

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Adoption & Permanency Panel April 2011- March 2012

1. Panel Workload

Oxfordshire continues to run three Adoption and Permanency Panels which each meet once a month, at County Hall Oxford.

During the past 12 months, 35 panel meetings have been held, with the workload of cases coming to the three panels being quite variable in quantity.

Very tight time frames continue to be operational in court, into which panel hearings must fit. Timely panel hearings remain crucial in avoiding delay for young children with care plans for permanency.

Care Proceedings

The number of Care Proceedings being issued over the past 12 months has remained high and led to a continued rise in the number of children in the looked after system. This has led to a subsequent rise in the number of children needing to be placed for adoption over the year. This rise in numbers has continued to cause pressure on resources and a rapid use of the bank of waiting approved adopters in the county.

Panel Membership

In April 2011 the government introduced new regulations for adoption. Panel members now join a Central List and panels can be configured with any member from the central list. This has ensured greater flexibility in terms of running panels when panel members are absent, however there are still regulations on the makeup of each panel with rules remaining regarding quoracy.

There have been some changes to panel membership since April 2011. Social Workers Kim Brown, Natalie Allen, Anne McKay and Helen Cox-Bolder have joined the Central List to replace departing social work members. Catherine Lloyd has joined the Central List as an independent member and is a specialist in education and mental health. All our panel members remain very committed to their roles and attendance levels are good, Donald McPhail, our Independent Panel Chair since April 2006 has continued chairing all three panels.

Panel Training

A training day for staff and panel members took place in October 2011 on the subject of: Contact and Permanence: creating a practice framework for the 21st Century

The day was led by John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research and Development at BAAF. Sessions were also led by Claire Jerram from the Legal Department who gave an overview of the legal framework, and Bruce Newman, adopter and panel member. The day was well received by staff and panel members.

Quality Assurance

A regular 'Adoption Strategy Meeting' held with senior managers in the department, including the Agency Decision Maker, Legal advisors to panel and the Panel Chair and Advisor, continues to address any issues in the work of the panel and wider matters regarding quality assurance.

In addition, the panel requests six monthly update reports on all cases presented at panel to inform panel of the progress of agreed plans and to highlight any cases that may not have proceeded to plan.

To comply with new adoption regulations, panel now reports on the quality of written panel reports provided by staff and must record in the panel minutes the reasons given for cases which are not reaching panel in the desired timeframes as laid down in the regulations.

These timescales are as follows:

- Adoption plans should be presented within 6 weeks of the statutory review where adoption was identified as the permanence plan for the child.
- Panels should make a recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopter's application to be assessed.
- Panels make a recommendation on the proposed placement of a child with particular adopters within six months of the adoption agency's decision maker deciding that the child should be placed for adoption.

The Panel records the reasons in the written minutes of the panel meeting when the above timescales are not met. This year's report on Oxfordshire's compliance with these time frames is reported on in the next section.

Issues Identified by Panel Chair

- There is a need to ensure that documentation for children's plans includes the rationale for the removal of the child from the birth parents, especially when the plan relates to a new child of the family whose siblings had been removed previously.
- There is a need to develop shared principles on both face to face contact and letterbox contact after adoption.
- Together or apart assessments need to be available to panel at the time of considering the plan for adoption.

OFSTED Inspection July 2011

In July 2011, the Adoption Service was inspected by OFSTED. The outcome of this inspection was a quality rating of good, with outstanding features in two categories:

- Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do. This refers to support available to help children develop positive relationships with their adopters.
- Helping children make a positive contribution. This broadly covers the way the Adoption Service engages with children and listens to their views.

In terms of recommendations for further improvement, the inspectors suggested that Child Permanence Reports are improved, specifically to take into account the wishes and feelings of younger children.

This issue has now been addressed with training for staff who write Child Permanence Reports on this subject and workshops for teams working on adoption planning.

The lead inspector observed Panel B during the inspection and the inspection report stated that 'There is very thorough scrutiny of assessments presented to panel and the panel's role in monitoring the agency's progress regarding their own recommendations is a key strength.'

Panel Feedback

All those attending panel, both staff and applicants are encouraged to complete feedback forms to inform panel and the service of any issues to be addressed to improve the experience of those attending panel. It is encouraging that the majority of responses from panel users are very positive and a high percentage of returned feedback forms reported general satisfaction with the experience of attending panel.

In addition, all panel members have an annual appraisal of their performance and an opportunity to give feedback on their experience of the service and to identify any development needs.

Disruptions

There have been no disruptions in adoption placements over the past year (disruption being defined as children returned to Local Authority care after placement with adopters, before an adoption order is made).

Oxfordshire now has well-structured training and support in place for adopters in the early years of a new placement until a child reaches independence.

Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care Project

Oxfordshire's Multi -Dimensional Treatment Foster Care project (MTFC) is now in its fourth year and has included some children with a plan for adoption moving to MTFC foster carers in preparation for an eventual adoption placement.

There are plans for a new 16 week training programme for adopters with young children already in placement, to be introduced in the autumn of 2012.

A new 'Adopt' training programme for adoptive parents with placements of children aged 2-8 years is currently in development and due to be introduced in the autumn of 2012.

Three children during the last year have moved to adoptive placements from the MTFC scheme (a sibling group of two and a single child).

An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay

In March 2012, the government published their Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay, which sets out a range of proposals to speed up the process for children; to overhaul the service for prospective adopters and to strengthen local accountability for the timeliness of adoption services.

Further changes to the Adoption legislation and guidance are expected in October 2012.

In order to track each local authority's accountability and performance, the government will publish Adoption Scorecards for each local authority which will then be updated annually. The scorecards will highlight key indicators for how rapidly local authorities place children in need of adoption and how swiftly deal with prospective adopters.

The government plans to revise the Adoption system in order to encourage a broader range of prospective adopters and will be introducing a new training and assessment process, which will be completed within 6 months rather than the current 8 months.

The role of Adoption Panels will also change as a result of the new regulations to be introduced this summer. The action plan states that panels will continue to hear cases for approving adoption applicants and linking children for adoption but will no longer hear cases regarding adoption plans for children in court proceedings. In these cases the courts alone will agree the adoption plans.

These changes have major implications for the way Oxfordshire runs its adoption service and adoption panels in future months and a local action plan is now being set in motion.

There will be a need to establish the form of information to be presented to the panel on the child, as the only time the panel will address the needs of the child will be at the matching panel when the child is considered for linking with specific adopters.

2. Adoption Panel Business: April 2011 - March 2012

Plans for Adoption

52 children had plans for adoption recommended by panel over the past 12 months. This is a significant increase compared with the total of 44 children with adoption plans made in the year 2010-11.

27 of these children were boys, and 25 were girls.

This group of children was made up of:-

- 7 pairs of siblings
- 3 groups of three siblings
- 23 single children

All of these children were subject to Care Proceedings.

30 out of these 52 cases were not presented to panel within 6 weeks of the plan for adoption.

Reasons for Delay were as follows:

- 24 due to court delay
- 4 due to staff pressures
- 1 due to request for further information from the agency decision maker
- 1 due to child's inclusion in MTFC programme

Change of plan from adoption during 2011-12

One child with a severe disability who had a previous plan for long term fostering had his plan changed to adoption, as his foster carer has applied to adopt him. This is a very positive outcome for this child, who has complex needs but will now have the long term security of an adoptive placement.

One child had her plan changed in court from one of adoption to Special Guardianship by her current foster carers.

Age range and Ethnic Origin of children with adoption plans

The age range of these children was:-

- 22 aged under 2 years
- 17 aged 2-5 years
- 13 aged 5 and over

The oldest child to have an adoption plan agreed over the past year was aged 7 years.

The ethnic origin of these children was:-

- 42 White
- 9 Mixed ethnicity
- 1 Asian

Approvals of Adopters

21 couples were recommended for approval as adopters during the past twelve months, together with 2 single adopters, giving a total of 23 households approved.

Of the 23 approvals, 17 met the 8 month time period from adoption application to approval, the period of time set down in the Adoption Standards for home studies to be presented to panel leaving 5 which did not meet this time frame.

Of those applications which did not meet the 8 month timeframe, all were due in part to circumstances related to the applicants and in one case the reason was also due to staff pressure.

Reasons for Delay for applications not meeting the 8 month time frame:

- 1 for the applicants' work/study plans
- 4 for medical issues relating to the applicants

There were no applicants turned down at panel and thus no referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism (I.R.M.)

Of those approved, two sets of foster carers were approved to adopt children who were already in their care.

Children Linked for Adoption

41 children were linked for adoption during the past twelve months – of this group 23 were girls and 19 boys.

Of these children:

- 18 children were linked within 6 months of their plans being agreed.
- 23 children were linked outside this time scale
- This group not meeting the time scales included 5 sibling groups of two children, 1 sibling group of three children and 5 single child

Children not placed within 6 months of plan for adoption- Reasons for Delay were as follows:

23 cases did not meet the timescale:

- 13 were in sibling groups
- 3 children have complex needs
- 2 children had a prior placement that broke down during introductions
- 2 children had a potential linking with adopters who subsequently changed their minds
- 3 children are of dual heritage and an ethnic match was searched for in the first instance.

Panel recommended the linking of three mixed race children, including a sibling group of two, over the past year, with white adopters, after searches for adopters who could provide an ethnic match for these children was unsuccessful. One mixed race child joined a half sibling already placed with white adopters.

Location of Adoption Placements

31 children were linked with Oxfordshire approved adopters and 10 children were placed in out of county placements.

These 10 children consisted of:

- one set of three siblings who moved to adopters with family connections
- two siblings with challenging behaviour who moved to a placement with a voluntary agency
- five single children; four of whom have disabilities and special needs
- one child joined the adoptive family of an older adopted half sibling.

General trends for adoption over the past year

There is a trend continuing from the previous year of a large number of children under 2 years with plans for adoption-this year the figure was 42% of all children with an adoption plan.

Children under two years are usually relatively straightforward to place and the only children in this age range who were not linked with Oxfordshire adopters were children of ethnic minority heritage.

In order to meet the requirements of the government's adoption action plan, there will need to be an increase in the pool of Oxfordshire adopters to give enough choice of placements in the coming months.

32 Adoption Orders have been made in court over the past year which is an increase of 8 over the 2010-11 figure of 24.

3. Permanency Panel (Fostering) Business March 2011 – April 2012

The Adoption and Permanency Panels have a dual function and in addition to adoption cases, make recommendations regarding plans for children up to the age of twelve years needing permanence in the form of long term fostering.

Oxfordshire's Permanency Panels also go on to make recommendations regarding the linking of these children with approved long term foster carers. Foster carers are invited to attend Panel when long term fostering linkings are heard.

Plans for long term Fostering

17 children had plans for long term fostering recommended by Panel. 8 of these children were boys, 9 were girls.

This group of children was made up of:-

- 3 pairs of siblings
- 2 group of 3 siblings
- 5 single children

The age range of these children was:-

- 9 aged 5-9 years
- 8 aged 10 years and over

The ethnic origin of these children was:-

- 11 white
- 6 mixed

Children linked for long term Fostering

6 children were linked with long term foster carers over the past 12 months.

One older child with was placed out of county with his grandparents who were approved as his long term foster carers.

Resources for long term Fostering

There continues to be a nationwide shortage of long term foster carers, with little choice available for children needing placements and this is reflected in Oxfordshire, particularly for older children and children with special needs.

4. Positive Achievements 2011-2012

- Frequency of panel meetings and careful planning of agendas has ensured children's plans for permanence are agreed in a timely manner to avoid any unnecessary delay.
- There has been no delay to any court proceedings caused by panel.
- Continuous recruitment of new panel members to the Central List to fill vacancies has ensured panels have remained quorate and able to operate smoothly.
- Training days and staff workshops have ensured both panel members and staff are kept well informed and up to date with new research findings and government priorities regarding planning for children in the Looked After System.

Objectives for 2012/2013

- To implement the new Adoption Action Plan as it relates to adoption panel process.
- To ensure the panels provide a quality assurance function to the department in respect of reports received and cases heard.
- To continue to improve panel performance through future planned training and panel member appraisals.

Liz Gilkes

Adoption Adviser and Professional Adviser to Panel

Donald McPhail

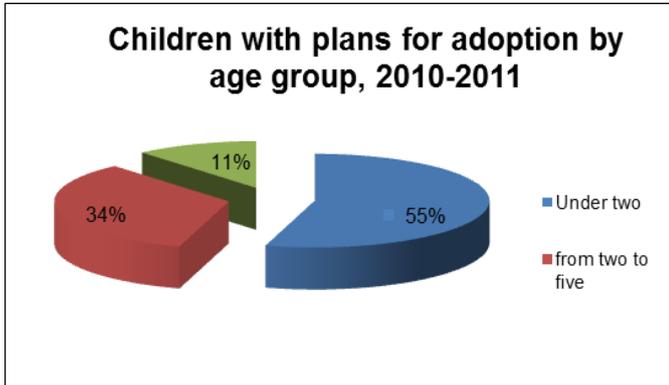
Independent Panel Chair

March 2012

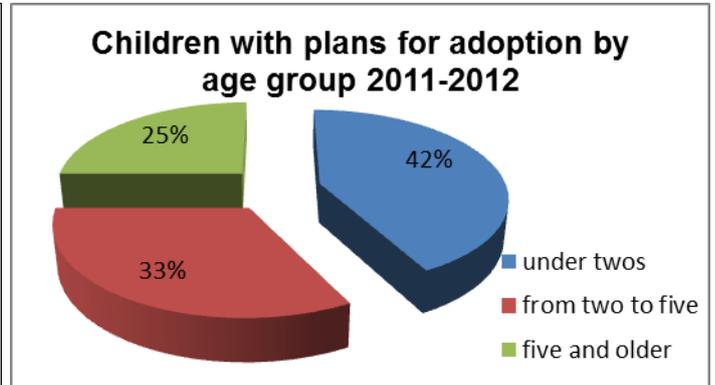
Appendix - charts

Children with Plans for Adoption by Age Group

2010-2011

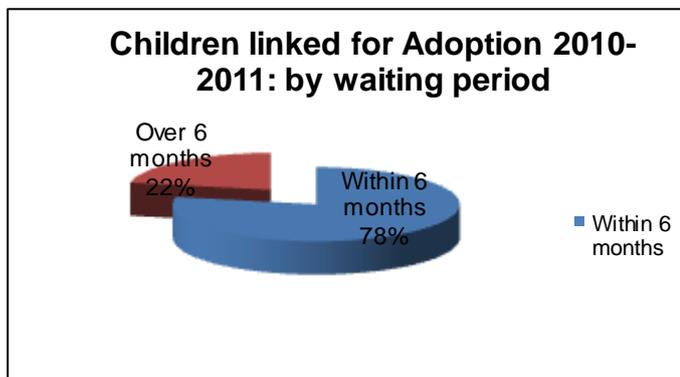


2011-2012



Children linked for Adoption by Waiting Period

2010-2011



2011-2012

