

North Tyneside Council Report to Cabinet Date: 11 February 2013

ITEM 6(i)

Title:
Adoption Action Plan

Portfolio(s): Children, Young People and Learning

Cabinet Member: Councillor David Lilly

Report from Directorate: Children, Young People and Learning

Report Author: Paul Cook, Head of Preventative and Safeguarding (Tel: 643 7381)

All

Wards affected:

PART 1

1.1 Purpose:

To seek Cabinet's authorisation for the actions required to take forward the North Tyneside Adoption Action Plan.

1.2 Recommendation:

It is recommended that Cabinet authorise the Head of Preventative and Safeguarding Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Learning and the Strategic Director for Children, Young People and Learning, to put in place and take forward the North Tyneside Adoption Action Plan attached as Appendix 1.

1.3 Forward plan:

This report is listed in the Forward Plan for the Cabinet meeting on the 11 February 2013.

1.4 Council plan and policy framework

The report and associated action plan have no direct links to the Council's Strategic Plan 2012-15.

The report and associated action plan is in line with the Council's Policy Framework for Children and Young People as outlined in the North Tyneside Children and Young People's Plan Update 2012. In particular:

Theme 1: Supporting Families with Multiple and Complex Needs: making sure that children get the best start in life.

1.5 Information:

An Adoption Order is granted by a Family Court. It removes all parental rights and responsibilities from the birth parent. It provides the adoptive applicant with all rights and responsibilities for the adopted child. The child's name can be changed as a result of the Adoption Order being granted and he or she can take up the name of the adopted family; in addition the child becomes by law the child of the adoptive family, with all associated legal rights.

In North Tyneside the figures for children adopted over the past 3 years is:

-	2009/10	18 children
-	2010/11	14 children
-	2011/12	20 children
-	2012/ to date	24 children.

The introduction of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO is an order that provides the applicant with most but not all 'rights and responsibilities' of parenthood) has encouraged relatives and foster carers to provide permanency for those children placed with them. In North Tyneside, over the past 3 years, the number of SGO's successfully granted is:

•	2009/10	6 children
•	2010/11	19 children
•	2011/12	12 children
•	2012 to date	11 children.

'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' was published by Government in March 2012. This plan made explicit the Government's commitment to improving the adoption system by reducing delay and placing children faster, with stable and loving families. The action plan is one aspect of a number of initiatives to quicken the adoption system. Also introduced is the adoption scorecard, a 'league table' of adoption performance. In addition councils have been required to meet with local judiciary to examine and where necessary overcome, delays in the legal processing of cases. There is too the promise from Government of consultation in 2013 to examine the need, or otherwise, to change adoption legislation to make it easier and quicker to adopt a child.

An announcement in January 2013 has indicated that Government will divert from the Early Intervention Grant funding to councils to improve adoption performance. Overall £150 million nationally will go towards this initiative and provide a one-off reform grant to councils. £50 million of the funding nationally will be used to incentivise councils to find more adopters; particularly those willing to take more difficult to place children. The remaining £100 million is in place to support adoption reform and included in this is a message to councils that they must do more to deal with a backlog of children waiting for permanency through adoption.

The Adoption Scorecard and the Tackling Delay Report place an emphasis upon 8 performance areas:

A1. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted.

A2. The average time taken between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family.

A3. Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.

A4. The percentage of children who leave care through adoption.

A5. The percentage of children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption

A6. The percentage of Black and Minority Ethnic children who leave care through adoption.

A7. The percentage of children aged 5 years or over who leave care through adoption.

A8. The average length (*of time*) of care proceedings locally.

Current performance by North Tyneside against the indicators above is generally good; thresholds for A1 and A2 have been met and performance is above the national average for A4 and A7. Performance against A5 and A6 is suppressed for North Tyneside, and a high number of other local authorities, due to low numbers. Improvements have been seen in A3. This remains a development area along with A8, which will require additional work with local courts to identify and overcome causes of delay.

In 2011 the North Tyneside Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted and judged to be 'good': a strong outcome and one which acknowledged that the service was effectively led with a well organised Adoption Panel and associated administration systems.

Since the inspection the service has been merged with the North Tyneside Fostering Service (rated "outstanding" by Ofsted) and there is now a single manager over the two teams. This ensures greater co-ordination of services for infants and young children requiring permanency planning.

The Adoption Service has recently been the subject of a Peer Challenge by a neighbouring council's adoption team (South Tyneside: rated "Outstanding") and benefitted from the scrutiny and challenge offered.

The Adoption Service is performing well and the publication of the latest adoption scorecard notes that North Tyneside has met both of the thresholds set for 2009-12 performance and is in a strong position to move forward and meet future targets.

To ensure that the Adoption Service in North Tyneside continues its strong performance and improves against key performance indicators, the team has established a local action plan (Appendix 1). Key priorities for the Adoption Service in 2013/14 to improve performance are:

- The quick and effective matching of children with prospective adopters through full use of local, regional and national resources. The fast-tracking of previous adopters and foster carers towards adoption, use of the National Adoption Register and greater use of voluntary agency appraised carers will secure this improvement.
- Closer and more joined up activity between the Adoption Service, care planning teams and local family courts will be a priority. This will remove system and administrative blockages to secure quicker, improved and effective adoption

related processes.

- A full and effective response to any prospective new adoption legislation and guidance as such is published. The service expects developments in the fast-tracking of adoptive applicants, changes to “Adoption National Minimum Standards” (Adoption Guidance) and the introduction of a “National Gateway” for adopters, a central advice and guidance point. The NT service commits to introducing all these changes quickly to the benefit of potential adopters and children waiting for adoption.

1.6 Decision options:

- 1) To agree the actions proposed to implement the North Tyneside Adoption Action Plan.
- 2) To decline to accept the proposal and require officers to submit detail of an alternative plan.

1.7 Reasons for recommended option:

Cabinet is recommended to agree the proposed Action Plan. The effectiveness of the North Tyneside Adoption Team to deliver high quality services to those approved as suitable adopters, and children requiring permanency through adoption, will be enhanced by implementation of the plan.

1.8 Appendices:

North Tyneside Adoption Action Plan – Appendix 1
Adoption Scorecard – Appendix 2

1.9 Contact officers:

Paul Cook, Head of Preventative and Safeguarding: 643 7381
Anthony Gollings, Financial Business Manager, CYPL: 643 8071

1.10 Background information:

The following background papers/information have been used in the compilation of this report and are available at the office of the author:

- North Tyneside Council Adoption Service Inspection Report 2011
http://october.northtyneside.gov.uk:7778/pls/portal/NTC_PSCM.PSCM_Web.download?p_ID=541478
- North Tyneside Council Adoption Scorecard 2011
http://october.northtyneside.gov.uk:7778/pls/portal/NTC_PSCM.PSCM_Web.download?p_ID=541479
- North Tyneside Council Adoption Scorecard 2012
http://october.northtyneside.gov.uk:7778/pls/portal/NTC_PSCM.PSCM_Web.download?p_ID=541480

PART 2 – COMPLIANCE WITH PRINCIPLES OF DECISION MAKING

2.1 Finance and other resources

The North Tyneside Adoption Service is appropriately funded by the Council and no further additional resources are required to implement the Adoption Action Plan. Areas for improvement and development as identified with the Action Plan can be delivered within existing budgets.

2.2 Legal

The Council is registered with Ofsted as an Adoption Agency approved to recruit and approve potential adopters and place, through matching, children in need of adoption with adopters. The Council is also an approved agency to provide post adoption support to children and those who adopt. The Action Plan supports the Council's legal duty in these matters.

Working closely with Children's Services, Legal Services are taking a pro-active role in progressing within the Authority the Government's stated priorities in relation to its adoption agenda.

2.3 Consultation/community engagement

The Adoption Service routinely consults with adopters and those considering adoption. Looked After Children are also consulted with through the Children in Care Council. The views gathered support the action of the Council and partners to provide safe, permanent loving homes for children in need of long term planning away from their birth families.

2.4 Human rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 21 in particular, supports adoption as in the best interests of those children who cannot safely remain in the care of parents or who are orphaned.

2.5 Equalities and diversity

Equality and Diversity issues underpin the recruitment, approval and support delivered to potential adopters. This is equally the case in relation to services provided to children who are looked after and requiring adoptive placements. Sensitivity to issues of race, gender, colour, disability, heritage, sexuality etc. are all carefully considered within the adoption of children and approval of adopters.

2.6 Risk management

There are no specific risks directly arising from this report.

2.7 Crime and disorder

There are no specific issues of crime and disorder arising from this report.

2.8 Environment and sustainability

There are no specific issues of environment and sustainability arising from this report.

PART 3 - SIGN OFF

- Strategic Director(s) X
- Mayor/Cabinet Member(s) X
- Chief Executive X
- Chief Finance Officer X
- Monitoring Officer X
- Strategic Manager
Policy and Partnerships X

Report authors: Paul Cook
Head of Preventative and Safeguarding