

**Torbay Council**

**Children’s Specialist Services**

**Adoption Service**

**Annual Report**

**April 2016 - March 2017**

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1. **Summary and Looking Forward**
	1. This report is to inform members of the Torbay Council Children’s Services of

Torbay Adoption Agency activities for the period 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017. There is a requirement that the Adoption Agency Activity is reported to the Executive annually.

1.2 It is acknowledged that there has been delay in presenting this report within timescale. This has in part been due to the focus on Torbay’s improvement journey as well as the involvement in the priority development work of the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

1.3 The report for 2017/2018 will be published in June 2018 this will contain full performance data and statistic for the period and will give the updating position of the RAA and proposed implementation.

1.4 Within the period of April 2016 - March 2017 Adoption, both nationally and locally, there has continued to be a sustained government focus upon performance and improving outcomes for children by increasing the choice of adopter, avoiding drift and delay of placement and improving post adoption support once children are placed.

1.5 Torbay has continued as an active member of Adopt South West (AdoptSW) and in line with government plans outlined within ‘Adoption - A vision for change’ we continue to actively contribute to the development of the RAA.

1.6 In addition the government have introduced other initiatives and since the 1st April 2016 the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was extended to enable children with special guardians to access therapeutic support. This recognised the similar challenges and the needs of their carers in maintaining stability of placements.

1.7 Within Torbay Adoption Team we have continued to make good use of the Adoption Support Fund and have supported our colleagues within the child care teams to make applications to the ASF where it has been appropriate.

1.8 The requirements for service improvements which were outlined in Ofsted’s report of January 2016 and the learning from the subsequent monitoring visits have been progressed. This has continued to be supported through the commissioner role and work with Hampshire colleagues.

1.9 Within this year 17 children were placed for adoption which is a reduction from the previous year of 18 (2015/2016). It is also noted that year on year there has been an increase in the number of children being placed with special guardians.

1.10 The number of children with adoption plans has remained consistent and the prediction of numbers decreasing has not come into fruition.

1.11 Torbay Adoption team have continued to work with Adopt South West in ongoing recruitment activity as well as having Torbay focused events. Despite this active recruitment we have not seen any increase in our sufficiency and adopter numbers being approved. Whilst this active recruitment is maintained it should be noted that Torbay does not delay in matching and actively seek adopters through other adoption agencies, including Voluntary agencies to ensure children do not wait for permanence.

1.12 Focus has been given to the development of Early Permanence for all children. The role of family finder and their early links to children working with the child care social workers has become embedded within practice. Progress has been made within the year in developing a Permanence Policy and clear practice pathways for Foster for Adopt placements.

1.13 Our priorities for 2017/2018 are:

* To strengthen and improve our Foster for Adopt practice ensuring early permanence is considered for all children where it is appropriate within their plan.
* To broaden our recruitment strategy undertaking joint campaigns with the fostering service to increase opportunities to raise awareness of adoption.
* Support child care teams with the delivery of workshops on Early Permanence, Permanence Planning, Sibling Assessments and Quality requirements for the Child Permanence Report.
* Further develop our expertise in making applications for children and families to the ASF in order to support outcomes in adoption or SGO placements where assessment identifies the need.
* Continue to be active in the development of the RAA including progressing a regional adoption panel model.
* Develop a clear audit tool for adoption cases to inform practice development.
* Further develop data reports to inform service delivery and requirements for development.
1. **Service Development Overview**

2.1 Adoption service development has been in response to the Ofsted inspection of November 2015 and subsequent monitoring visits. To support within this development process our commissioner Hampshire have undertaken audit and peer reviews. In addition to the issues arising from Ofsted their advice has been to strengthen the management oversight and leadership of the team.

2.2 The Adoption Team Manager has had a direct link to an experienced Adoption Team Manager from Hampshire and has worked on her own understanding of Adoption performance data, management direction and oversight.

 **Early Permanence and promoting Foster for Adopt for all children where this is assessed as appropriate.**

2.3 Throughout 2016 there was a review of the Permanence Process within Torbay and within this the process for early permanence practice. By March 2017 we had a revised policy, practice guidance and a tool to support permanence planning for social workers. A Foster for Adopt checklist criteria was implemented to support child care social workers in identifying early in the process those children where early referrals should be made. Our first Foster for Adopt case was used to inform process and develop the supporting tools.

2.4 Going forward workshops for all child care social workers across teams and the IRO’s are diarised to support their learning and to promote early permanence. It is recognised that without confidence in the practice then there remains some resistance to progression.

 **Further development of understanding the adoption process and consideration of children regardless of age as to whether adoption is in their best interests.**

2.5 Consultation sessions for Child Care Social Workers to discuss adoption issues with experienced Adoption Social Workers commenced within this year. Opportunities to discuss contact planning and maintaining relationships with birth family/siblings as well as the impact on adoption of relationships between older children and their parents have been key themes covered.

2.6 Through the role of the Advisor for Child Plans and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), challenge has been offered where consideration of older children for adoption has not been seen. This has been delivered through meetings with child care managers and child care social workers, as well as through the Adoption Team Manager linking with child care teams. It is noted that this challenge has also been presented to our legal team in relation to resistance from parties to proceedings questioning whether a child is adoption ready and considering them too old for adoption.

2.7 Work needs to continue in practice and through specific workshops to challenge, where appropriate, continued misunderstanding or barriers to adoption as the right plan of a child for permanence.

 **Continue to improve timeliness of children waiting for adoption placements and moving on.**

2.8 With the family finder role embedded within the adoption team, work continues to ensure that referral and allocation is made at the earliest point to allow for joint working and information sharing regarding a child/ren and their needs.

2.9 Family Finders have increasingly become part of the process of writing Child Permanence Reports for the purpose of the ADM decision and at the very least are updating all CPR’s following the ADM to ensure information is clear and concise and up to date. This will improve opportunities for linking and matching at the earliest opportunity.

2.10 Matching remains a challenge in Torbay where, due to complex familial issues and risk, we are generally unable to place within Torbay therefore actively seeking placements both in neighbouring authorities and further afield. Despite the challenges, the 3 year average on the national scorecard, evidences we are maintaining our timeliness for adoption.

 **Embed within our adoption support the use of the Adoption Support Fund where it is assessed as appropriate.**

2.11 Focused work has taken place to understand the criteria of the Adoption Support Fund and to ensure we incorporate this appropriately within Adoption Support Assessments. Improvement has been made in our link to the national framework and this continues to strengthen our understanding of the criteria required, which in turn avoids delay in accessing funding to support families in need.

1. **Regional Adoption Activity**

3.1 Torbay has continued to be an active member of AdoptSW alongside Plymouth City Council, Devon County Council and Somerset County Council (joined in 2016).

3.2 The decision for the creation of a Regional Adoption Agency by all members was to take a two stage approach, initially setting up a Local Authority led model. Devon County Council agreed to act as a single authority host for the region from 2018 for a period of 2 years with consideration being given to further development based on the evidence from other RAA’s nationally.

The RAA have created a governance and steering group to oversee the project.

3.3 The appointed membership of the governance board are Directors and Assistant Directors of the 4 local authorities. The two Voluntary agencies who have been part of AdoptSW have members who sit on the board as partner agencies. Julian Wooster, Director Somerset Children's Services is the chair of the governance board.

3.4 The RAA steering group membership are strategic managers from the four local authorities, reporting to the governance board and who have the delegated responsibility to oversee the direction of the project.

3.5 There is an RAA operational group comprised of representatives of operational managers from the four local authorities. This group essentially ensures that the steering group are informed by Team Managers, Operational and Business Support Staff, as well as Adopters.

3.6 In line with the progression to an RAA Torbay are developing a key officers group to include HR, Finance, Legal, IT and Info Compliance ensuring that we have lead members to link to the project lead to inform projected RAA service delivery.

3.7 Work for progressing towards full implementation of the RAA for April 2018 has been a focus for the Adoption Team Manager and the Adoption Team. Throughout 2016/2017 practice improvement workshops have been held with the focus on identifying best practice across the four Local Authorities to ensure this forms the basis of the RAA. Alignment of processes has been another key area of the workshops, with focus groups on Adoption Panel, Recruitment and Assessment, Early Permanence, Family Finding and Matching and support for Adopters/Special Guardians.

3.8 Torbay have maintained involvement and participation in regional AdoptSW family finding activities which have included DVD evenings and profile meetings.

3.9 The decision was made by the Steering group in August 2016 that progression should be made to a regional Adoption Panel, this being the first step to regionalisation. The target for implementation was set for 1st October 2017.

3.10 The RAA has acknowledged that communication for all staff involved in Adoption as well as other in Children's Services is key in ensuring a successful transition and therefore a commitment has been made for newsletters and specific communication updates to be cascaded within the 4 local authorities, overseen and agreed via the steering and governance group.

3.11 A staff learning event took place in March 2017 providing Adoption staff from all regions the opportunity for updated information, networking opportunities with other local authority staff and up to date practice information from keynote speakers.

Future dates are diarised along the implementation timeline to update all staff.

3.12 As has been noted the completion of this report has taken us beyond end of March 2017 and therefore information is available to provide further update on the RAA development.

3.13 In October 2017 the project board announced the decision by Devon not to proceed with hosting the RAA in 2018 -2020 and the preference of a one-step approach to a final model.

3.14 The Governance Board met in December 2017 to consider the feasibility of achieving a one-step approach and to consider the feedback from the DfE.

3.15 The DfE were updated of this decision and discussion/meetings took place with the Chair of the Governance Board, Devon Director and the DfE to discuss matters further.

3.16 Devon reviewed their decision and as a result have restated their position will be to go forward and act as the single authority host for the region 2018 -2020.

3.17 The impact of this has been the requirement to revise the timetable for ‘go live’ of the RAA.

3.18 It is now anticipated that all 4 local authorities will have had cabinet sign off by the end of April 2018 with the plan to progress to ‘go live’ of the full RAA in October 2018.

1. **Adoption Performance**

**Torbay Adoption Team**

4.1 In the year 2016/17 we have experienced some movement of staff however the core establishment of the team remains unchanged with leadership from the experienced Team manager and Assistant Team manager.

4.2 The team remain 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 remains:

* 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)
* support for adopted adults

**Marketing and Recruitment:**

4.3 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.

4.4 Local radio has proven to be a successful method of raising awareness to our

 target market via the station’s listeners and offering the geographical coverage required.

 Having consulted with Hampshire as our improvement partner we have also

 combined our marketing and recruitment events with our Fostering service to

 reach a wider audience and enhance opportunity. These events have

 co-ordinated with our ‘drop in’ events and recruitment stands throughout the

 year. It is noted that our most successful location is strategically placed

 outside of the Torbay on the main route of the A38, accessible to a wide range

 of Adopters from Plymouth through to Exeter.

 Analysis suggests that events need to be regular to sustain awareness. In the

 next year we aim to exhibit at local events, shows and attractions i.e Paignton

 Zoo, Crealey Adventure Park etc.

 We aim to build close working relationships with Torbay Schools and Health to

 help us recruit adopters with the skills we need.

 We will make links with social groups to reach a wider demographic audience

such as LGBT.

 We will hold a monthly drop in session at Tor Hill House where local residents

 can consult with the assessment and recruitment advisor.

4.5 Adopt South West has a comprehensive website with a link to Torbay’s own

 revised and improved adopter focused web pages.

 **Assessment/Approval of Adopters**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Period | Initial Enquiries | Applications received | AdoptersApproved |
| 1st April 2014 – 31st March 2015 | 155 | 9 | 9 |
| 1st April 2015 – March 2016 | 74 | 10 | 7 |
| 1st April 2016 – March 2017 | 75 | 8 | 7 |

4.6 The national picture outlined within the Adoption Leadership Board’s Headlines

 and Measures report noted that Registrations to become an adopter have

 increased by 8% from 740 in quarter 1 2016-17 to 800 in quarter 2 2016-17.

 The number of Adopter families approved for Adoption has decreased slightly

 from 710 in quarter 1 2016-17 to 700 in quarter 2 2016-17.

4.7 It is acknowledged that the conversion number from enquiries to applications and approval for Torbay continues to be low, however is shown as being

 consistent for the last two years.

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. The collaboration as

AdoptSW affords Torbay marketing through this arena however in addition we continue to undertake specific marketing and recruitment work.

4.8 Despite these efforts we have not seen an increase in our conversion rate. All

effort will be made through review of the Recrtuiment Strategy for the coming

year to consider alternative strategies.

 It is anticipated that the Regional Adoption Agency will be of benefit to Torbay

 In respect of efficiency of recruitment and approval of Adopters.

**Step Parent Adoptions:**

4.9 Torbay Adoption Team continue the function of accepting referrals from families where a 'step-parent' wishes to adopt their partner’s child/ren.

4.10 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.

 **Inter-country Adoptions:**

4.11 There were no enquiries for inter country adoptions to be considered within

 this period.

**Timeliness of Children’s Adoption Plans**



4.12 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.

4.13 Timeliness in 2016/17 did increase slightly compared to the previous year with the average time taken between court authority to place and deciding a match for adoption increasing by 7 days. Despite this recent increase performance was better than the 3 year regional and national averages.

4.14 After 7 years of continued progress Torbay exceeded the threshold for the

 average time taken between entering care and the child moving in to their

 adoptive placement. Over the same period Torbay has also reduced by 120

 days the average time taken between receiving the court authority to place

 and the finding of a match.

4.15 The 3 year average shows that Torbay Adoption Service has maintained

 timeliness in relation to adoptions. This is significant when we consider the

 national picture for adoption where there is a decline in adopters being

 approved. Of particular significance is the fact of Torbay enabling adoption

 together of 2 siblings groups of 3 children and especially 2 sibling groups of 2.

This year Torbay managed to secure 20 adoptions which is up on last year. A key focus within adoption placement matching is enabling siblings to remain together and where this is not possible, placing as close as possible geographically to afford best outcomes for contact as appropriate. This cohort of children included sibling groups where matching to adopters required time and careful consideration; children who had remained at home up to the final hearing upon which separation was granted with Placement Orders being made; finding of fact hearings delaying the 26 week process within the court arena which therefore created delay in affirming permanence plans. Going forward we see that timescales for matching will also be affected adversely by the significant medical needs of children with care plans for adoption.

**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% |
| 31/3/17 | 273 | 13% | 19% | 14% |

4.16 In 2016/17 of the 110 children that left care 14 children (13%) left due to an adoption order being granted which was a decrease on the previous year. Within the previous year’s Annual report it was projected that new ADM decisions and Placement Orders would potentially plateau with the likelihood that we would not see the same high numbers of children adopted from care.

4.17 Looking ahead we project that our number of children leaving care as a result of adoption will again increase, due to the timing of the report we can already show this is 18% as of end January 2018.

4.18 Within 2016/17 17 children were placed for adoption compared to 18 the previous year. Further to this 1 child was in a foster for adopt placement that had not yet become and adoptive placement.

**Profile of Children Adopted 2016/2017**





4.19 Adoption Orders were made for 14 children in the period of 2016/2017 of these there were 2 sets of 2 siblings, the remainder were singleton placements.

4.20 There has been a conscious effort that adoption planning has been considered for all children regardless of their age.

4.21 17 children were placed for adoption within 2016/2107, 7 were singleton placements, there were 2 sets of 2 siblings and 2 sets of 3 siblings.

4.22 Torbay have continued year on year to successfully place sibling groups together and for the year 2016/2017 we have not experienced an adoption disruptions whether this be prior to or post placement/adoption order.

**Agency Decision Maker (ADM) Decisions:**

4.23 There is a requirement of the Adoption Agency to ensure that any plan of adoption for a child is agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.

4.24 Within the previous year’s Annual report it was projected that new ADM decisions and Placement Orders would potentially plateau with the likelihood that we would not see the same high numbers of children adopted from care.

4.25 In contrast to the prediction of a decrease being expected in ADM decisions there were 15 made, there having been 14 in 2015/2016.

**Placement Orders:**

4.26 The number of placement orders made by the court in 2016/2017 reduced slightly to 22 from the year 2015/2016 when it reached 25. This was in line with the projection of the national picture that Placement Order numbers would decline during the period.

**Fostering For Adoption:**

4.27 During 2016/2017 a more focused approach was taken to improving our understanding of early permanence and development of a Permanence Policy and process to avoid drift and delay for children achieving permanence.

Our first Foster for Adopt placement was made in this period and we were able to use the practice experience support learning and finalise our process going forward.

**Looking Ahead:**

4.28 Our adoption activity data is evidencing continued increase in adoption plans and placements moving forward into 2017/2018.

4.29 The number of Placement Order made as at end of January 2017 is 27.

4.30 We have been successful in increasing our achievement of Foster for Adopt placements for children with four children being placed.

4.31 As at the end of January 2018 10 children have been placed for adoption with an additional 4 placed in Foster to Adopt placements.

4.32 The projection for 2017/2018 is an increase in ADM decisions being made, and as at the end of January 2018 there have already been 21.

1. **Adoption Panel**
	1. There have been some changes to the membership of the Adoption Panel which have included a change of medical advisor.
	2. The Independent Panel Chair Rachel Cook, has continued in the role, allowing for consistency in the function of the panel.
	3. The Panel Chair has fulfilled the requirement of providing an annual report of adoption activity.
	4. There has been a review of the membership of the Adoption Panel to ensure we meet and function within guidance and regulation to a good standard. This has been undertaken in conjunction with the progress of the RAA and regional panel function.
	5. In order to ensure we had diversity and balance of membership we have made the decision to join the central lists for Adoption and Fostering Panels.

Work is underway to progress this including the exploration of recruitment of new members and joint training.

5.6 As the plan within the RAA is for a regional panel, the joining of our current central lists will allow for the opportunity of experienced panel members to be maintained by Torbay on our Fostering panel.

5.7 The panel are comfortable with providing robust scrutiny and challenge to the Adoption Service. 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).

5.8 In January 2016, panel became paperless; receiving Adoption Panel paperwork via a Torbay Council IPad. Paperless panels are continuing to work very well with very few problems being encountered. This has reduced the costs of panel in the longer term by eliminating the cost of producing paper copies of reports which then need to be sent out to all members.

5.9 Panel have undertaken the required training and in addition the Independent Panel Chair has been active in the operational groups for progression of the regional panels.

5.10 The aim will be for a two stage process which will see all 4 local authorities working together in a virtual panel process with the full regional panels ‘going live’ in October 2017.

1. **Adoption Support Services**

6.1 The team provide a range of adoption support to families, birth families affected by adoption, families living in Torbay who have adopted children and also to adoptive families outside of the area with whom we have placed Torbay children. (Up to 3 years post adoption order as identified in the Adoption Support Plan).

6.2 The Adoption service provides birth relative counseling service and offer a ‘drop in’ support group. In the period 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017 the service received 21 referrals from the Child’s social worker to offer support and counseling. It is noted that engagement is low with both services and there is a requirement to continually follow up on referrals being made. The RAA will pose opportunity for some further independence in the birth parent counselling service.

6.3 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 a specialist community care worker.

6.4 The Adoption Service has a total of 241 children on the Letterbox database;

 there are 1609 contacts set up of which 1087 are active; this could be they

 have reached 18 years and it’s closed or birth relatives/adopters have

 disengaged with our service (mainly birth relatives).

Currently we are supervising and facilitating 11 direct contacts with birth

 relatives and adopters and children.

6.5 There were 26 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 67 adoptive families living in Torbay.

6.6 As had been noted in the report of 2015/2016 we have reviewed our support groups taking into consideration engagement and viability to maintain a service.

6.7 Being a small unitary local authority continually poses the challenge of efficiency versus the requirements of the adoption regulations for adoption support provision. We work in collaboration as part of Adopt South West to ensure opportunities to share resources and support functions are maximised.

The RAA will go further in offering a wider range of support opportunities across the region to ensure appropriate interventions are available at the time a family require.

6.8 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.

6.9 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.

6.10 The Adoption Team provides a service for adopted adults to access their adoption records as well as 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 5 adults were supported with access to records.

**Therapeutic Support**

6.11 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.

6.12 The Adoption Team has a part time play therapist. There is provision for six children to receive direct play therapy, alongside a consultation service and Sensory Integration Assessments. This service is well used within the Adoption service and also within the CLA permanence team. The Play Therapist facilitates the therapeutic Parenting Course for Torbay.

6.13 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.

6.14 The Adoption Team have successfully developed, a Therapeutic Parenting course with input from the Play Therapist who has led the course. This is well subscribed to by adopters but is also open to foster carers for Torbay who are bridging to adoption or supporting children with complex needs. This would have been an area which would be priority to further develop within the adoption service however this is will now be considered within the development of the RAA.

**Adoption Support Fund**

6.14 The government have continued to make available funds through the Adoption Support Fund aimed at further supporting adopters with accessing therapeutic support for their adopted children.

6.15 On 6th October 2016 the government announced a ‘fair access limit’ and in February 2017 confirmed this would continue at £5000 per year.

From 1st April 2016 the ASF was extended to include therapeutic support for children placed with special guardians where the child had been looked after immediately prior to the Special Guardianship Order being made.

6.16 Torbay have continued to make successful applications on behalf of families they support and will continue to access the fund whilst the government funding is available. In the period of 2016/2017, 12 applications were made and were successful in receiving funding over £40,000.