track record of adoption support.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 In the context of significantly changed market conditions there is a need to ensure continuing, timely high quality assessments and placements for children and resilient services for adopters. There is also the need to address inspection requirements in ways which can ensure flexible management and deployment of social work resources as well as addressing the need for permanence planning in conjunction with the Children's Social Care teams.
- 3.2 The national child and family charity Coram approached Thurrock Council with regard to working in partnership to develop adoption services in Thurrock supported by a grant they have received from the Department for Education.
- 3.3 Coram has extensive experience in providing adoption support services and recent evaluation showed that adoption was successful for 99% of children placed through their adoption services. Their services are able to bring additional expertise and capacity to the current local authority provision to find and prepare prospective adoptive parents who can best meet the needs of Thurrock children in care.
- 3.4 The model being proposed by Coram would provide a hub approach bringing together a number of local authorities to achieve an increased range of prospective adopters for Thurrock children and increased opportunities for Thurrock potential adopters.

- 3.5 The development of a partnership agreement would provide an integrated programme of activity to optimise adoption permanence outcomes for children in Thurrock by means of:
- adopter recruitment, assessment and approval by an Ofsted registered / judged outstanding agency
 - recruitment, assessment and approval of concurrent planning/foster to adopt carers
 - provision of the adoption and concurrent planning panel
 - hub access to Coram's Parent and Adoption Support Services (PASS)
 - flexible deployment of capacity/skills to address local needs
 - partial management of the Thurrock Adoption services to agreed delivery model
 - delivery as relevant to permanence planning for example SGO assessments, and/or broader management and supervision and QA activity.
 - Case by case post adoption support services on request to be supplied by Coram in dialogue as to required input to needs and availability;
 - Improved use of resources
- 3.6 Practice excellence is at the heart of considerations by officers with regards to the development of this model and members are asked to note that in recent (February 2015) inspections, Coram is judged Outstanding in every category by OFSTED for both Adoption and Fostering.
- 3.7 In addition Coram Capital Adoption aims always to provide the best possible preparation and support for adopters and offers a range of additional support services including parenting skills groups, music and art therapy and clinical expertise.
- 3.8 If it is agreed to develop this partnership model with Coram Capital Adoption the aim is to enhance early permanence to reduce drift and delay for children within the care system, further drawing on Coram's long established expertise in concurrent planning and early permanence reflecting child focussed delivery.
- 3.9 The delivery would be underpinned by Investment in staff and exemplary professional standards, CPD, supervision and learning to meet new challenges underpins quality delivery.
- 3.10 Coram's track record in current planning and formation of a Coram Capital Advisory Group will advance working relationships with the courts and CAFCASS in particular to underpin early permanence planning for children and continuous learning for confident evidence based delivery of services.

- 3.11 The development of a pilot project to move delivery through Coram Capital Adoption will bring:
- Improved outcomes for children and cost benefit of earlier placements secured through broader placement choice (from the wider pool of Coram adopters) and through concurrent planning and fostering to adopt;
 - Cost-efficiency by shared services e.g. single panel, effective deployment of hub expertise;
 - Sustainability from scale and mixed economy protecting small delivery units from market volatility;
 - Delivery based on diagnostics informing service improvement and planning releasing new potential within the system for sustained delivery;
 - Innovative matching and adoption support practice including marketing strategy and concurrency planning and training;
 - Robust accountability in the context of legal, policy and regulatory standards;
 - Flexible and responsive delivery presumption informed by local partnership, vision and effectiveness models;
 - Generative approach to champion high standards and direct expertise and resource to where it is most needed by virtue of market developments, service feedback and information from service feedback and evaluation, and,
 - Membership of Coram Capital Adoption Advisory Board with representation from Judiciary and Cafcass and LA shared expertise

3.12 Thurrock and Coram Partnership Proposal

- 3.13 The proposal is for Coram and Thurrock to enter into a partnership for a 3 year period through a grant agreement, in line with appropriate delegated decision making levels for the Council. This will enable benefit realisation for Thurrock's children, timely delivery and responsiveness to the agenda for change/improvement and identified key performance indicators.
- 3.14 The proposal enables the impact of market volatility to be monitored and service reshaping through a variable cost model so that flexibility is in built to the delivery approach. An advisory group to Coram Capital Adoption with Thurrock Council and legal and recognised professional experts will be formed to advise and inspire - opening up new avenues for support.
- 3.15 Practical focus on the shape and design of the partnership service specification is under consideration aimed to reflect the best solutions mutually agreed for enhanced delivery. It is not proposed that there will be any staff subject to TUPE due to the high vacancy levels currently in Children's Social Care teams.
- 3.16 A robust quality assurance process and reporting framework will ensure effective delivery alongside supervision and continuous professional development for co-located social workers in line with best practice

3.17 Financial parameters

- 3.18 Based on current demand it is estimated that 5 adoption placements will be required in year one. These currently cost £28k per placement (total estimated annual cost £140k), by purchasing this through the proposed partnership the total annual cost will be £131k. This includes Coram staff and management services fee.
- 3.19 This model provides capacity for up to 5 adoption placements on the basis of the standard ratio of social work time to assessment. If there are less than 4 or more than 6 placements, the resourcing requirement will be re-examined in partnership. In addition Thurrock will provide accommodation within existing resources whilst Coram will provide capital funding under grant for the implementation of the CHARMS database to enable consistent reporting. Once the CHARMS system is set up there will be a one off CHARMS implementation cost for detailed due diligence to maintain improved report performance once the system is set up and to cover the duration of the initial contract period.
- 3.20 Thurrock will retain full control over its adoption allowance commitments and any interagency fee required for a child will be addressed by Thurrock on a variable cost basis. At its discretion but subject to Coram capacity and agreement, Thurrock will hold a designated commissioning allocation and could under the agreement and subject to availability commission the following elements by spot purchase:
- Additional assessments (beyond team capacity) for SGOs, long term foster care or non-agency approvals at an agreed rate of £3k per assessment
 - Wider training and development or systems design on a bespoke basis
 - Additional quality assurance supervision for at a cost of £5k per staff member to be supervised (based on £400 per day).

3.21 Added value and unique contribution

3.22 Coram, as a voluntary adoption agency equipped to cover the range of services required and with a track record of success in such local authority partnerships and London specific presence. In addition, Coram has secured grant funding which will provide specific additional benefits for the lifetime of the Partnership Agreement by means of:

- Training and practice improvement in adoption and adoption support delivery (DfE VCS grants) and including access to specialist support for adopters with children under 5 and access to the Coram Academy offer where applicable
- Participation in the Concurrent Planning/Fostering to Adopt Learning set with a value of £2k pa
- Specific value contribution to Thurrock under the CVAA expansion grant to Coram Capital Adoption for partnership formation, permanence development and investment in the management database (CHARMS) at a value estimated at £10k
- Free diagnostic analysis of 3 year trends and patterns to inform future service planning

3.23 Services to be retained by Thurrock Council in keeping with its statutory duties.

3.24 The local authority will maintain the following service provision in line with its statutory duties:

- Adoption Panel functions (children / matches)
- Agency Decision Maker functions for children and matches
- Family finding service – with a view to progressive integration
- Inter-country adoption
- Life story work/later life letters/letterbox contact
- Post Adoption Support Fund & Adoption Allowances
- Office accommodation for co-located staff and interface IT networks

- 3.25 There is flexibility within the proposed model to enable it to evolve over time, adapting to the needs of the local authority however the expected advantages are as follows:
- Improved outcomes for children and cost benefit of earlier placements
 - Cost efficiency from shared services
 - Sustainability from scale and mixed economy protecting small delivery units from market volatility
 - Informed delivery based on diagnostics and wider findings
 - Innovative matching and adoption support practice to meet the needs of adopters and harder to place children who by characteristic of age, length of time in care, sibling group, BME community or disability or recognised complexity of need, require additional targeted focus to make suitable placement delivery happen
 - Potential to create additional new resources to benefit children through their not for profit status and fundraising potential.
 - Robust quality and standards accountability integral to remit with Trustee Board oversight and Ofsted registration.
- 3.26 Officers therefore make the recommendation that a three year grant agreement be entered into as an innovation project that provides the flexibility to adapt the agreement should demand fall. This model provides greater financial stability for the Council.
- 3.27 Our average time between a child becoming looked after and placed for adoption for children adopted between 2010-13 was 784 days. Some of the 784 could be explained in terms of 'legacy' cases but this remains an area that we are committed to making no excuses, learning and developing best practice for children.
- 3.28 Our average time between a child becoming looked after and placed for adoption for children adopted between 2011-14 was 710 days compared to an England average of 628 & SN average of 655. Our 2011-14 average is therefore shorter than our 2010-13 average.
- 3.29 Our average time between a court providing authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match for 2010-13 was 323 days. Our average time between a court providing authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match for 2011-14 was 244 days compared to the England average for the period of 217 days (SN average of 227). Our 2011-14 average is therefore again shorter than our 2010-13 average.
- 3.30 While we are pleased with this progress and improved trend we recognise that we still have concerted work to do to bring our average level or below the England average which is our aim.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Thurrock is a small adoption agency and currently does not benefit from being part of an effective adoption consortium.
- 4.2 While Thurrock have been able to achieve progress in reducing the average number of days between children becoming looked after and being placed for adoption, Thurrock lacks the capacity on its own to maximise opportunities to develop further and take significant advantage of new developments within the field of adoption. This direction of travel is in line with the requirements of the Education and Adoption Bill (2015)
- 4.3 A partnership arrangement will allow Thurrock to:
- Benefit from economies of scale within the adoption market in meeting local, regional and national need;
 - Provide the capacity to build on and improve the timeliness of placement for adoption for children where adoption is in their best interest;
 - Provide the capacity for Thurrock to explore early permanency approaches that reduce delay for children and potential changes in placement (e.g. 'fostering to adopt');
 - Expand the provision of adoption support pre and post the making of an adoption order (for newly approved adopters under the partnership arrangements);
 - Provide flexibility in assessments for permanency and changes in the profiles of children needing permanency.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 Consultation will take place with staff and Children's Overview and Scrutiny and the Corporate Parenting Committee to support the development of a robust quality assurance and monitoring process and ensure that the partnership delivery is subject to scrutiny.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 This report has a positive impact on the following Corporate Priorities:
- create a great place for learning and opportunity
 - build pride, responsibility and respect
 - improve health and well-being

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**
Finance Manager

In this partnership there is the opportunity to improve outcomes for children and adopters whilst achieving better economies of scale. By entering into a grant agreement there is the flexibility to alter the annual costs should demand reduce or change significantly thus reducing financial risks to the Council. As well as improved outcomes for the child reducing the waiting time for adoption has the potential to significantly reduce the costs of interim placement arrangements.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Principal Solicitor Children's Safeguarding

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The use of a grant agreement rather than a contract provides the flexibility to review the provision annually and adapt it as the needs change. As this is a new venture for Thurrock this approach best meets the needs of children whilst supporting the development of innovation.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Karen Wheeler**
Head of Strategy & Communications

This proposal supports the provision of support and placement of the most vulnerable children thus reducing the risk of inequality and poorer outcomes. It also improves the early permanence for children who may otherwise be hard to place by increasing the pool of adopters available to meet specific needs.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- Adoption Statutory Guidance 2013:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-statutory-guidance-2013>
- Background information on Coram Services
http://www.baaf.org.uk/webfm_send/3216

9. **Appendices to the report**

- None

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Children's Services