

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny

Draft report: Review of Southwark's Adoption Service

1 Summary

How is Southwark's adoption service doing, from the perspective of a child in our care, of an adopter, and of a taxpayer?

Changes in national adoption policy present significant opportunities for Southwark's adoption service to improve outcomes for children in our care, to help more people adopt successfully, and to streamline service delivery.

Specifically, recent moves to a) speed up the adoption process, and b) remove race-related restrictions on prospective adopters can, if implemented thoughtfully, improve outcomes for our children and help us create a more efficient service.

Data shows that the Southwark adoption service is already making significant progress but not enough and not quickly enough. This review sets out some further steps that will improve outcomes for all our stakeholders and position Southwark as a model for others to follow.

2 Introduction

2.1 Adoption has undergone a significant transformation following the release of the Narey Report in 2012. The implications for local authorities, their partners and children in care can be found in the government-published documents 'An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay', and 'Further Action on Adoption: finding more loving homes'.

2.2 The aim of the reforms is a faster and less complex adoption process where age, race or secondary issues like being a smoker would cease to be a barrier for prospective adoptive parents.

2.3 The scrutiny committee's concern is what this has meant for children in our care. Close examination of the 'adoption scorecard' containing the information that must be sent to central government suggests that the local authority is improvement bound. The role of the scrutiny committee is to get underneath the quantitative data of the scorecard and find out how we were doing from an adoptive family's perspective and the perspective of a child in care. We also obtained the views of an outside expert.

The following report is based on the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny's review into the adoption process in Southwark in 2014/15.

3 Children in our care

3.1 Compared to national rates Southwark has a high rate of referrals; as at October 2014 these stood at 3200. There are 3000 children in need and 330 children with a child protection plan.

3.2 There are 537 children in care and the breakdown of placement types is

- 78% of children in care are placed with foster parents
- 9% are living in residential settings
- 5% are living independently
- 5% are placed for adoption

3.3 Educational outcomes

- 31% have a SEN (national average is 3%)
- 92.8% average attendance (96.8% primary)
- 60% are in schools outside of Southwark
- 29.8 % achieved 5 good GCSE's (Southwark average is 65.2%)

Evidence gathering

4 Scrutiny session with service representatives

In October 2014 a scrutiny session took place with Rory Patterson, Director of Children's Social Care and Alasdair Smith, Head of Adoption Service. A verbatim account of it is available. The key points are

- 4.1 Following the introduction of the adoption performance 'Scorecard' the council ran a successful adopter recruitment campaign which resulted in the number of approved adopters increasing from 21 to 29. This increase, of more than one third, is encouraging, but the base number of adopters in one of Britain's largest Boroughs is still very low.
- 4.2 The average time taken between a child entering care and moving in with her/his adoptive parent is 676 days. Performance has been improving over last five years and the latest results show improvement of 60 days. The trend is still more than 100 days short of the government's 547day target and 30 days short of the national average. (Which child? One of the 5% of children in care that are adopted? Or one of the 537 children in care? Or something else? Need to check figures and sense with Director of Social Care report)
- 4.3 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 than previous years. How long does it take?

- 4.4 8 out of the 33 children took longer than 200 days to be matched with an adopter. Tell us about the worst case, how long did it take. All were White British (5 boys and 2 girls) except one who was White and Black African.
- 4.4 **The volume and proportion Number and percentage of children where the permanence decision has changed away from adoption** 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
- 4.5 **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. At the end of September 2014, 4 out of 22 children adopted were age 5 or over (18%). Need to check figures and sense from Director of Social Care report**
- 4.6 At the end of September 2014 11 out of 22 (50%) children adopted were from BME backgrounds.
- 4.7 There is an under representation of different ethnic groups amongst adopters with a shortage of prospective adoptive parents from black, minority ethnic backgrounds.
- 4.8 At the time of the review, the scrutiny committee chair was contacted by a constituent who explained that a family she knew was thinking of complaining about the matching process and felt that they hadn't been matched because they were white. The family didn't complain; instead they raised it with the South London Adoption Panel who subsequently wrote to the Director of Children and Adult Services asking for permission to 'review' the case.
- 4.8 Given the diversity of the borough, Southwark could be a shining example of transracial adoption. The service is targeting their marketing materials to attract more adopters from varied backgrounds.
- 4.9 The average time between a child coming into care and moving in with its adoptive family needs to be lower. An improvement of 60 days will be crucial to a baby or toddler. Legislative changes mean that families can now foster to adopt and the Council is looking into enabling this.

5 Focus group with adoptive parents

A focus group with eight adoptive parents and representatives of the scrutiny subcommittee was held on December 2014. The reports from the participants where

mainly positive, but here we focus on what can be improved. A detailed note of the meeting is attached. The key findings are as follows

- 5.1 Concern about “assessment cheating”. New adopters are only coming into the system to complete assessment and training once they have ‘registered’ as adopters in the induction process.
- 5.2 Two adopters (one with Southwark) were concerned that they had at least three social workers (one of which was a social work manager). Both felt they would have benefited from more continuity.
- 5.3 One adopter had been in the process since April and has not been matched
- 5.4 Matching issues on the lines of race:one applicant said that she had been turned away from Southwark four years ago because she was the “wrong colour”, and that even now she has been ruled out of adopting a mixed race child , in a neighbouring borough, because she and her children are all white.
- 5.5 Adopters from Southwark say that there are not many mixed families in the borough and that families tended to be matched in keeping with the family’s ethnicity.
- 5.6 One adopter proposed networks to support ‘black, white and mixed adoptions’.
- 5.7 The Life Story Books were criticised for taking too long to compile. One adopter reported that her child’s book took over a year to put together and when it arrived it had “inappropriate language”. It also contained details of the birth mother’s last name, an obvious safeguarding issue.
- 5.8 Post adoption support was seen by those who have successfully adopted as very good.
- 5.9 Training on adoption was seen as very good when delivered by people who had experience of adoption. Examples of training delivered by a woman that had her child adopted out were given.
- 5.10 One family thought that the training given by social workers was “valuable stuff” but the delivery was dry and hard to follow.
- 5.11 One adopter explained how her experience of her child’s schooling exposed a need for teacher training on the needs of adopted children. She said that all schools should have a better understanding of the issues that can confront children who have been adopted. Other adopters agreed with this.
- 5.12 It was felt that the scenarios used throughout the assessment and training process were designed to put people off adopting. There was a recognition that people needed to be prepared for dealing with difficulties but one participant felt there needed to “be more balance”, and a number of people

recommended more stories from adopters; which are frank on the challenges and difficulties

- 5.13 Social media has changed the way in which 'contact' is perceived. One adoptive parent said 'Facebook has changed everything'. Adoptive children will find it easier to track their birth parents through social media.
- 5.14 All the adopters praised support immediately after adoption, with alternate weekly visits from the child's and parents' social worker. However the three year mark can be when support drops off. Dealing with school is hard, and parents commented they found it hard to access support packages. More training of teachers on the needs of adoptive children and the type of support available was recommended.

6 Scrutiny session with representative from PAC – UK

The subcommittee had a presentation from PAC UK on meeting the educational needs of Permanently Placed children. Permanently Placed children include children who are adopted, have Special Guardianships, Residence Orders, are fostered, Looked After or otherwise permanently placed.

A scrutiny session was held with PAC UK in January 2015. Details of the session are attached the key points were as follows:

- 6.1 Education outcomes for Permanently Placed children are more similar to Looked After Children than the general population. This is because of the attachment issues caused by grief, loss and the often traumatic experiences the permanently placed children have experienced in their early lives; 70% of those adopted in 2009-10 entered care due to abuse or neglect.
- 6.2 According to Pac UK, even when adopted at a very young age children with histories of trauma present with poorer levels of academic attainment.
- 6.3 Permanently Placed children do attract significant funding through Pupil Premium, however families need to identify the child to the school as this is not automatic. Yet attachment is not addressed in teacher training, and few staff has thought about the impact of trauma and loss.
- 6.4 Looked After Children have robust structures to monitor, champion and meet their needs these same Designated Teachers and Virtual Schools have no remit with permanently placed children, even though they have vital understanding about attachment and trauma.
- 6.5 PAC –UK recommended a whole school approach by providing training for all school staff on contemporary adoption, attachment and the impact of trauma and loss. The training offers a framework within which children's difficulties can be understood, and provides evidence-informed implementable strategies.

- 6.6 They also provide child-focused and school-focused systemic consultations for groups of school staff, in which schools can develop their good practice. This can include developing supervision for school staff to manage the emotional impact of working with children with high levels of emotional needs.
- 6.6 PAC-UK advised that this approach can be beneficial for many of the children at school, as around 40% of children are insecurely attached to their parents or their primary care givers . A better understanding of the how to meet emotional and learning the needs of children who have been traumatized, experience loss of grief, or have attachment needs can the improve behavior and academic progress and emotional wellbeing of the whole school.
- 6.6 Both the adoption focus group (ref) and the PAC-UK spoke about the impact that difficulties at school can place upon children and families. Compared to the general population Looked After children are eight times more likely to be permanently excluded from school and are more likely to be absent from school. The disruption and stress this causes families can be a contributory factor in placements breaking down.
- 6.7 PAC UK recommended identifying an Adoption Advocate within each school, in a role analogous to that of Designated Teacher. PAC-UK facilitates an Adoption Advocate Network, in which groups of committed local schools can share good practice and develop resources.
- 6.7 The scrutiny School Survey, while only a relatively small sample, did identify Looked After Children as a priority group, however no school identified Permanently Placed children as a key group. Schools did , however, frequently identify children with emotional difficulties as a key group and a significant number had integrating emotional wellbeing, behaviour support, and therapeutic services into their school model.

7 Conclusion

The scrutiny committee valued the opportunity to discuss the changes in the adoption service and the subsequent performance information on the adoption scorecard with senior children's services managers and adoptive families.

The adoption service has already implemented changes in the way it works as a result of this review.

Notwithstanding the ethnic diversity of Southwark, the national trend of black children being less likely to be adopted is prevalent here too.

In the UK black children are three times less likely to be adopted than white children. Southwark has responded by targeting more black families to come forward to adopt.

What may be necessary is a closer look at how children's services have adapted to culture change required to deliver the results required by the new processes of adoption.

But there is more to do: a dialogue is needed at every level of children's services on how we can let prospective adoptive families know that that ethnic considerations are now unimportant. What matters is that Southwark is more concerned in finding loving stable homes as quickly as possible for children that come into our care.

The discussion with PAC UK was also useful and supports the views of the adoptive families that met with the scrutiny committee. The committee will use the findings to inform the review on education and achievement.

It would also be useful to see what the aspirations for these children are. Scrutiny may wish to test some of this thinking

8 Recommendations

The review has highlighted many things that make Southwark adoption a positive and successful service. However it has also provided evidence to enable the council to further improve its service.

The goal should be to make Southwark a shining example by delivering a fast, safe non- racialised adoption service, the best in the country

- One that actively encourages people to adopt by balancing the challenges of adoption with the joys of adoption
- One that completes all assessments in six months and follows this up by actively matching
- One that is not blind to national and ethnic differences but is not transfixed by them either
- One that supports children and families all the way through the process and throughout the adopted child's education.
- One that pioneers new forms of best practice for contact in the digital age