

Item No.	Classification: Open	Date: 15 October 2014	Meeting Name: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Sub- Committee
Report title:		Adoption in Southwark	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
Cabinet Member:		Cabinet Member for Children and Schools	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Scrutiny Committee considers the briefing provided below.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. In March 2012 and January 2013 the Government published '*An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay*', and '*Further Action on Adoption: finding more loving homes*' which set out a raft of reforms to the adoption system, including the adoption performance 'Scorecard'. Since this time Southwark has run a successful adopter recruitment campaign which has resulted in the number of approved adopters increasing from 21 to 29. The increase in adopters has enabled us to adopt 33 children in 2013/14, which is a significant improvement on 2012/13 when only 21 were adopted. While the timeliness of adoption has also improved, more work is being undertaken to meet the national performance thresholds which are being raised annually.

PERFORMANCE

3. The government measures and compares local authorities by way of the annual adoption Scorecard. It uses 3-year average figures to more accurately depict performance through time. Within the Scorecard there are 10 indicators including four timeliness measures which show how fast children are moving through the system. 2010-13 is the most recently published Scorecard and this report uses it to make comparisons. The 2011-14 Scorecard will be released by the DfE in early in 2015.

The children

Timeliness indicators

A1 - The average time taken between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family is 676 days. Performance on this indicator has been improving over the past five years and the latest 3-year average result shows an improvement of 60 days. This is a positive trend although still short of the Government's 547 day target and 30 days short of the national average. It is above the performance of statistical neighbours.

Work to improve performance in this measure includes concerted action to reduce the length of care proceedings; more robust tracking of children on their adoption

journey; expanding the pool of available adopters as well as more supported and creative family finding approaches.

A1) cannot be looked at in isolation because it does not accurately account for when children are adopted by their foster carers. When this happens, it has an adverse impact on the indicator because of the length of time children will have been with their foster carers before being adopted. Where foster care adoption has taken place the children have usually been living with their foster carers for considerable periods of time before being formally counted as *placed for adoption*. The DfE recognised this A1 limitation and therefore introduced the A10 measure as a counter balance.

A10 - The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster care adoption. Timeliness on this indicator is better than A1 at 504 days. This is considered the true figure measuring time from entry to care to moving in with an adoptive family and is below the A10 England average which was 545 and also the statistical neighbours of 541.

A2 - The average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family has shown improvement. Matching in 2013/14 took 46 fewer days compared to the previous year. This is about a month short of meeting the DfE target of 152 days which has reduced from 182 days the previous year. There is an expectation that local authorities will be able to do more and do it faster.

8 out of the 33 children took longer than 200 days to be matched with an adopter. All were White British (5 boys and 2 girls) except one who was White and Black African. Delay in these circumstances usually occurs when the placement order is contested by the birth parent(s). All individual children are closely monitored and tracked to ensure that any barriers to adoption are identified and dealt with quickly.

A8 - Average length of care proceedings

In April 2014 the updated Public Law Outline (PLO) came into effect and set a statutory 26-week time-limit for completion of care and supervision proceedings. Southwark's 2010-13 3-year average was 49 weeks which is close to the national average. In 2013/14 care proceedings reduced to 45 weeks, however, this is still some way off the statutory time limit. The majority of local authorities are having difficulty meeting the 26 week limit and this is especially true in London where the total number of cases is higher. Southwark is working with three other authorities (Lambeth, Lewisham and Greenwich), and the Principal Registry to improve practice in care proceedings and complete proceedings within the required time frame. The Directors of Social Care in all 4 boroughs meet regularly with the judiciary and CAFCASS to address any issues which may be causing unnecessary delay.

Other indicators

A3 - The percentage of children who wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family has shown an improvement of 4 percentage points from 57% to 61% 2013/14. Southwark is above the national and statistical neighbour averages on this indicator, and shows we are becoming more effective at moving all children through the adoption process from placement order to adoption.

A4 - Adoptions from care (number adopted and percentage leaving care who are adopted) This measures how many children leave care through adoption as a proportion of the total number of children leaving care. So while the number of children being adopted has risen, Southwark also has a high number of children who leave care for other reasons. For example, Southwark has a relatively high rate of 16 and 17 year olds entering care because of homelessness.

However, the trend shows an improvement for the 3-year average of 3 percentage points and brings Southwark closer to the 2010-13 national average of 13%. The total number of adoptions from care in 2013/14 is 33 and represents 12% of all those in care who left care in the same year. The total number of children adopted is a 65% increase on the previous year. Performance is projected to continue to improve.

A5 - Number and percentage of children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption (A5) This is an indication of when the care plan has changed away from adoption and has been increasing for the past three years. Southwark's 2010-13 3-year average was 14% which is above the national average result of 9%. 2013/14 annual performance shows a 15% reversal rate and confirms that performance is in decline.

Southwark has always been ambitious for adoption for children. Looking at 2013/14 performance it can be seen that all 11 children where decisions were reversed relate to changes to care plans made prior to or at final court hearings when a relative emerged late in care proceedings and the final care plan had either been changed by the social work team, or by the court. This is partly explained by courts being less inclined to make Placement Orders when other family arrangements will do following a landmark court ruling in September 2014 (re. BS). In other cases adopters cannot be found for older children or those with complex needs. These children are often in stable placements and the decision is taken to maintain this arrangement in the long-term.

A6 - Number and percentage of BME children leaving care - 43 children (7%). This is in line with the national and statistical neighbour averages. This number and percentage has shown gradual improvement which is projected to continue in 2014-15. At the end of September 2014 11 out of 22 (50%) children adopted were from BME backgrounds. There has generally been a concern about delays for children from BME backgrounds and it is good to see significant progress in this area. Historically, adoption services have waited too long for an appropriate match in terms of ethnic background. While an ethnic match is important, this should not delay placement with a loving prospective adoptive family if one is available which does not match the child's ethnicity.

A7 - Number and percentage of children aged over 5 who are adopted – While Southwark's 3-year average figure has improved from 1% to 2% it is still below national and statistical neighbour averages. However, current performance is encouraging and shows that at the end of September 2014, 4 out of 22 children adopted were age 5 or over (18%).

This improvement has been achieved through promoting adoption by foster carers as well as developing more flexible support packages, which encourages prospective adopters to commit to older children. Foster carer adoption is one of the main ways of increasing the number of older children adopted from care, and more foster carers are being encouraged and supported to take this route.

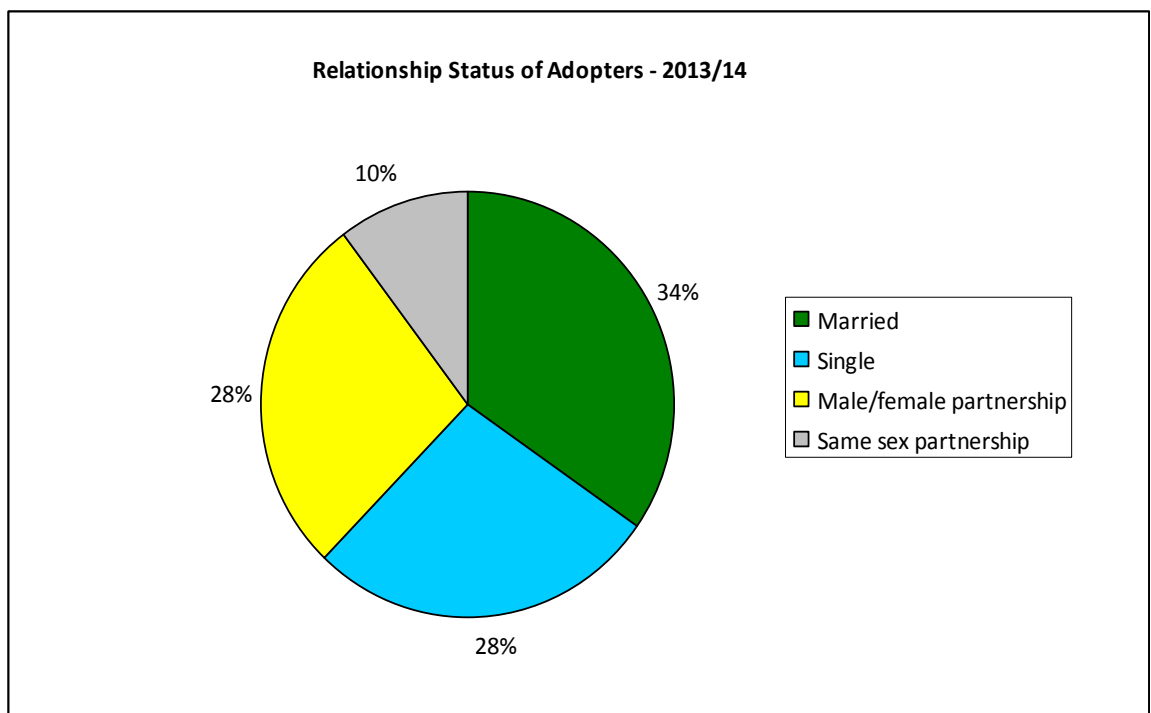
Additionally, recruitment activity in early 2015 will also focus on finding families for sibling groups because older children are often a part of a group.

A9 - Number of children awaiting adoption - According to the 2010-13 Scorecard, Southwark, along with seven other London boroughs, stands in the second highest banding of numbers of children awaiting adoption. This is a result of the high rate of care proceedings in Southwark over the past two years and the proactive pre-birth work undertaken by the assessment and intervention service. Consequently, we would expect higher numbers of children waiting because of the higher rates of admission of younger children entering care.

During 2013/14 the number of children awaiting adoption in Southwark ranged from 39 to 45. Parallel planning, where more than one permanency option considered, is now commonly practiced and is minimising delay. Moreover, the Adoption Taskforce chaired by the Director of Children's Social Care also monitors these children and has been successful in finding solutions for children who are 'stuck' and also in upholding a sense of urgency to achieving permanency for children. Currently, the number waiting for adoption stands at 38. Eight of these are awaiting final court hearings for Placement Orders. Of the remaining 30 only six are not linked with any family as a potential carer.

The adopters

In 2013/14 Southwark approved 29 adoptive families. This is a significant 38% increase in the availability of adopters when compared to the previous year. Of those approved the vast majority (88%) were heterosexual and married and four (14%) were foster carers.



Factors for the rise in adopters include, the Adoption Reform Grant, which enabled increased activity, including successful Christmas and 'Finding 40

Families' campaigns and closer working relationships with Voluntary Adoption Agencies.

In Southwark, as in most London boroughs, there are more people from White ethnic backgrounds applying to adopt than from Black backgrounds. For instance, in 2013/14 there were more than double the numbers of Black Caribbean and Black African children waiting for adoption than adopters of the same ethnic backgrounds. As a result, Black children often wait longer to be matched with a family.

The service recognises this issue and has prioritised the recruitment of more adopters for BME children. The first half of 2013/14 shows that the numbers of BME adopters in the initial stage of the assessment process has increased significantly and it is expected that these adopters will be approved and available for BME children later this year and early next year. Targeted initiatives currently taking place include work with Home for Good, a voluntary sector organisation, to engage churches and promote adoption; using Southwark's Community Engagement Team to develop links in the community; and running a leaflet and poster campaign during Black History Month all aimed at raising the number of potential adopters for BME children.

Timeliness – application to approval

In July 2013 the Government introduced a new two-stage adopter assessment process and aims to approve adopters in six months. Stage One is two months long and involves learning about the needs of looked after children and Stage Two which takes four months involves more intensive assessment and initial matching. The stages can take longer than the prescribed six month timescale if there is good reason from the adopter, for example a bereavement or house move. Below is a breakdown of adopters' timeliness from application (registration of interest) to approval decision.

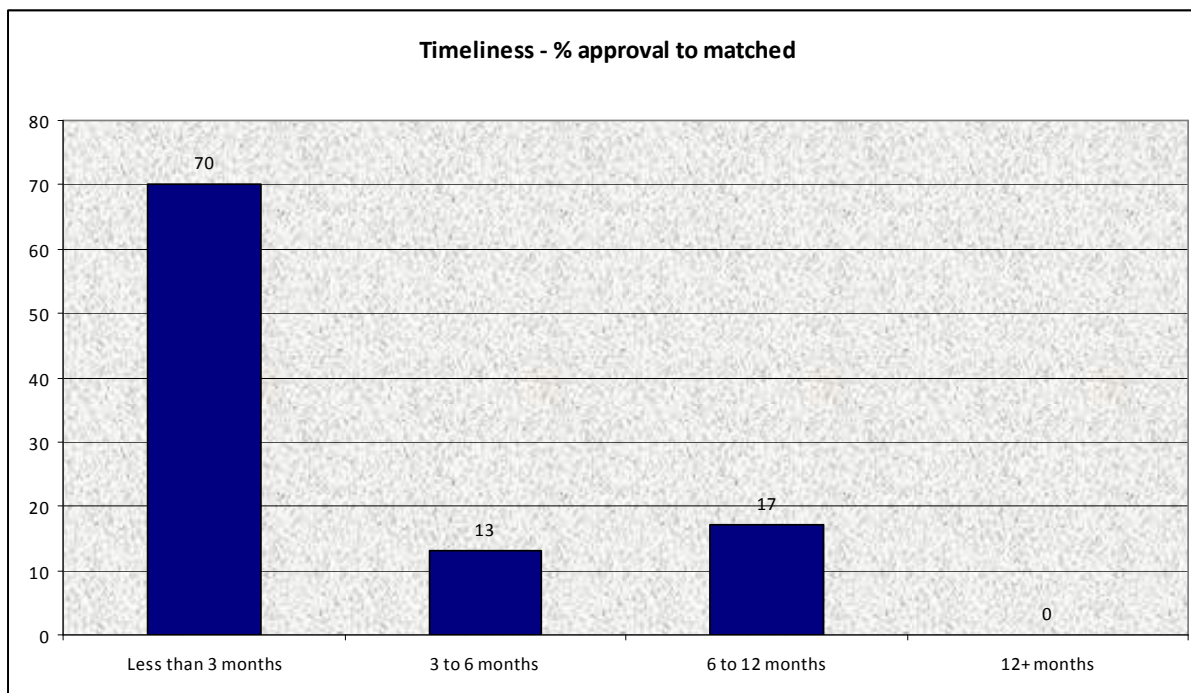
23 adoptive families were approved under the old guidance. 14 of these (61%) were completed in the statutory timeframe of 8 months.

6 families were approved under the new two stage assessment process. Of these 3 (50%) completed the Stage 2 assessment within 6 months.

Considerable work is currently being undertaken to strengthen the assessment system to meet the statutory timescales. There have been a number of challenges integrating the new two stage process during a period of change in the adoption service. The team now has more capacity and more effective tracking systems in place to significantly improve performance in this area.

Timeliness – approval to matched

In 2013/14 almost three quarters of adopters waited less than three months or less to be matched with a child, and of these, one quarter were matched within 1 month. No adopter waited more than 12 months to be matched to a child.



Policy implications

1. The adoption service has a key role to play in supporting the department's permanency policy which is to ensure that children in care have a secure permanent alternative family placement when needed.

Resource implications

2. There are no resource implications arising from this report.

AUDIT TRAIL

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Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
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Cabinet Member		
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