

CABINET

12 JANUARY 2021

ANNUAL ADOPTION REPORT

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mrs Josie Iles, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Lead Member)

Report from: Ian Sutherland, Director of People, Children and Adults Services

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Summary

This report provides the Cabinet with the Adoption Agency's Annual Report. This annual report covers adoption performance during this period and provides an update on the work of the team.

This report also includes information about Adoption Partnership South East, the newly formed Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) with Kent County Council and the London Borough of Bexley.

Future annual reports on the work around adoption will be produced by the Head of the Adoption Partnership South East.

This report was initially considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 December 2020. The comments of this Committee are set out at section 9 of the report.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1. This report is consistent with the Council's budget and Policy Framework including the Council Plan, in particular the Council Plan priority "to develop Children's Services to be a good service."

2. Background

- 2.1. The Statutory Regulations require that Elected Members should be informed of the Adoption Agency's activity on a regular basis. This annual report provides information that will assist Elected Members in respect of their responsibilities as corporate parents for Looked After Children, and it should be read in conjunction with the Adoption Agencies Statement of Purpose. The work of the Agency is governed by the Adoption Act 1976, the Adoption and

Children Act 2002, the Children Act 1989, The Children and Adoption Act 2006 and associated guidance. In addition, the Agency works within the National Minimum Standard 2014, The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 and 2013 and the Statutory Adoption Guidance 2013.

- 2.2. The Agency has responded to and embraced the Government's Adoption Reform Programme and the Children and Families Act 2014. The Adoption Service contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people. Its key priority is to achieve permanence and stability for Looked After Children ensuring that they are brought up in loving, secure, stable families. Where a child's welfare requires placement outside the birth family, the Adoption Agency's paramount consideration is the welfare of the child throughout his or her life. Permanence outside the birth family will be legally secured through Adoption, Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order.
- 2.3. This report provided an overview of the Adoption services provided during the period October 2019 to September 2020.

3. Advice and analysis

3.1 Service Structure

- 3.1.1. The structure of the Adoption Service is set out at Appendix 1. As of 1 November 2020 the structure has changed, following the launch of the Adoption Partnership.

3.2. Adoption Panel

- 3.2.1. Adoption Panel contributes to the running and quality assurance of the local authority's adoption service and provides annual reports on the service and its performance. In doing so, it has an overriding responsibility to promote good practice, consistency of approach and fairness in all aspects of the adoption service, in accordance with its principles. As part of this function, the Panel makes recommendations on the following:

- Suitability of prospective adoptive applicants to adopt
- Whether a child should be placed for adoption (only for children voluntarily relinquished by a parent)
- Whether a child should be placed for adoption with particular prospective adopters

The recommendations must be unconditional and cannot be 'in principle'.

- 3.2.2. The panel meet every four weeks. During the most recent Ofsted inspection, the inspector commented on the effectiveness and quality of the panel discussion. The Adoption Panel makes recommendations to the agency about the cases referred to it. It is the role of the agency to make a decision and for this purpose, it is necessary to appoint a decision maker. The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is a senior person within the agency.

3.3. Adoption Panel Membership

3.3.1. As of 30 September 2020, the Adoption Panel central list was as follows:

- Independent Panel Chair
- Independent Vice Chair
- Independent second Vice Chair
- 4 further Independent members
- Social work qualified representatives
- Medical adviser
- 1 Elected Member Medway Council

3.3.2. Non-voting members include the Professional Adviser to the panel and Panel Administrators.

3.3.3. All Medway panel members were invited to express interest in joining the Adoption Partnership panels. Some Medway panel members, including the chair, decided to retire from the panel rather than transfer.

3.4. Panel Training and Development

3.4.1. The Adoption Agency strives to ensure there is a good level of induction, appraisal and training. Feedback from Panel members suggested that whole day training was difficult because of other commitments alongside the commitment to panel itself. Training has therefore been taking place on panel days following panel business when time has allowed.

3.4.2. All Panel Members had an annual appraisal completed by the Agency Panel Advisor and Panel Chair where their personal training needs are discussed and considered. This enables the identification of learning needs and effective planning of the training schedule for the following year. The Panel Chair meets with the Agency Decision Maker to have an annual appraisal undertaken by the Agency Decision Maker. In addition, representatives from the Agency and Panel Chair meet every 6 months for a Panel Liaison meeting to discuss issues with regard to the functioning of the panel and the agency. This meeting is shared with the Fostering Panel to improve consistency and practice across both panels.

3.5 Panel Activity and Agency Decision Maker

3.5.1. In the period between October 2019 and September 2020, the Adoption Panel met on 11 separate occasions. Following lockdown in March, adoption panels became virtual meetings through the use of Microsoft Teams. The government introduced changes to regulations as a result of Covid which allowed for Agency Decision Makers to agree placements in place of panels and for reduced quoracy. Despite the challenges, no panels have been cancelled and the work of panel has continued.

3.5.2. Below is a table detailing Panel activity for each month in terms of matches and approval of prospective adopters and also figures for decisions made by the Agency Decision Maker that supported a care plan for adoption for a child.

Panel decisions	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Year
Matches	0	4	3	4	0	2	1	1	5	0	0	1	21
Decision that adoption is the plan for the child	1	2	2	2	3	2	4	0	3	2	4	6	31
Adoptive families approved	0	1	0	0	1	0	3	3	1	0	0	0	12

Data Source: Performance and Information, Medway Council

3.5.3. The Agency Decision Maker decided that adoption should be the plan for 31 children in 2019/20, which is slightly lower than 34 children in 2018/19 and 33 in 2017/18. The details of these children are discussed in section 5 below.

3.5.4. In terms of matching children with prospective adopters, the panel considered matches for 21 children. This is higher to figures in 2018/19 and 2017/18, where 16 children were matched in both years.

3.5.5. The numbers of households approved as suitable to adopt has decreased this year to 12 in total compared to 17 in 2018/19. Covid and lockdown has had an impact on assessment of adopters although numbers of enquiries did increase as lockdown eased and there are more potential adopters in assessment.

Panel decisions	Year ending September 2018	Year ending September 2019	Year ending September 2020
Matches	16	16	21
Decision that adoption is the plan for the child	33	34	31
Adoptive families approved	12	17	12

Data Source: Performance and Information, Medway Council

4. Referrals for Adoption, Placements and Adoption Orders

4.1. Children Referred for Adoption

4.1.1. Medway has made recent changes to its permanency policy to ensure that all children are presented to Permanence Panel within 6 weeks of becoming looked after and cases are tracked on a monthly basis by the team manager with case responsibility to ensure plans are progressed without delay. Legal Panel and Permanence Panel will both consider opportunities for early permanence options through fostering for adoption to ensure these are considered as early as possible.

4.1.2. Following Permanence Panel, if adoption is identified as a potential plan for a child, a social worker in the Adoption team is allocated the case for monitoring and family finding. This link worker will begin work on potential matches prior to the final hearing by considering Medway approved adopters and contacting our RAA partners to ensure no delay with matching should the court grant a placement order.

4.1.3. The family finding social worker may be required to provide a written report for the courts around the viability and timescales for securing an adoptive family. They also attend subsequent looked after children reviews and review permanence planning meetings with the child's social worker to ensure that all involved in care planning for the child are working together.

4.2. Number of Children with an ADM Decision

4.2.1. As detailed above, in 2019/20 the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) decided that adoption should be the plan for 31 children, compared to 34 in 2018/19 and 33 in 2017/18. Of the 31 children, 2 of these children have already had changes of plan due to the court not granting a placement order. This was an older sibling group of two where the court did not consider family finding would be successful and the plan was changed to long term fostering.

4.2.2. Of the others, 13 to date have had a placement order granted and the remainder are in proceedings. Of these 13 children, 5 have had matches identified or are already placed and for one of these children, the adoption order has been granted. For 7 of these children, family finding is ongoing and for 1 child a family has been identified.

4.2.3. In addition to those children subject to court proceedings, there have been 3 babies who have been relinquished for adoption in the last year. Two of these were placed in a fostering for adoption placement and the other is being adopted by her foster carers.

4.3 Adoption Placements in 2019-20

4.3.1. In 2019/20, 21 children were matched and placed with prospective adopters. 10 children were matched and placed with adopters assessed and approved by Medway Council, 2 were placed with our RAA partners and 9 children were matched with prospective adopters approved by other agencies.

4.3.2. There were three sibling groups of 2 children placed for adoption during this period. This included one sibling group of 2 boys, aged 7 and 4, who had experienced significant early trauma.

4.3.3. As of 30 September 2020, there were 10 children with a placement order for whom active family finding is ongoing, although several of these are linked to potential families. There are 3 children for whom a family has been identified and a further 3 whose plans are being changed as it has not been possible to identify an adoptive family. The shortage of adopters nationally for older

children, sibling groups and children with complex developmental or trauma-related needs has been challenging and for some children, it has not been possible to identify families, despite extensive efforts.

4.3.4. Within this period Medway placed 4 children in a 'Fostering for Adoption' placement, including the 2 relinquished babies referred to above. There is now a duty for Local Authorities to consider providing this type of placements to children, however it is recognised that this will only be an option for a small number of children in any one year due to the risk of the child returning to parental or family care.

4.3.5. The Medway performance on the A1 indicator (time from entry into care to placement for adoption) for the three years ending September 2020 is 507 days. This is behind the latest national figures of 486 days, but an improvement on last year's figure of 539.

4.3.6. Performance on the A2 indicator (average time between local authority receiving court authority to place and identifying a match) for the year end September 2020 was 231 days, against a national average of 201 days. However, this figure includes children adopted by their foster carer and when this data is removed, the figure is 181 days.

4.4. Disruptions

4.4.1. One adoptive placement disrupted pre adoption order. The placement was of a sibling group of two and the placement of the older child disrupted after 6 months in placement. The children were placed shortly before lockdown and this had a profound effect on the placement as the workers were not able to visit and provide face to face support. In addition, the children were not in school which further challenged the placement. Although the older child returned to a placement in Medway, the younger child is still in placement with the adopters. A disruption meeting will be held to ensure any learning from this disruption will be taken forward.

4.5. Ethnicity of the Children Placed for Adoption

4.5.1. 20 of the children placed for adoption were white British, the other 1 was white and black Caribbean.

4.6. Ages of the Children Placed for Adoption

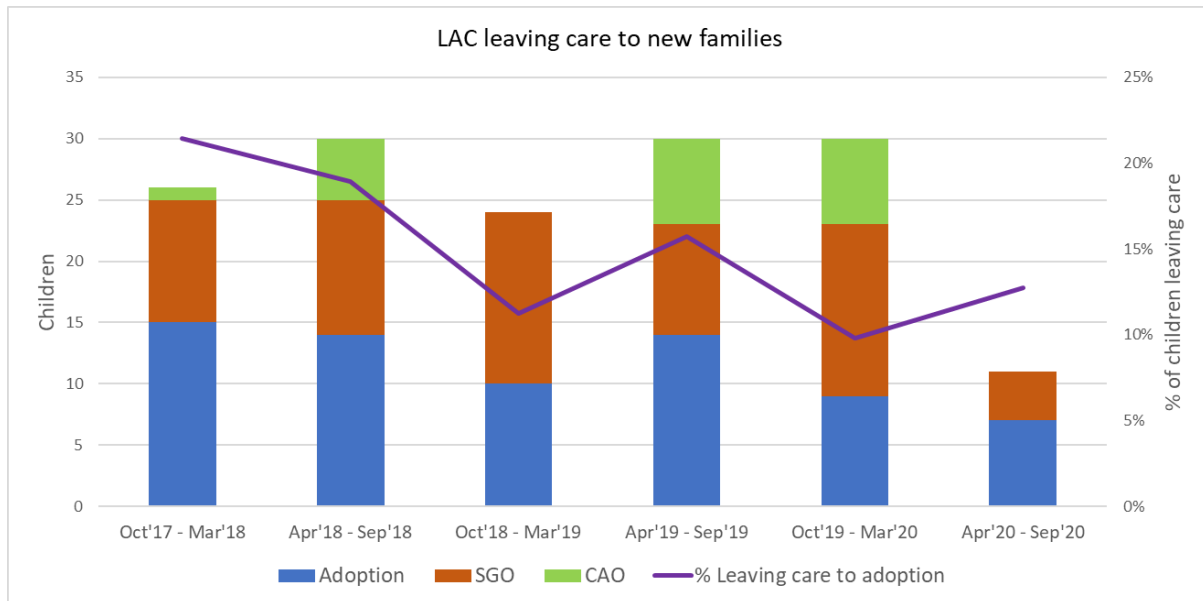
4.6.1 Of the children matched, 12 were aged 2 years or under, 4 were between 3 years and 4 years, and 5 were 5 years and over.

4.7. Gender of Children Placed for Adoption

4.7.1. Of the 21 children matched for adoption, 8 were females and 13 were male.

4.8. Adoption Orders

4.8.1. The graph below details the numbers of children leaving care to Adoption, Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and Child Arrangement Orders (CAO), previously Residence Orders (RO) and demonstrates marked change in the use of Child Arrangement Orders, a reduction in the use of Special Guardianship Orders and increase in the use of Adoption Orders. The 11% of children leaving Medway care to adoption in the last 12 months is a reduction from historical performance, and slightly lower than the national figure of 13%.



4.8.2. Some of the reduction in adoption orders reflects the national shortage of adopters, especially for traditionally “harder to place” children. There have been a number of children in the last few years who have required a change of plan away from adoption because it has not been possible to find adopters nationally, because of their level of special needs or because they are part of sibling groups.

4.8.3. Although these children have had plans changed, the team have successfully placed some older sibling groups and children with complex, trauma related needs as a result of early abuse and neglect. Although these placements have taken up to a year to identify, which is outside the government expectations for placement, it has nevertheless been a significant success for those children.

4.8.4 Adoption Partnership will provide access to a larger pool of adopters for Medway children, making it easier and quicker to place Medway children. This will bring significant benefits to children who will more quickly achieve permanence in their adoptive homes.

4.8.5. Special guardianship orders have tended to fluctuate year on year. Special Guardianship orders are generally used for family members who come forward to care for a child from within their extended family. This ensures that

children can grow up within their own network, rather than being adopted by a stranger. The courts require the local authority to ensure that “nothing else will do” when considering adoption so all possible family members will be explored before a plan for adoption is made.

5. Prospective Adopters

5.1. Information for Prospective Adopters

5.1.1. Medway Council has a single point of contact to the service through its dedicated email address and telephone line. Information is also freely available via the council website with links to an initial enquiry form.

5.1.2. Social workers from the team send information and speak to all potential new applicants within 5 working days of contact and offer attendance at information evenings and initial interviews. Information evenings were held monthly with colleagues from London Borough of Bexley, where current information on the needs of children requiring adoption and the process of assessment is provided to people who are interested in becoming prospective adopters. Lockdown in March prevented the Team from holding these events but Adoption Partnership began joint virtual open events in May and these have been very successful in attracting new adopters who will become adopters for the Partnership.

5.2. Recruitment of Adopters

5.2.1. In order to ensure a range of adopters are recruited for children and to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive families, a range of recruitment activity has taken place during the year. Research has shown that most applicants express interest through internet searches and through social media so recruitment activity has focussed on these avenues. The Senior in the team responsible for recruitment has ensured that all enquiries through social media have a rapid response. The team has also used local press articles to highlight the need for adopters for particular children, such as sibling groups.

5.2.2. Adoption Agencies have a duty to recruit a range of adopters to meet the needs of the children they are seeking to place for adoption. The recruitment strategy considers the sufficiency of adopters required to meet the needs of children in Medway.

5.2.3. Recruitment has been a joint enterprise for the Adoption Partnership since April as it was agreed that all adopters from that point would become adopters for the partnership. Information events have been publicised across the three local authorities and have attracted a strong response.

6. The Assessment Process

6.1. Enquires, Assessment and Approvals

6.1.1. All assessments are carried out in accordance with The Statutory Guidance for Adoption July 2013, National Minimum Standards 2014 and the Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005.

6.1.2. There were 16 initial enquiries received during 2019/20, of which 9 households attended an information meeting during this period. Although not all enquiries progressed, it is not unusual for prospective adoption applicants to make enquiries to decide that adoption is not right for them at that time. Some applicants may reconnect at a later stage and progress from an initial enquiry and follow through with an application.

6.1.3. There were 7 Registration of Interests received by the Agency, and of these, 2 households were second time adopters or foster carers, moving straight into stage 2, with the remaining households going into stage 1.

6.1.4. During 2019/20, 10 applications were presented to the Adoption Panel, all of whom were approved. 4 of these families have a child placed with them and 1 already has an adoption order. For the remaining families, family finding is ongoing.

6.2. Makeup of households/Applicants presented to the Adoption panel in 2019/20

6.2.1 There were 9 couples and 1 single adopter approved by the Adoption Panel.

6.3. Ethnicity of Adopters approved in 2019/20

6.3.1. Of the 10 households approved 7 were White British (WB) couples, 1 couple was Black or Black British and 1 couple were from another black background. The single adopter was WB.

6.4. Pre and Post Approval Support

6.4.1. All applicants and approved adopters are supported by a Social Worker from the Adoption team from application right through to approval, the process of placement of children, to the making of an Adoption Order. Once an Adoption Order has been made, adopters continue to access support or can request an assessment of their additional support needs through the Adoption team.

6.4.2. Adoption Partnership has dedicated teams to recruit, assess and support adopters and the support needs will be as effectively met under the Partnership and there will be wider access to further training and support.

7. Adoption Support Services

7.1. Pre and Post Adoption Support for Families

- 7.1.1. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 established the right of adopted families to request an assessment of their adoption support needs. Our website informs the public about the level of support Medway offers both pre and post placement and how help and support can be accessed. Also available is a 'Children's Guide to Adoption Support'.
- 7.1.2. Each request for adoption and special guardianship support is assessed to ensure the appropriate support is put in place, whether through social work support from the team or specialist support through the provision of therapy or counselling. The recent Ofsted report commented on post adoption support as comprehensive and easily accessible.
- 7.1.3. Until the formation of the Adoption Partnership, Medway Adoption Team offered support to both adoptive families and to Special Guardians. However Special Guardian support is not transferring to the RAA and so Special Guardianship support is now being offered by the Connected Carer Team. The transfer of the support to the team which undertake the Special Guardianship assessments will benefit the carers and also better inform the assessments being undertaken in the team. However, this is likely to lead to an increase in the requests for Special Guardian support.
- 7.1.4. The Department for Education Adoption Support Fund has been available since April 2015 to provide funding for therapeutic support in recognition of the impact of trauma and loss for all children who are placed for adoption and the lifelong impact of this. Considerable funding continues to be made available through the Adoption Support Fund for adopters and Special Guardians. Additional funding was also made available during the initial lockdown which was used to support adopters to access online support and training.
- 7.1.5. The team have a mailing list of adoptive families who are sent newsletters, invitations to training and support groups, and social events including a Christmas party and a summer picnic.
- 7.1.6. Each child placed for adoption is required to have a contact plan in relation to their birth family. The service currently manages letter box exchanges on behalf of 250 children and families many of which have required direct intervention to support all the parties involved in the contact arrangements, i.e. adopted children and young people, their adoptive parents and their birth families.
- 7.1.7. The team also supervised 3 direct contact arrangements between children, their adopters and birth family members.
- 7.1.8. This area of work is still under discussion as to how the new Adoption Partnership will cover this going forward. Decisions will be made on this within the next few months.

7.2. Commissioned Support Services

- 7.2.1. During this period, Medway Council remained a full member of CoramBAAF. CoramBAAF is a leading agency for research, professional advice and development. They also organise the National Adoption Week and Adoption Activity Days where would-be adoptive parents meet children with a plan of adoption.
- 7.2.2. The Agency has also continued its membership with New Family Social, a national charity supporting adopters and foster carers from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-gender community. This organisation provides social events, a website and membership events for carers, and support and advice to adoption agencies.
- 7.2.3. The future of these commissioned services will be decided within the ongoing discussions about the Adoption Partnership and Medway Council will remain a member of the above organisations in order to benefit from the fostering services.

7.3. Services for Adopted Adults and Birth Relatives

- 7.3.1. Social Workers in the Post Adoption Service provide advice and counselling services to adopted adults seeking information and access to their birth records and to birth parents affected by adoption. For all Medway residents an access to records counselling service is offered. Information is also provided to other councils who are supporting adopted adults living in their area who were adopted through Medway Council. An initial counselling interview is offered to those seeking birth records and work is undertaken to locate records held by other Adoption Agencies. Counselling and practical advice during tracing, an intermediary service and pre and post reunion support are also available to adopted adults and their birth relatives. Birth relatives or those with a prescribed relationship, seeking to make contact with adopted adults are offered information and advice and an intermediary service where appropriate. In the case of birth relatives, they are not provided with any identifying information about the adopted person but the Agency acts as the intermediary.

7.4. Intercountry Adoption

- 7.4.1. Medway Council offers an Intercountry adoption service as required by regulation. However, no enquiries have been received in the last 5 years. Intercountry adoption figures nationally dropped by 80% between 2004 and 2014 as more countries have sought to make suitable arrangements for their children within their own borders and no longer make children available for adoption internationally.

8. Adoption Partnership South East

- 8.1. As referred to throughout this report the newly formed Adoption Partnership South East went live on 1 November 2020. This service is in line with the government announced changes to the delivery of adoption services setting a very clear direction that all local authorities' adoption services must be delivered on a regionalised basis by 2020. This followed a range of national policy changes since 2012, including the 2015 'Regionalising Adoption' paper by the DfE that sought improvements in adoption performance. Following the general election in June 2017, the Minister of State for Children and Families reaffirmed their commitment to this policy.
- 8.2. Regular reports on the formation of Adoption Partnership have been presented to Medway's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Medway's Cabinet, including the most recent report to Cabinet in September detailing the proposed agreement and the structure and scope of the new service.
- 8.3. Work has been ongoing in bringing together the practice in the 3 agencies to ensure that best practice from all 3 local authorities underpins the work of the Partnership and is successful in meeting the needs of children who require permanence through adoption, and improving the performance of the authorities.

9. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 1 December 2020

- 9.1. The Committee considered the report which provided details on the performance of the adoption service from September 2019-2020 and included information about the newly formed Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).
- 9.2. Members raised a number of questions and comments, which included:
 - 9.2.1. **RAA Statement of Purpose** – reference was made in the report of the RAA Statement of Purpose and it was requested that this be sent to Members.
 - 9.2.2. **Reporting to all Members** – it was suggested that all Members receive the report as part of their training in their role as corporate parents.
 - 9.2.3. **Male representation in the service** – concern was raised by the lack of male members of staff within the service. In response officers confirmed that traditionally the service, for adoption, fostering and across children's social care, was predominantly a female workforce but there were not considered to be any barriers to males accessing the profession. It was also confirmed that there were three males on the Adoption Panel.
- 9.3. The Committee noted the report, requested its comments be forwarded to the Cabinet and that all Members be provided with a copy of the report as part of their training in their role as Corporate Parents.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Howcroft-Scott, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

10. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Finance	The principle underpinning the Adoption Partnership has been that there will be no increase in funding for the first 3 years of the Partnership.	Legal agreement in place	C2
Recruitment of the right adopters for the children of Medway.	There is a national shortage of adopters at the current time which has implications for timely placement of children. This also has implications for the placement of Medway's complex and challenging children.	Adoption Partnership should enable all three local authorities to access a wider pool of adopters and provide good quality support to enable adopters to parent more complex and challenging children.	B2

11. Implications for Looked After Children

11.1. In order to ensure there is timely permanency planning for all children entering care, Medway has considered its Permanence Planning Policy alongside those of its partner agencies within the RAA. This supports early identification of the children for whom adoption is the plan and supports early family finding so that children can be placed within their permanent family at the earliest opportunity

12. Financial Implications

12.1. The current Adoption Agency model is operating within budget and the development of the Adoption Partnership will be more cost effective and help to drive cost efficiencies, as children are placed more quickly from foster care reducing placement costs.

13. Legal Implications

13.1 There are no legal implications relating to the delivery of an adoption service to children and families. The formation of the Adoption Partnership meets the government requirement for a Regional Adoption Agency.

14. Recommendations

- 14.1. The Cabinet is asked to consider the comments of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee set out at section 9 of the report and note the Annual Adoption Report.

15. Suggested reasons for decisions

- 16.1. Statutory guidance requires adoption agencies to report on adoption agency activity in the last year

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Adoption Team Structure Chart

Background papers

None