

Adoption Activity Report 2015 – 2016

1. Background

- 1.1 This report is to inform members of the Torbay Council Children's Services of the Torbay Adoption Agency activities for the period 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016. There is a requirement that the Adoption Agency Activity is reported to the Executive annually.
- 1.2 Adoption has continued to be an area of focus in England within the Government's Children's social care reform programme. In May 2015, the Children and Families Minister, Edward Timpson announced legislation would include "new powers that will require councils combine their adoption functions if they fail to join together services under their own steam within the next 2 years". It described this as the "greatest step change in the way children are matched for adoption in a generation".
- 1.3 In June 2015, the Department for Education published the paper Regionalising Adoption asking all adoption agencies in England to consider how to work much more closely together followed by the Education and Adoption Act enacted in March 2016. In March 2016, the Department for Education published the paper Adoption – A Vision for Change outlined progress to date in Adoption Regionalisation plans as well as considering sustainable success and the need for innovative and excellence being required in practice.
- 1.4 Torbay Adoption Agency has been part of Adopt South West a co-operative regional partnership since April 2015, along with Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council, Barnados, Families for Children and more recently Somerset County Council. Adopt South West was successful in a joint application for funding under the government initiative to form a Regional Adoption Agency. In the initial bid we were one of 18 groupings of local authorities and voluntary sector adoption agencies.
- 1.5 Over the last year our Regional Adoption Agency has undertaken benchmarking and options appraisals in order to agree the proposed delivery model. The model agreed is a single Local Authority hosting on behalf of the other Local Authorities. Commissioning intentions from each agency have been submitted, with further scoping exercises as the next stage in relation to finance and structure.
- 1.6 The development of the project is overseen by the Regional Adoption Agency steering group made up of Service Managers and Heads of Service from the agencies involved. A Governance group has been established with Directors and Assistant Directors maintaining oversight and sign off on the continued development of the project. The key outcomes expected from regionalisation are:
 - Innovative Adoption practice across the spectrum
 - Improved life chances for children

- Improved adoption support services
- Improved Efficiency

2. **Torbay Adoption Team**

- 2.1 The Adoption Team has continued to have low staff turn-over and has a team of knowledgeable and skilled Social Workers and Community Care workers. The current Team Manager and Assistant Team Managers have both been successful in securing the posts permanently following a period of secondment.
- 2.2 The team are actively involved in Practice Improvement meetings as part of the Regionalisation project with the Team Manager leading for Torbay within the Operations group. The core business of the Adoption Team encourages:
- marketing and recruitment of adopters
 - assessment of adopters, matching and placement support
 - step parent adoption assessment and court work
 - adoption support pre and post adoption order
 - family finding, matching and placement of children (including the child looked after social work role)

3. **Marketing/Recruitment/Assessment/Approval of Adopters:**

- 3.1 Recruitment of adopters has continued throughout the year with focused recruitment of adopters being undertaken during National Adoption Week. Marketing and recruitment has been undertaken in the main through Adopt South West with a combined TV advert and campaign launched for National Adoption week .

Adopt South West has a comprehensive website with a link to Torbay's own revised and improved adopter focused web pages.

Period	Initial Enquiries	Applications received	Adopters Approved
1st April 2014 – 31st March 2015	81	15	13
1st April 2015 – March 2016	58	6	6

- 3.2 It is acknowledged that the conversion number from enquiries to applications and approval in this period has been low, reducing year upon year. Geographically the fact that Torbay is a small unitary authority between Devon, Plymouth and the voluntary agency Families for Children does impact adversely upon the number of adopters coming through.
- 3.3 Across England there has been reduction in the number of expressions of interest in becoming adopters. The decrease from the first half of 2015-16, if it manifests, would equate to a fall of 37% when compared to 2014-15. In relation to reduction of approvals of adopters, if it manifests, would represent 26%. (Data from the Adoption Leadership Board headline and measures business intelligence quarter 2 2015 to 2016 update - published March 2016).
- 3.4 The Regionalisation model would benefit as currently the activity for recruitment, assessment and approval is not viable.

4. Approval and Matching of Adoptive Families

- 4.1 As of 31st March 2016 there were 7 adoptive families who were approved. Of these:
- 2 families were waiting to be matched with children
 - 3 families had children placed with them but had not had a final Adoption Order made.
 - 2 families have had Adoption Orders granted
- 4.2 Between April 1st 2015 and 31st March 2016 the 5 Torbay adoptive families who were matched to a child/ren waited varying periods of time between approval and adopters and the date matched. Of the adopters matched to children:
- 4 waited less than three months
 - 0 waited between three and six months
 - 1 waited between 9 and 12 months
 - 0 waited between 12 and 18 months
 - 0 waited 18 months or more
- 4.3 These figures indicate an improvement in timeliness in Torbay. The data from the Adoption Leadership Board as at March 2016 gives an improvement across England from the low of 25% in quarter 4 2013-14 to 33% in quarter 2 2015-16.

5. Step Parent Adoptions:

- 5.1 Torbay Adoption Team continue the function of accepting referrals from families where a 'step-parent' wishes to adopt their partners child/ren.
- 5.2 The function of providing this service will need to be reviewed in line with the Regionalisation model, as well as, in light of the trajectory being seen which is an increase in numbers of these adoption referrals and its impact upon capacity.

6. Adoption Plans - Children

- 6.1 The aim of Torbay Children's Services is to consider the appropriateness of an adoption plan for all Children Looked After where assessment has concluded they are unable to remain in or return to live with their birth families.

Percentages of children adopted from care

Date	Total number of children looked after	Percentage of all children who left care who were adopted	Statistical Neighbour Average	National Average
31/3/12	195	5%	17%	13%
31/3/13	221	11%	19%	14%
31/3/14	249	17%	20%	17%
31/3/15	305	15%	23%	17%
31/3/16	279	23%	19%	15%

- 6.2 It can be seen from the data above that there has been an increase in children leaving care through permanence to adoption year on year within Torbay. There have been 28 children who have been adopted in this 12 month period, this being the highest number to date for Torbay Children's services.

This is in contrast to the Department for Education data which reports a national decrease of 12% from the previous year in Children Looked After who have been adopted. The reduction was anticipated as from 2015 there has been a decrease of Placement Orders and therefore fewer children being placed for Adoption.

- 6.3 It is anticipated that in the next year new ADM decisions and Placement Orders will plateau. It is unlikely that we will see the same high numbers of children adopted from Care next year as we have this year.

Timeliness of Children's Adoption Plans

	Torbay 2011-14	Torbay 2012-15	Torbay 2013-16	Statistical Neighbours 2012-15	National 2012-15
Thresholds (A1) Scorecard	547	487	426		
Time moving in with Adoptive family (3 yr Av)*	647	623	516	548	593
Thresholds Scorecard (A2)	152	121	121		
Time between order and match (3 yr Av)*	245	241	211	213	223
% waiting less than 16 months *	42%	50%	60%	55%	47%

6.4 The table above details information collated as part of what is termed the Adoption Score Card. There has been an improvement in the timeliness between a child entering care and being placed with adopters, for the period 2013-2016 the three year average shows Torbay as performing better than our statistical neighbours. The time from Placement Order to matching, although still below the national average, has also improved for Torbay children and as detailed the time children are waiting has also reduced.

6.5 Courts need to be satisfied that there is no alternative to adoption for the child before agreeing an Order and birth parents have opportunity to challenge through the courts up to the point that an Adoption Order is granted. These factors have meant that for some children there has been delay before an Order was granted or waiting to be placed. The number of Torbay children who achieved adoption was slightly affected by these issues meaning some adoption Orders were delayed into the next year.

Torbay has successfully increased the number of older children, sibling groups and children with complex needs being adopted; the benefits of this are over shadowed by the length of time it takes to achieve the Adoption Order.

6.6 A change in practice made within the last three years to the adoption social worker role has been a significant factor in improving timeliness of children's adoption plans. Following the Agency Decision Maker confirming the plan for adoption and Adoption Social Worker is allocated to begin profiling the child/ren and early linking can commence to avoid delay. This social worker

is then allocated the child looked after following Placement Order ensuring that the child is known and adoption can be the focus.

- 6.7 There are two children, a sibling group of 1 boy (8years) and 1 girl (7years), currently waiting to have their plans for adoption returned to the court following a disruption of their adoption placement just prior to the Adoption Order being made. The case and disruption meeting minutes were considered by the Adoption panel who have reflected on practice and panel process, advising changes which have been put into place.
- 6.8 31st March 2016 there were 15 children who had Agency Decision Maker approval of adoption care plans, awaiting court approval for Placement Order. There were 28 children subject to a Placement Order of these:
- 5 were awaiting a match to adopters of which 3 were linked and
 - 6 due to the next adoption panel for match recommendation
 - 2 were matched awaiting placement in April 2016 were placed with adopters - adoption order yet to be made
 - 21 were placed with adopters
- 6.9 Within the period of 1st April 2015 - 31st March 2016 23 matches for Torbay children were recommended at panel. Of these 21 were matched with adopters from other agencies and 2 with Torbay adopters. As Torbay is a geographically small area it is usual that families/extended family are resident which can pose risk to local adoptive placements. Whilst Torbay Adoption team strive to recruit adopters outside of the Bay, as well as from within, it is not always appropriate to place our children with our approved adopters. Children are matched to prospective adopters from other Adoption Agencies.

7. Adoption Panel

- 7.1 The Adoption Panel has continued to meet and function within guidance and regulation to a good standard. The panel are comfortable with providing robust scrutiny and challenge to the Adoption Service. Panel membership has remained consistent. There have been no recommendations made by the panel and/ or decisions by the Agency Decision Maker that have resulted in a referral to the Independent Review Mechanism. (The Independent Review Mechanism is an independent body which can review the decision of the Agency Decision Maker if challenged by the individual.)
- 7.2 The data within this report reflects that adoption activity has reduced from the previous year specifically in relation to approval of adopters. Despite this feedback from adopters is positive about their experiences with the Service, particularly liking the 'personal' feel of such a small team.
- 7.3 The Panel chair and panel members have all been involved in annual training and an information sharing regarding Regionalisation of Adoption. It is likely

priority will be given to scoping the advantages of centralising panels. In light of the reduction of panel business for Torbay, again the Regionalisation of panels is likely to be the way forward.

8. Adoption Support

- 8.1 On 1st May 2015 the Department for Education launched the Adoption Support Fund a government funded project aimed at further supporting adopters with accessing therapeutic support for their adopted children. Local Authorities can make applications on behalf of adoptive families to secure Funding, adopters can advise who they would wish to undertake the work.
- 8.2 Torbay have made successful applications on behalf of families they support and will continue to access the fund whilst the government funding is available. The team provide a range of adoption support to families, birth families affected by adoption, families living in Torbay within Torbay who have adopted children and also to adoptive families who we have placed Torbay children with outside of the area. (Up to 3 years post adoption order as identified in the Adoption Support Plan).
- 8.3 The adoption service provides birth relative counseling service and offer a 'drop in' support group. In the period 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016 the service received 29 referrals from the Child's social worker to offer support and counseling. It is noted that engagement is low with both services therefore a review will be held in relation to ongoing viability.
- 8.4 The Adoption Team provide a service for birth families with regard to post adoption contact. This contact can be indirect through the letter box service and may be between birth and adoptive families only or may be with the child or siblings. Some direct contact takes place between adopted children and family members. This is a busy service and is managed on a day to day basis by one of the community care workers.
- 8.5 The Adoption Service has a total of 1435 letter box between birth parents and adoptive parents contacts of which 1041 are Active. The inactive cases are either due to the birth relative or adopters that have not engaged or the child/ren are over 18/21; we have approximately 220 children on the database. Currently we are supervising and facilitating 12 direct contacts with birth relatives and adopters and children.
- 8.6 There were 33 Referrals for an Adoption Assessment of Need. The majority of these referrals relate to children and young people who require direct work and support with life story work. Currently the service provides support to 76 adoptive families living in Torbay.
- 8.7 The adoption support service currently run three adopters social groups a year that are well attended. Additionally there are three adopted young person's groups which have a varied age group attending. An adopter led support group has been set up with the first one being facilitated by Torbay Adoption Support Team, with the plan for these to become adopter led.

- 8.8 Adopters are offered training opportunities on a variety of topics. This year there has been one therapeutic parenting course followed by a support group and a 90 minutes consultation opportunity for adopters who have attended.
- 8.9 The adoption team provides a service for adopted adults to access their adoption records, counseling in relation to these where required and advice on tracing birth relatives. Recent changes in legislation have meant that relatives of the adopted person can also request access to the adoption records of an adopted adult. In this period 6 adults were supported with access to records.

9. Therapeutic Support

- 9.1 Every child that is adopted has life story work undertaken and there is a statutory requirement to provide the life story book. These are completed by community care workers within the adoption support team. These take a significant proportion of the adoption support time.
- 9.2 The Adoption team has a part time play therapist. There is provision for six children to receive play therapy, consultation service and Sensory Integration Assessments. This service is well used within the adoption service and also to the CLA permanence team. The Play Therapist facilitates the therapeutic Parenting Course for Torbay.
- 9.3 The adoption service provides Theraplay which is an attachment based model of working directly with children and adopters to build and develop the attachment between the child and their adoptive parent. An assessment is undertaken to assess the attachment relationship within the adoptive family and provide specific intervention for the family.
- 9.4 Torbay have developed the THRIVE model of working with children which is a therapeutic approach to understanding attachment and the child. The service is providing THRIVE to the adoptive families developed within the Adoption Support plan to maintain stability and promote attachment.

10. Inter-country adoptions

- 10.1 There have been no inter-country adoptions within this year. Should there be a need then this would be commissioned outside the service.