

# Sefton adoption service

## Annual report

### 2016–2017



## Foreword

This report is provided as part of the monitoring of Sefton Adoption Service required under Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and Adoption Minimum Standards 2011.

This end of year report provides details of adoption activity from 1.4.16 to 31.3.17.

## Introduction

Almost all children placed for adoption have been placed from public care. It is a challenging task for Local Authorities and the courts to analytically conclude that parents cannot safely parent their child/children. Adoption is a last resort for children after all other options have been completely exhausted. Minimum delay is crucial in securing permanence for children.

Attachment and neuroscience research have been key in identifying that early permanence provides better outcomes for children. Due to their previous experiences of trauma, abuse, broken attachments and separation children placed for adoption often have greater difficulties in managing their emotions, behaviours and feeling safe in relationships.

Adoptive parents need to be exceptional parents and provide therapeutic parenting that over time will help children heal from trauma. As an Adoption Agency we have a duty to find the right families for children, families who have fully evidenced their motivation, emotional resilience, adoptive parenting capacity and openness/ reflection of their own attachment history.

In recent years the Government has made significant policy and legislative changes to promote children leaving the looked after system to the emotional and legal security that adoption provides. It is now expected that 80% of care proceedings will be completed within 26 weeks. The younger a child is on placement, the better chances of successful adoption. This led to the Fostering to Adopt initiative that has allowed children to be placed in their potential place of permanence with approved adopters who are temporarily approved as foster carers. This route to adoption promotes early attachment and minimises the disruption of moves for children.

The Adoption Scorecard was introduced in May 2012 in order to compare, monitor and improve Local Authorities' performance against specific timescale measures.

Significant changes have also been made relating to the recruitment and assessment process for prospective adopters which reflects a speedier process. These changes were published as Statutory Guidance.

## Service Structure

The Adoption team have experienced the retirement of the team manager in February 2017, following a period of long term sickness absence from August 2016; a lead practitioner for assessment and recruitment and a lead practitioner for adoption support are currently undertaking all managerial responsibilities, including Agency Advisor role and Panel Advisor role. The Adoption Support Lead Practitioner chairs all “moving on” meetings to support the team working around the child to complete the necessary work for children to make a healthy transition. This is in line with the most recent research. The Lead Practitioner for Assessment tracks children’s cases (A1 and A2 scores). Both lead practitioners chair all matching meetings and placement planning meetings in the child’s journey.

The Adoption Service is split into two functions under the two lead practitioners who supervise staff accordingly. Social workers in the team can accept work relating to assessment or support as demand dictates. One dedicated recruitment worker covers most of the initial visits and deals with statutory checks, and stage one work books in respect of prospective adopters. Family finding activities for children are now distributed more widely across the team after it was acknowledged that this expertise needed to be held by more than one dedicated family finder. The family finding regarding adults continues to be carried out by the family’s allocated worker.

The children’s family finders provide a consultation point with children’s adoption workers (based in Locality Teams) regarding adoption process and planning. The family finder may be asked to complete a virtual search of locally, regionally and nationally available families for particular children, although the plan

for adoption is based on the child’s needs and not the current availability of adopters.

Placement Support Workers (PSW) work alongside social workers working directly with families. PSWs arrange a range of social activities for both families and children. There are 4 PSWs in the adoption team. One of them is solely dedicated to Recruitment and Stage 1. The team has 7.9 Social workers, two business support officers and share one targeted Publicity and Marketing Officer with the Fostering Team.

Sefton Adoption Team provides a service for the Borough of Sefton and works closely with all of the children’s Locality and Assessment teams in relation to Sefton children who have a plan for adoption; or are likely to need a plan for adoption. Children should not be precluded from being considered for adoption because of age, disability, complexity of need or because they are part of a sibling group. Older children and young teenagers often have established attachments to birth family through contact and their need to remain emotionally and legally part of their birth family is of more value than severing these links in favour of a new adoptive family.

Sefton Children Service is currently organised to ensure that all children have the same social worker throughout their journey to permanence / adoption, therefore children’s adoption social workers are located within Locality teams and work within the Adoption and Children Act 2002 once an adoption plan is formalised at a LAC review.

The Adoption Team will work jointly with children’s adoption workers during linking, matching and placement of children and in completion of the annex A report until the adoption order is granted.

## Care planning and permanency planning

The point at which the Adoption Team becomes involved encompasses both a formal and informal process. Due to tracking systems in place including Permanence Planning Meetings (PPM) and the Family Finder, there is in most cases a knowledge of children for whom adoption may well be the plan before any decision is formalised. A Public Law Outline (PLO) compliance officer has been useful in keeping track of cases in the court arena and also at Legal Gateway Meetings. The Lead Practitioner for Assessment and Recruitment is part of the Adoption PPM meetings. PPM tracks all LAC cases and ensures adoption planning and process is timely with the aim to achieve the A1 and A2 timescales. The request for an ADM decision for an adoption plan is given priority. Both lead practitioners quality assure the CPRs and read all supporting evidence in their roles as agency advisors to offer advice to the ADM when considering a decision of whether the Agency considers adoption to be in the best interests of the particular child. The views of the IRO, guardian, legal person and medical advisor are sought. A formal meeting takes place with the ADM, agency advisor, child's social worker and legal advisor to consider all the evidence. This new process is working well and is in line with how other agencies work to reach an adoption decision.

PPM is a tracking system in place to ensure timeliness. The lead practitioner and family finders work closely with children's social workers providing guidance and support as cases progress. The Child's electronic record has also been developed to send alerts to the Adoption Team when adoption plans have been formalised at a LAC review and also when CPR's have been authorised.

Early knowledge of the child or children is key in effective care planning in order to consider early family finder profiling, photography and possible referral to a forthcoming exchange day or activity day. Professional photographs and DVD's are commissioned for all hard to place children to maximise exposure of the real child. Use is also made of national and regional family finding search sites (Link Maker, Adoption Match). Where appropriate, advertisements are placed in professional or other targeted journals/publications or local press eg National adoption week. Adopter led family finding has continued to progress and has created opportunities for children who otherwise may not have been considered for those adopters.

## Children and Adoption: Measuring Performance

For timeliness in respect of the child's and adult's journey to adoption, the Adoption Team aim to ensure that the journey to adoption is as short as possible, and in line with the adoption scorecard indicators. The two most significant indicators for the Adoption Team and wider Children's Service are the A1 and A2 scores.

A1 = the number of days between the child entering care (including S.20) and moving into the adoptive home.

A2 = the number of days between the granting of the Placement Order and the agency agreeing a suitable adoptive match (ADM agrees match).

The Government set an expectation (in days) for A1 and A2 and provided a sliding scale which gradually reduced between 2011 -2016. The scores are measured in days to emphasise the significance of every day in the child's journey with the aim of minimising delay.

The current (and final) expectation for A1 is 426 days.

The current (and final) expectation for A2 is 121 days.

### SHOBPA decisions/Placement Orders/ADM match/Placed for adoption

- 28 SHOBPA (should be placed for adoption) decisions were made by Sefton's ADM during this year. The previous year 2015/16 15 SHOBPA decisions were made.
- From the 28 above, 20 Placement Orders were subsequently granted. Of the 28 SHOBPA decisions, 5 are still awaiting a final hearing with a number being contested. These consist of a sibling group of two and three single children. With regard to the other three children, two had a change of

plan, one child was relinquished (placement order not required).

- Sefton Adoption Panel have recommended 10 matches as suitable, all of which were ratified by the ADM. These include: a sibling group of two (placed externally), four single children under the age of 1 (placed internally), 1 single child under the age of 1 (placed externally due to his ethnic and cultural needs) and a sibling group of three who were placed externally (their placement order was in the previous financial year). These ten children were all placed during 2016/17. An additional two children were placed externally for adoption in the previous financial year but have only just had their final adoption order. Therefore, in total 10 children remain placed for adoption, with no adoption order yet granted.

The following provides the A1 and A2 scores for the 10 children mentioned above, as the sibling group of 2 falls into the previous financial year (2015/16)

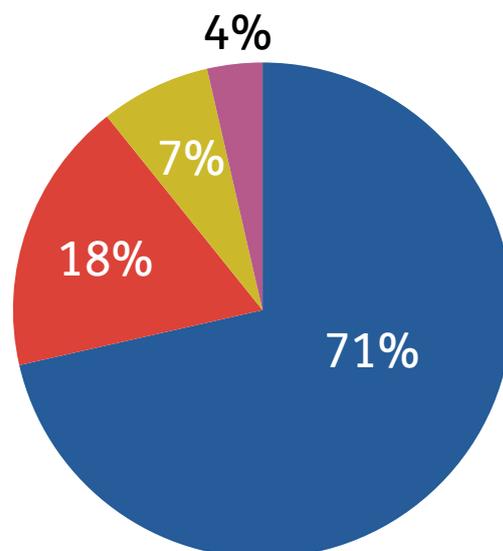
Of the 10 children:

- 4 met the A1 threshold (426 days) with scores of 321, 364, 301 and 214. One other child has met the A1 threshold with a score of 203 but this falls within the current financial year (2017/18) as date of placement for adoption was 22.5.17.
- 6 children failed the A1 score. These consist of a single child, a sibling group of two and a sibling group of three.
- The score for the single child was 542 days. The delay was linked to a court directed extension of family finding to identify an ethnic match which was achieved.

- The score for the sibling group of two was 467 days. This slight delay was due to an internal link not being progressed at a later stage in the linking process due to prospective adopters support networks being neighbours of extended birth family.
- The score for the sibling group of three was 791 for 2 of the children and 639 for the youngest child. The adoptive match has taken longer to identify because the children are part of a sibling group of three and when considering each of the sibling’s individual and combined needs this reflects they were ‘hard to place’. This significant delay was linked to a number of complexities, initially during the care planning stages. A Placement for the two older children with a family member disrupted prior to them returning to a Local Authority foster placement and their younger sibling being placed in an unplanned way. Local, regional and national searches were undertaken to secure a family. A previous match was identified for the children together and progressed to Adoption Panel; however the decision was made to defer this match due to a number of issues and a recent move for the children which brought about changes in their behaviour and a need to further assess the decision regarding placing the children together as a sibling group of three. Subsequently this couple withdrew. A further 6 weeks of family finding was directed following a Care Planning meeting to identify a suitable match for all three children together. This was achieved following a very intense period of family finding which ultimately avoided the separation of the sibling group.
- Of the 10 children;
- 3 children met the A2 threshold of 121 days with scores of 54, 110 and 119 days. One other child has met the A2 threshold with a score of 30 days but this falls within the current financial year (2017/18) as date of placement for adoption was 22.5.17. This was a Foster to Adopt Placement.
- In respect of 6 children the A2 score was not met; the sibling group of two was 203 days, the single child was 238 days and the sibling group of three was 424 days. This delay is linked to reasons explained above.
- One child was relinquished and therefore no placement order is granted under this process. The time between SHOBPA decision and ADM match is 125 days. There was delay in the family finding stage due to significant health uncertainties and that prospective adopters were awaiting the results of numerous tests.

### SHOBPA Decisions

- Placement orders
- Change of plan
- Awaiting final decision
- Placement order not required



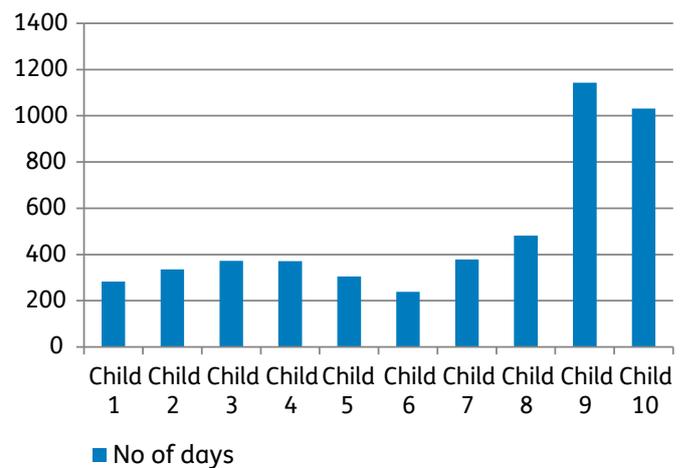
## Children Adopted

10 children were adopted during this year. These include a sibling group of three all under 5 years of age, one child aged five and the other were single children all under two years of age. This is the lowest number adopted for more than 5 years, and reflects both changes in the Court’s approach to adoption and Local Authority care planning practice during 2015-16.

- Of the 10 children adopted 7 met the A1 score (426 days) with scores of 283, 335, 373, 371, 305, 239 and 379 days, being significantly below the threshold of 426 days.
- The child with a score of 379 was part of the sibling group of three placed together. The other two children within this sibling group failed the A1 score (more information to follow).
- The remaining three children did not meet the A1 threshold with scores of 482 (single child) and 1143, 1031 days (two children from sibling group of three). The significant delay in respect of the two siblings (part of a group of three) was linked to significant delay within the court proceedings. The A2 score of 10 days as outlined below from Placement Order to ADM match evidences that family finding/linking run concurrently alongside the delay within the proceedings for these children in order to prevent any further delay. The prospective adopters were on hold for a significant period until the proceedings were concluded and the match was considered as soon as possible for the children to be placed for adoption.
- Of the 10 children adopted, all met the A2 score threshold of 121 days. Sefton’s scores were: 10, 10, 10 (sibling group of three as mentioned above), 113, 80, 87, 79, 121, 102 and 97 days.

Following Sefton’s Ofsted inspection between the 11.4.16 and 5.5.16, the graded judgement for adoption performance was as “requiring improvement”. A number of strengths and improvements were highlighted and the service is committed to building on these. The following information is abstracted directly from the Ofsted report, published 27.6.16.

## No of days - threshold 426



7 children met the threshold, of the remaining three there were significant delays with court proceedings

*Sefton’s adoption service was made the subject of an improvement notice between December 2012 and June 2014 due to its poor performance in placing children with adopters quickly. Since that time, effective tracking systems that ensure that children’s plans consider permanence at an early stage and monitor their progress through care proceedings have been routinely used, and unnecessary delay is avoided. Oversight of progress by a dedicated family finder and senior managers through adoption permanence panels ensures that plans do not drift. Good communication with the family finder enables the adoption team to give early consideration to the adopters already approved and those who are in the assessment process as potential matches for children.*

*The authority's performance against the Department for Education's adoption scorecard shows a year-on-year improvement in timeliness performance.*

*The local authority's average number of days between receiving the court authority to place a child to be adopted and the authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family in 2012-15 was 253 days, which is an improvement on the 282 days for 2011-2014. This is still 132 days outside the national scorecard threshold of 121 days. However, in the last year, despite having five children over the target number of days, the average for all 11 children was 107 days, which again demonstrates positive progress, and below the national target.*

Adoption Permanence Planning Meetings are held every other month and dates and deadlines tracked for all children with a plan for adoption. This allows for the process of family finding matching and approval to be closely synchronised, as well as identifying those children whose health or developmental needs will potentially cause delay in the plan for adoption.

## **Interagency Placements:**

There were 9 interagency placements for Sefton children consisting of 4 single children, a sibling group of 3 and a sibling group of 2. Four of these adoptive placements were via voluntary adoption agencies and one Local Authority. The cost of these placements was £157,133.

2 Sefton approved families had children placed with them from different Local Authorities. This generated an income of £54,000.

With regard to the sibling group of three, as they had been Looked After for 18 months at November 2016, this met the DfE criteria for reimbursement of the Inter-Agency fee.

Inter-agency placement Net cost for 2016/17 was £43,133.

## Recruitment/Assessment/Family finding

### Advertising/publicity

Word of mouth continues to be one of the most effective ways of recruitment. Approved adopters play a pivotal role in recruiting and mentoring potential new adopters. Their experience is vital to help dispel some of the myths that prevent people from coming forward. Our adopters are involved in Information sessions, drop in events and recruitment stands. We also have a number of adopters who actively engage and support media work (press / radio / social media) to share their stories. Case studies feature prominently on our website as do videos of our adopters sharing their experiences.

Social Media as in previous years continues to be successful in generating enquiries. Alongside Sefton's Facebook and Twitter accounts, the service has access to a wide range of Local Authority Social Media Channels. The social media channels with the greatest impact for the service are Facebook and Twitter.

For each 'hard to place child' a quality paper profile, professional picture and video is produced. These are used extensively during the family finding process on Adoption link, Adopt Northwest and exchange days etc. These have proved to be invaluable in making high quality matches.

The adoption team recruits adults from both within and outside of the borough of Sefton (geographic proximity) who appear most able to meet the likely needs of children requiring adoption. Sefton's priority is to recruit adopters willing to consider children who are older (over 4 years), part of a sibling group or having complexity of need.

The team facilitate 6 Information Evenings per year to enable people interested in adoption to

learn about the adopter process, decide whether to progress their interest further and begin to learn about the nature of children needing adoptive families. The team will complete an Initial Visit as a follow up to any initial enquiry to the team or following an Information Evening. Most enquiries to adopt come electronically through Sefton's adoption website.

### The Two stage Approval Process

The team facilitates the Stage One (learning and self-development) of the adopter process enabling adoptive applicants a two month period to learn more about their own motivation to adopt and about the task of adopting children who have suffered trauma and abuse. Statutory agency checks, DBS and medical checks are taken in Stage One and applicants attend 3 day Preparation Groups facilitated by the team and other relevant speakers.

The team progress only those applicants who appear most able to meet most of the needs of children to Stage Two of the adopter process; this being an assessment of their qualities and ability, culminating in the prospective adopter report - PAR. Four months is permitted to conclude Stage two - to complete the assessment and PAR, attend panel and achieve the agency decision maker's approval (ADM) and becoming registered adopters with Sefton.

### Adoption Preparation Training

All prospective adopters in stage one of the process are required to attend 3 days Adoption Preparation training that is facilitated by two adoption social workers and the Adoption Lead Practitioner for Assessment. Sefton and Wirral have successfully alternated every two months the delivery of this training for Sefton and Wirral prospective adopters since January

2014. As part of the forthcoming transition to a regional agency (the agency will be part of AIM, Adoption In Merseyside) which consists of Sefton, Liverpool, Wirral and Knowsley we have more recently shared adoption preparation training between the four Local Authorities. This has meant prospective adopters do not have to wait to attend training as they are running even more frequently and it has also supported the promotion of good practice by sharing ideas to improve adopter preparation training.

The areas covered in adoption preparation training include attachment, brain development, therapeutic parenting, life work, contact, child care procedures, adoption process, family finding, adoption support, looked after children's health, adoption medical and personal experiences of adopters. There are a variety of guest speakers that includes social workers, adoptive parents, foster carers, art psychotherapist and a medical advisor.

The following are direct quotes taken from prospective adopter's evaluation feedback following attending training. These include feedback from the four Local Authorities:

*A very concise, interesting course which has given me a good understanding of what is ahead. The facilitators have a passion for their roles which is a joy to see*

*Outstanding trainers- passion and knowledge gave me hope and positivity moving forward*

*The course was very insightful-full of information and skills on how to move forward in the adoption process- Thank You*

The recent Ofsted findings reported both good and poor practice:

*Adopters are positive about the quality of information and the welcome that they receive when making an enquiry to become adopters. This includes relevant literature and research findings, and adopters are asked to complete a comprehensive workbook at stage one.*

*The majority of assessments are timely and comprehensive, and delays are due to factors outside of the control of the service. Adopters in the last year have been from a suitably diverse range of backgrounds and family composition, and include people from ethnic minorities, single people and same-sex couples.*

*In the year 2015-16, none of the 11 Sefton children placed for adoption both with Sefton adopters and adopters from other local authorities experienced a disruption of the placement. However, Sefton adopters experienced unusually high levels of placement disruptions. No formal consideration of learning or identification of themes has happened and, consequently, no actions have been taken to prevent further disruptions in the future.*

During 2016/17 there have been no disruptions within Sefton and in November 2016 a joint team and panel training day took place "Lessons learned from disruptions". The day focused on the critical points when considering these disruptions;

- Assessment, training and preparation for adoption (adopters/child)
- Child/ren placed not in original age range/ number considered by adopters
- Introduction process experienced difficulties, e.g. rushed, plans not followed, geographical distance.

- Difficulties in relationship with existing child in family
- Child's behaviour (physical, emotional, sexual, additional case needs)
- Issues arising subsequent to the placement, e.g. family issues
- Availability/consistency of support

A psychotherapist also provided a training session on the importance of an adopters own attachment history in parenting a child who has suffered trauma and abuse and how "blocked care" can have a devastating impact on the therapeutic parenting children require.

The following are the common themes and issues noted from the feedback of the training day:

### Child issues:

- In all cases, the children had spent a significant period in care, often more than half their lifetimes.
- Some had experienced neglect and abuse prior to becoming looked after and/or several changes of care giver.

### Placing authority issues

- The preparation of some children for the transition to an adoptive placement had been inadequate.
- In some cases, placement planning was late/insufficiently detailed. This was seen to be a particular issue with inter-agency placements, where differing processes can lead to differing expectations.
- Some introductions were too short or otherwise flawed. This was a particular issue where children were being placed some distance away or where the timing of the introduction was dictated by other events, for example, foster carers' commitments. In one case, a substantial part of the introduction time was taken up

with "farewell parties".

- A lack of consideration/assessment of the differing/competing needs of siblings when seeking to place sibling groups.
- Changes in the child's social worker.
- Prospective adopters were not always given all the available information about the child. The language used to describe children's behaviour may not have been as explicit as it should have been.

### Adoption agency issues

- Inter-agency matching presented particular challenges. The agency knew its adopters, their strengths and vulnerabilities, but needed to have confidence in the placing agency's assessment of the child's needs.
- In two cases, the prospective adopters had identified potential matches prior to the completion of their assessment. Consequently, the terms of their recommended matching criteria were determined with the children they had identified in mind, rather than being more objective.
- Following the disruption, some adopters acknowledged that their enthusiasm to become parents/proceed with the placement prevented them hearing all the information they were given about the child.
- In one case, although the prospective adopters' birth child had been fully involved in the assessment, their response to the placement of a child had not been anticipated and had precipitated the disruption.

### Adopter issues

- There was a lack of a shared understanding of the descriptions of children's behaviour, see comment above re the language used

to describe children's behaviour.

- Adopters' limited informal network of support, or supporters who proved unreliable.
- Adopters not being prepared to accept the agencies' support.
- Unexpected post-placement changes in the adopters' circumstances.
- Adopters not recognising the value of having a gradual, rather than abrupt, transition from the foster carers' parenting style.

### Learning for the practice of the Adoption Team and Panel

- These four disruptions should be considered in the context that all adoption carries some risk and the overwhelming majority of placements work well. Also, while there is always scope to improve practice and to use research and experience to learn about risk factors, assessment and matching cannot be an exact science and many placements work because of the idiosyncrasies of the adults and children.
- There have already been some practice developments, for example some training for family and friends of prospective adopters, i.e. their informal support network, is planned.
- Regarding the assessment of prospective adopters, all groups had concluded that they would have recommended approval. The reaction of the birth child in one case indicates a desirability of an assessment of the emotional resilience of any children already in the household.
- Adoption agency staff need to feel confident to challenge the placing agency's processes and plans. They should be satisfied that the assessment of the child's needs and their preparation for placement

has been adequate, that the proposed placement arrangement for siblings is appropriate and that placement planning is timely and sufficiently detailed.

- Sufficient time should be allowed for introductions and as far as possible they should reflect what will be normal post-placement life for the child and prospective adopters.
- Where prospective adopters are identifying their own links, the assessment's conclusion about matching considerations should be informed by their capacity to care for those children.
- More detailed assessment/preparation of those prospective adopters wanting to be matched with sibling groups would have been desirable. In some cases, extra time may be necessary to ensure that prospective adopters' expectations of the child/ren with whom they have been linked are realistic. It was noted that impediments to spending extra time pre-placement include the target timescales for matching, the desire to minimise the time children spend waiting and prospective adopters enthusiasm.
- When developing support plans, prospective adopters should be consulted about the nature of support they would find helpful.

### Family/Friend Preparation Training (New Sefton Development)

This development has been part of the lessons learned from disruptions as adopters own support networks are crucial in a successful adoptive placement. Sefton Family and Friends training was delivered for the first time on the 17th January 2017 at Merton House where thirteen people attended. The course content included why children come into care, attachment theory and children's experiences of trauma, loss and

grief. This then progressed to relating this to understanding children's behaviours and shared strategies of how support networks can assist carers in meeting a family's needs pre and post adoption order to prevent disruptions. The feedback form attendees were positive:

*I have found the course helpful and informative for our role as adoptive grandparents of an adopted child*

*Very informative and will help me to give support to my family*

*Everything was explained in an excellent way- perhaps too much on the worst case scenario but I suppose it needs to be*

This feedback alongside a course rating of excellent and good demonstrates how well received the course was by attendees. The next course has been scheduled to be delivered on 20.6.17 with family and friends being invited from our regional partners Knowsley, Wirral and Liverpool local authorities in preparation for the Merseyside regionalisation. We anticipate delivering the course three to four times a year as part of the pre order interventions within the new adoption agency Adoption In Merseyside (AIM)

### **Bump Into meetings (New Sefton development)**

Although many agencies are using 'bump into' meetings, these are a new practice in Sefton that so far have proved to be very positive and we plan to continue with this practice. These meetings are where the prospective adopter/s meet

the child/ren before matching panel. Sefton's Adoption Panel have recently been provided with a briefing about the benefits of these.

#### **Rationale**

The majority of children requiring adoption today are older, non-baby placements. Because these children are older they have lived in birth family environments that have caused them 'significant harm' for longer. Recent advances in neuroscience have highlighted that children's brain development, most rapid in the first years, is adversely affected by trauma. Frequent, prolonged exposure to abuse or neglect in the early years results in 'developmental trauma' (Van Der Kolk). These children have high levels of anxiety and this can manifest in varied ways.

This is highly significant when thinking about placement transitions. A foster carer may see a move to adoption for their child as a cause for celebration. For the prospective adopters the move will may represent a long awaited, much longed for moment in their life when they will become parents for the first time, often after years of longing and frustration. For the child, this change of carer and routine will be seen as a threat to their safety and will inevitably trigger fight, flight or freeze responses of the primitive brain. Unremembered but neurally wired memories of past separations, moves and new carers will be triggered. (Perry 2006)

However well planned a move is by the adults, the child will perceive it to be a repetition of past abandonments and rejections unless that experience is acknowledged and the child empowered to approach this transition differently. Using a brain informed approach to managing anxiety in introductions is essential. In the current fashion of introductions a first meeting between adopters and older children is usually a highly stressful event on all sides and

leads to the risk that the child's limbic brain will associate these adults with fear.

Family Futures is an independent adoption support agency well known for evidence based therapeutic interventions. In their document "Planning Transitions for Children moving to Permanent Placement" they advise

"It is probably better that the child meets his/her prospective adopters in person before being told anything about them. The rationale for this is that talking to the child, showing them photographs, sharing information about the prospective adopters will inevitably raise the level of the child's anxiety, meaning that this information becomes linked to an experience of heightened anxiety. This may seem counter intuitive as the sharing of information is intended to reassure the child. However it is not the information that will impact the child, it is the stress associated with change and separation that will be triggered. If the child meets the prospective adopters and has a positive experience of being with these real people it will be easier for the child to associate these new people with positive feelings and experiences"

## Adoption Panel

Sefton Adoption Panel's role is;

- To consider and make recommendations concerning whether:
  - Individuals/couples/families are suitable to adopt;
  - Proposed matches for the purposes of adoption are appropriate.
- To quality assure reports presented to panel in respect of the above and feedback to the agency accordingly
- To review adopters and children "waiting" for placement and, where relevant, recommend de-registration of adopters

- To offer the agency advice about matters such as placement support plans, delegation of parental responsibility and contact arrangements.
- In addition to this core business, panel should also receive reports on the disruption of placements.
- Panel may also comment on whether the agency is timely in its assessment of prospective adopters and in matching children in need of adoption with prospective adoptive parent/s.

Sefton's independent adoption panel uses an Independent Chair and a pool of 'Central list' members who have an interest and expertise in adoption to make recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker.

**For full information please refer to Sefton Adoption Panel Annual Report 2016/17**

# Adult: Data and Performance

## Pre-Stage Activity

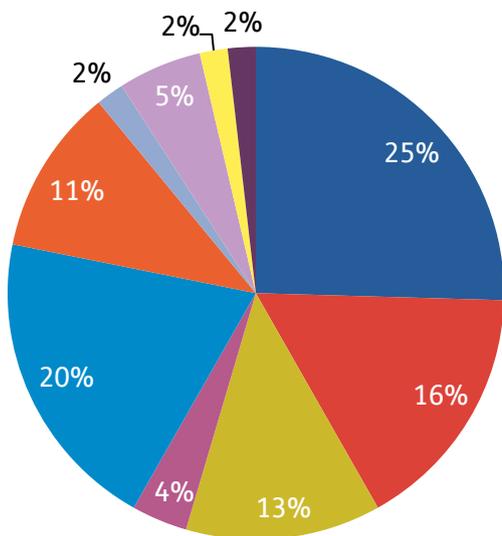
Adoption Enquiries received - 82

Telephone calls by Adoption Service duty -76

Of all the calls made there was no response from 14 enquirers despite a number of attempts by duty workers.

21 progressed to an initial visit.

## Reasons for not progressing to an initial visit



- No response to initial contact
- Information only
- In process of moving/building work
- Exploring other LA's and voluntary agencies
- Still exploring IVF, last cycle recent or recent loss
- Birth child too young
- Birth child transitioning into high school
- Very recently stopped smoking
- Recent death of close family member
- Mental health issues

## Data for not progressing to an initial visit

No response from their initial contact - 14

Information only - 9

In process of moving/building work/no spare room - 7

Exploring other LA's and voluntary agencies - 2

Still exploring IVF or last cycle very recent or recent loss - 11

Birth child too young - 6

Birth child transitioning to high school - 1

Very recently stopped smoking - 3

Recent death of close family member - 1

Mental health issues - 1

## Stage One

Of the 21 initial visits 9 progressed to Stage One. Some reasons for not progressing include applicant's decision or Agency decision for example:

Applicant's needed more time

One couple were second time adopters who decided it was not right time for their adopted son

Agency decision's made not to progress included financial, issues, accommodation issues.

Mental health issues highlighted and complexities with their birth child.

One couple decided to explore another cycle of IVF.

Two initial visits of the 21 were fast tracked to Stage 2 (one single prospective adopter had opted for 6 month break between stage 1 and 2. The second was fast tracked to stage two as second time adopters).

From the 9 progressed to stage one, three couples were not progressed to Stage two. Agency decision based on :

Significant concerning information received from referees.

A lack of openness and honesty relating to mental health highlighted within applicant's medicals.

Concerns highlighted relating to unresolved/unprocessed trauma and abuse in applicants' own history.

One couple withdrew from Stage One due to pregnancy.

When the Agency reaches a decision not to progress to Stage 2 of the process this is a fully considered child-centred decision and the Adoption Lead Practitioner for Recruitment/assessment completes a detailed written account of the reasons.

The remainder of those in Stage One as of 31.03.17 either remain in Stage One or have since progressed to Stage 2.

## Stage Two

For the period of 01.04.16 to 31.03.17, 6 adoptive families were progressed to Stage 2. Two of these included the fast tracked ones mentioned above. Five of these were approved as suitable to adopt. One single prospective adopter opted to withdraw following a negative Stage 2 assessment.

## Approved Adopters

During the period from 01.04.16 to 31.03 17, 12 adoptive families were approved as suitable to adopt. All approved adopters with the exception of one single adopter for this period met the stage two timescales of four months to the Agency Decision Maker ratifying panel's recommendation of suitability to adopt. With regard to the one single adopter, stage two was extended by a month due to further time needed to explore some complex issues.

- Couple approved 16.4.16: Matched to Blackpool child on 20.10.16, placed 16.11.16
- Couple approved 9.6.16: Matched to Sefton child 7.3.17, placed 16.3.17
- Couple approved 9.6.16: Matched to Sefton child 16.8.16, placed 11.9.16
- Couple approved 5.7.16: ongoing family finding
- Couple approved 5.7.16: approved foster to adopt 13.12.16 for specific child. Placed

8.1.17 under Regulation 25A. Following Placement Order on 18.4.17, match ratified on 17.5.17

- Couple approved 4.8.16: linked to Sefton child (matched 7.6.17)
- Couple approved 26.10.16: Matched to Sefton child 10.2.17, placed 20.2.17
- Same sex couple approved 26.10.16: Approved as Foster to Adopt under Regulation 25A for specific child 29.3.17. Child not yet placed due to contested proceedings. Couple remain on hold awaiting outcome
- Single male adopter approved 18.11.16: Link to Sefton child and been on hold for this child whilst proceedings concluded. Match being considered 26.6.17.
- Couple approved 18.11.16: External match; Tameside Local Authority.
- Couple approved 18.11.16: Matched to Sefton child 31.3.17
- Couple approved 7.3.17 linked to Lancashire child

In addition, to the number of approvals in 2016/17 the following four adoptive families were approved in the previous financial year but are at different stages of the process;

- Couple approved 15.12.15: This couple remained on hold for a significant period for a child the responsibility of Lancashire Council. Child placed on 14.3.17.
- Single female adopter approved 19.2.16: matched to Sefton child 7.12.16, child placed 17.12.16. Final adoption hearing scheduled for 20.6.17
- Couple approved 19.2.16: A number of potential links since approval. Linked to Sefton child. Match being considered by panel on 26.6.17.
- Couple approved 3.3.16; Matched to Blackpool child on 17.10.16, placed 9.2.17.

In addition, a further four Sefton approved families had final Adoption Orders granted in this financial year for Sefton children, including a sibling group of three and three single children.

### Foster to Adopt

The Adoption team actively promote this child centred route to adoption from the point that a prospective adopter/s make an enquiry and throughout the two stage process. In 2016/17 6 of the families approved could consider Foster to Adopt.

A Foster to Adopt placement will only be made where there is clear evidence to the Local Authority that there is little likelihood that the birth parents can resolve their problems or that other family members can care for the child.

Foster to adopt places a child with approved adopters who can accept the level of uncertainty that this route to adoption may bring before the court's final decision. The Agency Decision Maker approves the adopter/s as temporary foster carers (named child) under Regulation 25A (Care planning, Placement and Review Regulations).

The children's teams are key in identifying the child that this route maybe suited to and some of the reasons are as follows:

- Where parents have had one or more children previously placed for adoption or other forms of permanent placement and the evidence strongly suggests that their circumstances have not changed and pose the same risks as they did to the previous child/ren. The local authority does not have a proactive plan to rehabilitate the child as the circumstances of the parents are such to pose a serious on-going risk.
- Where this is the first child, the circumstances of the parents and the risks to the child are such that there is no

proactive plan to return the child to the birth parents or to other family members.

- Where parents have indicated that they may want their child adopted, but have not formally consented. (S52(3) Adoption and Children Act 2002) (Relinquishment)

As part of the forthcoming RAA, it has been confirmed that non-agency applications will remain within the Local Authority.

### **Advantages of Foster to adopt**

- The child is placed with carers who may become their adopters at an early stage and avoids multiple placements for the child.
- It will avoid the stressful upheaval for the child if he/she has to move from foster home to a new adoptive family once a court has reached a final decision.
- The bonding period between the child and adoptive parents can begin sooner thus creating a secure and loving family life for the child.

### **Non-Agency applications**

The adoption service also has responsibility of the completion of the Annex A report for all private adoption applications (step parent adoptions). Letters of intent are provided to the adoption lead practitioner (Recruitment/assessment). This letter is giving the Local Authority three months' notice before the court will accept the adoption application. The lead practitioner aims to allocate the Annex A report prior to the three months, however this depends on caseloads of the adoption social workers as Agency adoptions are the Service's priority. Some of the non-agency applications are complex with birth fathers not in the UK and interpreters have been used on occasions to ascertain wishes/feelings.

In 2016/17, 8 letters of intent have been received. Currently, 4 Annex A reports are in process. 3 adoption orders have been granted in this year (one of these included Sefton foster carers who made a private application for a Sefton Child in their care).

## Adoption Support

The provision of adoption support services is a crucial element of the statutory framework. Adoptive children and their families are likely to have a range of additional needs throughout their lives.

The team responds to adoptive families' requests for support and complete assessments of need. Adopters are prepared by the team to respond to their children with a 'therapeutic' style of parenting which takes account of the long term effects of early trauma. Many adopters need assistance in their parenting responses when behaviours or coping strategies become triggered at different stages. Therapeutic input at a low level is available from Sefton's therapeutic team and all adopters attend 'Safebase' training (attachment based parenting programme) during the initial stages of placement. The Safebase training programme has been jointly commissioned by Sefton and Mr Timpson for the last four three years. Twenty families a year have had the opportunity to attend this training if they had a Sefton child placed with them or if they were Sefton approved adopters.

Placement support Workers in the team provide activity based respite to adoptive families; the respite also extends to providing regular 'short break' provision on individual cases where the family's need for short breaks has been assessed. The short break activities offered by the team usually fall within school holidays, while one to one support for struggling families is more readily available whenever the need arises. The role of the PSW is also to complete the life books for all children who have achieved adoption or those who have experienced an adoption placement breakdown.

The team facilitates the Letterbox system to enable written contacts between adoptive and birth families (while maintaining anonymity

of the adoptive placement). The team also facilitates the supervision of a small number of direct contact arrangements between birth relatives and adopted children.

The team commissions a service for adult adoptees living in the borough of Sefton from PAC-UK, regarding requests for access to adoption files and 'search and reunion'; also an intermediary service for birth relatives of adult adoptees is provided.

In 2016/2017 the team provided support to 160 adoptive families and 55 adult adoptees or birth relatives. This drop in numbers compared to data of previous year coincides with the completion of annual reviews on all families in receipt of services which resulted in the identification of cases that no longer required Local Authority support.

Adoption has lifelong implications for birth families, adoptive parents and adopted children. Adopted children have complex needs and the post adoption team provides a range of specialist therapeutic and practical support which is tailored to meet individual needs.

This includes supporting parents in better understanding the effects on their child of the parenting strategies they use and the impact of the child's early life experiences in the child's behaviour; and providing advice on what could be described as 'therapeutic parenting techniques'. During 2015 to 2016 two team members completed specialist training on Non Violence Resistance and one completed training on Developmental Dyadic Psychotherapy level 1. In March 2017 another team member completed training on Developmental Dyadic Psychotherapy Level 1. The intention of skilling staff in the team was not only to provide more effective support

to adopters, but also to be able to start making our own applications to the adoption support fund to generate an additional income or to incur expenses of previous support services offered to the provision of therapeutic respite to adoptive families that has been funded by the ASF.

Adoption support services provided by Sefton include:

- Post adoption support, advice, training to any adoptive families living in Sefton and for three years following the making of an adoption order for those children who have been placed by Sefton.
- Sign posting prospective adopters of children to the service provided by preventative services when appropriate.
- Providing access to adoption records, counselling for adopted adults and intermediary services for those who wish to trace birth relatives. From 2014 birth relatives are entitled to the provision of intermediary services from their council.
- Direct work with children who require additional respite provision or the support from a Placement Support Worker. Direct work has often been identified prior to the placement for adoption of children or just after when large sibling groups of children have been placed.
- Provision of weekend short breaks to families in need of this service who have children from the ages of 7 to 15. This service takes place twice a year and four placement support workers take a group of children away for the weekend to activity based camps. This service is highly valued and receives very positive feedback from adoptive families.
- Applications to the adoption support fund.
- The provision, review and assessment of

financial support packages to adoptive families.

- The setting and management of the letterbox contact including the provision of information and advice to all parties.
- The organisation of social events for adoptive families: Christmas Party and Summer Picnic.
- Provision of training around trauma and attachment to school staff in adoption support cases.
- Provision of adoption related training to adopters or any other professional that is outlined within Sefton's training calendar.
- Provision of life books to every child who has been placed for adoption.

With regard to Sefton's adoption support, the Ofsted report stated;

*Adoption support is an area of strength. Effective support is available to birth families, children and adopters. A wide range of support is available, including direct work with families, letterbox contact, direct contact supervision and general advice giving. A range of therapeutic services are available through the use of the adoption support fund. Following a social work assessment, appropriate support is provided. Support packages are available to all adoptive families, regardless of the length of the placement. The support offered is timely and responsive. The service also offers a range of activities to adopted children, such as bowling, walking and residential trips as well as direct work.*

### **Adoption Support fund**

On 24th January 2013, the Department for Education (DfE) published their report 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding more loving homes', setting out their proposals to attract adopters and improve the support available to adoptive families. This led to the implementation of the

Prototype Adoption Support Fund in December 2013 which worked with ten Local Authorities to generate sustainable improvement to the assessment and provision of appropriate therapeutic support to adoptive families.

The Adoption Support Fund was opened to all 152 Local Authorities in England on 1st May 2015.

The Adoption support fund requires the Local Authority to complete an assessment of needs identifying with the family the therapeutic intervention that it's required.

### **Adoption Support data/activity**

During 2015/2016 the team has seen a considerable increase in the number and complexities of children referred for adoption support.

Between 1.4.16 and 31.3.17 the adoption service completed 46 assessments of adoption support needs in relation to 35 families. Just two of them did not result in the provision of adoption support although some of these assessments have not been completed yet, the families have been provided with different types of services from the team.

During this period the team has dealt with two adoption placement break downs whilst currently working to prevent others; three children were placed in care with parental consent, although one of these families received child in need short break care for 74 nights prior to the children becoming Looked After. A third family currently in receipt of short breaks (provided by foster carer) in an attempt to prevent accommodation. Currently only one these children have a Child in Need plan and a social worker is allocated from one of the Assessment Teams.

### **Adoption support fund applications**

27 families have benefitted from the adoption support fund during this financial year.

### **Life books**

In 2013 and as a result of the Adoption Improvement Grant, Sefton commissioned 20 life books from a local voluntary adoption agency to reduce the backlog of life books that needed completing at the time. After a slow start in ensuring the voluntary agency workers had access to children's information on the ICS system and processes were complying with information compliance requirements, the work commenced in July 2014. Unfortunately the process was difficult and in October 2016 Sefton decided to negotiate the break of the contract and Sefton received a refund. These 20 life books were returned to be completed within the team.

During this year 18 life books were completed and currently there are 10 life books in the process of being completed. It is acknowledged that this has led to some delay for the children and families concerned.

### **Support to families**

This area of work has experienced an increasing high demand for the service. Requests for support for adoptive families come to the team from a wide range of sources, although it is mainly adopters who call the adoption team duty social worker requesting help mainly due to their child/ren displaying behavioural difficulties.

All the assessment of adoption support needs are completed and a support plan is implemented. This type of work often involves making applications to the adoption support fund. All the requests for the completion of assessments involve adoptive families experiencing difficulties parenting children who continue to have complex emotional and behavioural needs. A proportion

of those involve teenage children, where the risk of adoption breakdown is more prevalent. In this year the team worked with 13 adoptive families who parented teenage children, completing 17 assessments of needs.

During this year 5 activity days out were provided by the team, involving a total of 49 children and 10 adults. Two therapeutic breaks were provided and twenty children were invited.

The annual Christmas party had in attendance over 65 children and the Summer Picnic had over 100 attendants.

## Regionalisation

### A VISION FOR CHANGE:

The DfE has published a policy paper, **Adoption A vision for change**, which sets out its plans for adoption reform, as part of its overarching vision for transforming the quality of children's social care services by 2020. The key objectives identified by the government are to reverse the recent marked decline in the number of adoptions, and to address concerns that some children still wait too long for adoption, too many families miss out on vital support services, and some children fail to get the permanence option that would be in their best interests.

In considering the recent sharp decline in adoption numbers, the paper outlines the perceived impact of recent court judgements, which have also been considered (at greater length) by the Adoption Leadership Board's (ALB) 'myth buster' publication, *Impact of court judgements on adoption – what the judgements do and do not say*.

### Overview

Adoption: a vision for change sets out the government's vision for the adoption system in 2020, expanding on January's policy paper *Children's social care reform: a vision for change* and the accompanying announcement of plans to change adoption law.

The proposals aim to: address the unexpected recent fall in the number of adoption decisions; improve the effectiveness of the system through the introduction of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), with all local authorities (LAs) being part of an RAA by 2020; improve the professional skills and knowledge of the workforce through a new development programme and a new Specialist Knowledge and Skills statement setting out expectations on social workers; reduce the time children wait to be adopted; provide more high quality adoption support; and introduce new measures to embed further strong performance management and accountability.

Over coming months, views will be gathered on the proposed legislative changes, how they will be implemented in practice, and whether any further changes are required.

## Merseyside Regionalisation Developments

The Merseyside Regional Adoption Agency (known as Adoption in Merseyside) includes Sefton, Wirral, Knowsley, Liverpool, Nugent Care, After Adoption and Adoption Matters. Regular strategic and operational meetings have taken place. The go live date for the RAA is January 2018, although more collaborate working is already taking place with regard to information evenings, preparation training and adopters support groups. The Service structure has been agreed and a number of workstreams including IT, commissioning, HR, finance, learning/development continue to meet regularly as we move closer to the RAA. Three task and finish groups have focused on Recruitment/assessment, family finding and adoption support. The venue for the hub has now been identified in the Halewood area.

**Elaine Jamieson Lead Practitioner (Recruitment & Assessment)**

**Ana Maria Palmer Lead Practitioner (Adoption support)**

