

Manchester City Council Report for Information

Report to: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee – 9 November 2022

Subject: Adoption Counts Annual Report

Report of: Strategic Director of Children and Education Services

Summary

This report fulfils the obligations in Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011) and Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) Adoption and Children Act 2002 to report to the “executive side” of the local authority. This has guided the structure and information set out in the report below.

It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2022. Plans for children are dynamic and develop every day and the picture will have changed at the point that this report is read.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to: -

- (1) Read and consider the content of the action plan (Appendix 1).
 - (2) Recommend any aspects of consideration, amendment or clarification as required.
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Wards Affected: All

Environmental Impact Assessment - the impact of the issues addressed in this report on achieving the zero-carbon target for the city

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion - the impact of the issues addressed in this report in meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty and broader equality commitments

Manchester Strategy outcomes	Summary of how this report aligns to the OMS/Contribution to the Strategy
A thriving and sustainable city: supporting a diverse and distinctive economy that creates jobs and opportunities	
A highly skilled city: world class and home-grown talent sustaining the city's economic success	
A progressive and equitable city: making a positive contribution by unlocking the potential of our communities	
A liveable and low carbon city: a destination of choice to live, visit, work	
A connected city: world class infrastructure and connectivity to drive growth	

Full details are in the body of the report, along with any implications for:

- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Risk Management
- Legal Considerations

Financial Consequences – Revenue

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Background Documents (available for public inspection):

The following documents disclose important facts on which the report is based and have been relied upon in preparing the report. Copies of the background documents

are available up to 4 years after the date of the meeting. If you would like a copy please contact one of the contact officers above.

- Executive Scrutiny Report

1.0 Background and Context

Since going live in 2017 Adoption Counts has undertaken to discharge Manchester's responsibilities as an Adoption Agency. The working relationship between the local authority (LA) and the RAA (Regional Adoption Agency) has been fundamental to the success so far of the partnership working. The established processes to maintain the good working relationships and the communication necessary. In addition, The Assistant Director of Children's Services sits as a member of the Adoption Counts Board.

The RAA Head of Service and the Operations Manager linked to Manchester meet twice a year with the Assistant Director to discuss performance over the period and any issues or themes that may be arising. This meeting is very much a two-way dialogue, with Manchester ensuring that the RAA is fulfilling its responsibilities as well as the RAA being able to offer feedback to the LA about any emerging themes or issues in care planning or working together.

2.0 Introduction

A full annual report is available, along with annual report from the Adoption Psychology Service, and this has been shared with the Board members and Local Authorities. This report for scrutiny committee gives an abridged version of the annual report detailing the progress in planning and placements for children, assessment, and approval of prospective adoptive parents, and in offering adoption support. Priorities for Manchester's children over this reporting period were highlighted as CPR (Childs Permanence Report) quality to be improved, Later Life Letters followed up in a timely way, early permanence training package to be introduced to Manchester social workers. Also high on the agenda, Black Adopter Recruitment, Black Lives Matter Training and a Race and Ethnicity Group set up, Initial Visits Process reviewed.

3.0 Performance – Children

Manchester and Adoption Counts work collaboratively in tracking children with a potential plan of adoption through to the adoption order being granted. This is achieved by regular meetings in relation to children and any planning drift or delay highlighted and escalated to Head of Service Adoption. Senior Managers in both organisations, share care planning concerns for children for whom family finding has not been successful and children who wait longer for a permanent family through adoption. Adoption Counts core offer is supporting adoption planning to social workers and managers in Manchester for children with a plan or potential plan of adoption under 5 years. Alongside planning for children for those who have been adopted later in life letters and life story books which outstanding are escalated to the Adoption ADM.

34 children were made Subject to Should Be Placed for Adoption (SHOBPA) decision as their care plan. The decision that adoption would be in the child's best interest was made following the local authorities final care planning meeting with all other permanence options for the child being ruled out. The

number of children with a SHOBPA decision agreed as part of their care plan in this time last year has fallen by approximately 25%.

31 children were made subject to a Placement Order by the Court. This has been a slight decrease in the number of Placement Orders for Manchester's children in comparison with the last two years 31 POs in 2020-2021 and 17 POs in 2021-2022.

11 children had a Change of Plan away from adoption five to long term foster care and six to SGO in this period.

36 children were placed for adoption joining their adoptive families with 32 of these children being placed with Adoption Counts adopters and four children with interagency adopters. This is a decrease of eight children from 2020-2021.

Timeliness of children's adoption plans are measured by national scorecard indicators of A1 (the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted – target of 426 days) and A2 (the average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family – target of 121 days). For the 36 children placed with adoptive families the average A1 measure was 547 days and the A2 is 150 days. This was impacted considerably by two children whose care plans for adoption were sensitive to their needs in their journey to adoption.

24 of these children placed with adoptive parents were above the A1 threshold of 426 days. This included two sets of sibling groups of three, and a sibling pair. 18 of the children were placed above the A2 threshold of 121 days. Manchester and Adoption Counts ensure opportunities to secure legal permanence for children via adoption are considered at the earliest opportunity by monitoring the A1 and A2 figures.

50 children were adopted, the average number of days for A1 503 which is 77 days above the threshold.

22 children were outside the threshold with an A1 figure of 1201 and 1774, respectively.

The average A2 figure for these children is 147 which is 26 days above the threshold. Fifteen children were outside the threshold including whose A2 figures were 600 and 682 days, respectively. A1 threshold average time between entering care and being placed with adoptive family is 150 when target is 121. 50% met the target, but this too will be impacted nationally by covid implications for courts.

Three children were placed in an early permanence placement. Wherever children are placed in an early permanence placement with a potential for adoption by the same carers. The children were placed with carers temporarily

approved by Manchester's Agency Decision Maker as foster carers under regulation 25A of the Care Planning Regulations

COVID-19 continued to have an impact upon general court timetabling and care proceedings for a number of the children therefore, adoption has taken longer to achieve. A number of Court hearings were deferred, there was an increase in the number of birth parents applying for leave to contest the adoption placement and adoption orders. During care proceedings family members coming forward to be assessed at a later stage in proceedings delayed adoption or another permanence option being achieved in a timely way. Adoption Counts continued to plan successful transitions of children during Covid restrictions using a robust risk assessment for each individual child moving to an adoption placement.

Manchester and Adoption Counts are scheduled to complete a thematic review for those children who wait more than 12 months after Placement Order for an adoptive family. (Currently eleven children in Manchester have been waiting 12 months or more). This report will be available in the next six-monthly report. Learning and actions from these children's journey will be focussed into early planning for children.

3.1 Quality of Children's Reports

The child's social worker writes children's permanence reports (CPR's) are audited by Manchester's Service Managers then Adoption Counts Manager prior to SHOBPA consideration. These reports are then re-audited prior to a child being presented to adoption panel for matching with prospective adopters. This is to ensure that these child centred documents are graded as being 'Good' as a minimum.

Thirty-nine Manchester child permanence reports (CPR's) audits have been completed during this period.

Of the CPRs presented at Shobpa, 74% needed improvement. By presentation at panel 97% were rated good or above. Whilst this demonstrates good impact, the aim is to achieve a higher percentage of good or above gradings at first presentation. Adoption Counts offers support and training to children's social workers and managers. There is an increased focus on achieving good quality child focussed reports at SHOBPA and gradings will be monitored to ensure improvement.

3.2 Marketing Recruitment & Assessment of Adopters

A key priority for Adoption Counts is to ensure sufficiency of adopters to meet the individual needs of all Manchester's children with a plan of adoption recruitment of adopters continued to be successful within this time. Marketing activity increased compared with the previous year in line with some lockdown and pandemic restrictions being eased. A high presence of digital and social media advertising re-commenced along with outdoor advertising and commissioning Manchester Evening News. Targeted Facebook advertising

was to specifically reach out for members of the Black Community to come forward and consider adoption. Children whose race and ethnicity is Black traditionally wait longer to be matched with an adoptive family and Manchester have a higher proportion of children from Black or mixed ethnicity race and heritage within our five partner authorities

Eighty-seven adopters approved in this year.

Enquiry numbers have significantly increased this year with **1428 for the full year**. This is an increase of 454 from the previous year. **282 attended our information sessions** of which **122 entered the adoption process**. This is a 43% conversion rate which is higher than the previous year. 61% of those who attend an information session go on to request an Initial Visit and of those, 71% enter the adoption process by submitting a ROI. **Information evenings** continue to run weekly on-line which ensures timescales are met. **Initial visits** decreased 173 in total; this is a decrease of 41 from the previous year. The decrease in initial visits does not seem to have had a negative impact on the number of applications received by the Agency. **Registrations of Interest** received **123 in total** from 150 the previous year. It is possible this decrease could be influenced by the gradual lifting of the Covid restrictions. The Agency's performance should be viewed in the context of an ongoing national picture with the figures reflecting a national surplus of adopters. It suggests that the strategies implemented through our recruitment and marketing plan continue to be effective in terms of our local adopter sufficiency strategy.

Adopter assessment performance in relation to timescales for Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the assessment process 44% were within timescales for stage 1 (this excludes seven families who were fast tracked) and 72% for stage 2.

The completion of medicals 2021-2022 due to the pandemic caused some delay along with overseas checks. Stage 2 assessments during the year moved from being completed virtually to being completed 75% face to face and 25% virtually, as restrictions were lifted.

There has been a noted rise in withdrawals in the year which was identified within the monthly sufficiency meetings 17 in Stage 1, 1 In between 1 and Stage 2, 12 in stage 2.

An audit of these cases was undertaken to understand the reason for the rise and to reflect on any findings and impact on processes needed. All but one withdrawal was appropriate to the circumstances of the applicants and all, but one was adopter led decisions.

3.3 Practice Developments

Family finding practice developments in relation to achieving permanence in a timely way for Manchester's children has focussed on families for children with a Black heritage alongside children with a disability, sibling groups and children with complex health needs. Work in partnership with other regional

adoption agencies across England and have taken part within a national Family Finding focus for Black children.

In relation to early permanence for children a working group have developed an early permanence training package which will be delivered to our LA colleagues to enhance awareness and understanding regarding the benefits of early permanence options for children. Adoption focussed matching events have been developed and allow access to approved adopters through video clips of children through a secure link.

Six staff have been trained in Adult Attachment style interview (ASI) training and this model to be rolled out from September 2022. This model of practice offers a conversational style interview which questions adoptive applicants about their current relationships with their partner, family of origin and with two adults close to the applicants. This will be a clear indicator of how as adoptive parents they will reach out for support during the parenting of a child or young person through adoption.

As an organisation Adoption Counts are committed to embedding the Black Lives Matters ethos and challenge to us within our work in the Recruitment and Assessment of adopters who can truly meet and understand the needs of children who are from a Black or minority ethnic heritage. Most staff and Adoption Panel members have accessed the Black Lives Matter training. This is shaping delivery of service with prospective adopters and the matching of children.

Preparation Training for prospective adopters is now delivered face to face. The teams in the Recruitment and Assessment to focus on Initial visits. This piece of work was undertaken in relation to addressing allocation timescales and meeting the needs of prospective adopters. Timescales of Stage 1 and Stage 2 assessments are being scrutinised by separating out initial visits.

In relation to contact in adoption we focus on 'open' adoptions as a starting point for children with their birth family. Messages from research tell us how we can weave in the prospect for children being able to retain contact with their families if in their best interest.

At present as a management team, we are looking to develop a first stage system in relation to matching children to adopters who can meet their needs at an early stage using data held on the system by using the children's matching criteria in relation to their individual needs against adopters' skills and abilities.

3.4 Adoption Panel

Submission of reports to panel by the teams continue to be achieved in a timely way, with a robust, dedicated panel administration team supporting this process. This ensures there are no delays in approvals of adopters and children being matched with their adoptive parents to achieve their permanent outcome. 172 items were heard by Panel in this time period. Panel member

diversity reflecting our children's individual identity on our central list is part of a national initiative from the RAA's alongside local recruitment. Ethnic diversity of our panel membership will be surveyed in 2022-23.

For Manchester children where we have a high representation of children from a Black and mixed ethnicity heritage we are actively recruiting from the Black community.

3.5 Adoption Support

Adoption Support remains integral to our delivery for adopted children, new adoptive families, birth families and adopted adults, recognizing the life-long journey of adoption. We remain committed to supporting children and their new families from the early transition stages of a placement through to the making of an Adoption Order. Thereafter we recognize that new challenges may emerge requiring varying levels of tailored support to ensure successful outcomes for children. Adoption Support is available to all families until their child is 21, or 25 if they have additional needs.

Adoption Support is delivered by Adoption Counts specialist team in partnership with Adoption Psychology Service. This is a specialist multi-agency partnership created with CAMHS, and includes clinical psychologists, education psychologists, psychiatrist, specialist OT, couples psychotherapist, and therapeutic social workers. This is based on the I-Thrive model, which details universal services, getting help, getting more help, and risk support.

All individuals and families seeking support are offered an adoption support assessment within 4-12 weeks of approaching the agency. 223 families from Manchester received support last year, 45 of whom were new families approaching the agency. 88 were adopted adults seeking access to their birth records. Assessments identify the appropriate support for families, and this could range from access to universal adoption services (parent education events, family events, peer support activities, online resources through Adopter Hub now called CATCH), through to identifying specialist therapeutic interventions tailored to their family. This demonstrates steady demand across the region with continuing pressure placed on social workers who have high caseloads.

From September 2021 a dedicated early-stage adoption transitions clinic was piloted by APS, for professionals involved at the initial stages of the adoption planning process. This clinic has been extended based on successful outcomes identified at review of the pilot in January 2022. The goal of the clinic has been to enhance the application of the University of East Anglia's 'Moving to Adoption' Model for children and families with more complexity, and to identify and mitigate adoption disruption risk factors through specialist support at the earliest opportunity.

If a specialist therapeutic intervention is required (either assessment or therapy) and this cannot be delivered in-house, we seek funding from the Adoption Support Fund. During this year there were 113 applications to the

Adoption Support Fund for children living in Manchester. This drew down £368,442 funding which was used to fund therapy for children and their families. This includes therapeutic parenting support and groups, DDP and family therapy, play and other individual therapies, and specialist sensory integration support, among others. This is comparative to other years where support continues to be needed by many adoptive families at different stages of their lives.

Risk support is offered by specialist adoption support social workers in partnership with the Local Authority, schools, and CAMHS. A small number of families need intensive support and specialist assessments can be completed in-house or commissioned to identify the right services for families. 39 referrals were received into Adoption Psychology Service, 11 of which were for Manchester children who received education support and specialist consultations and assessment or intervention.

47 adopted adults from Manchester approached the agency for support to access their adoption records (41 were already being supported by the service). These were responded to by a group of specialist workers (1 FTE) and can involve a waiting period while historic records are located and sensitively shared. This is a steady demand and we have worked hard to support a number of individuals who have waited a lengthy period following the pandemic.

Adoption Support also offered a Letterbox Service, to support exchange of information safely between birth and adoptive families, to promote their child's identity. There were 392 Manchester families exchanging information in this period, some of which are multiple exchanges within the year to several birth family members. We were invited to participate in a pilot project run by Link maker, who are developing an online letterbox service. This was going to start in Spring 2022, but the start has been delayed allowing for more preparation time nationally.

Support for birth parents is commissioned externally through PAC-UK and this includes individual counselling and support for birth relatives, along with a birth mothers' group which meet in person to offer mutual support.

Service developments continue with training opportunities offered to social workers from the Adoption Psychology team, along with systemic peer support sessions to consider the most challenging situations. Evening workshops for parents continue to be offered online with a return to in-person events trialled. The transitions clinic was evaluated and will be rolled out permanently.

3.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

- More rigorous challenge around children's family members being ruled out as potential carers for a child at an earlier stage in care proceedings.
- Early Permanence Planning for children and unborn children to be supported with regular and updated training.
- Life Story Books and Later in Life Letters backlog to be addressed.

- Focus on recruitment within the Sufficiency Plan of adopters for children from a Black or mixed ethnicity background for children who wait longer in Manchester for an adoptive family.
- Ensure the diversity of the Agency's Panel Central List members is more representative of the children being matched.
- Quality of CPR's to be incrementally improved with support prior to SHOBPA.
- Thematic review of those children who wait over 12 months for an adoptive family.

4.0 Governance and Future Opportunities

Adoption Counts will continue to report to the Board on a three-monthly basis to ensure management decisions are considered strategically with priorities for children being monitored and results measured.

5.0 Conclusion

Manchester Children's Services and Adoption Counts to focus on early permanence for children with a permanence plan of adoption being tracked for a potential adoption care plan. To increase sufficiency for those children who wait longer and to ensure that their CPR's are written in a child focussed quality way at first time of writing. Finally, to ensure that children who have been adopted from Manchester receive their life story books and later in life letters in a timely way.

6.0 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to: -

- (1) Read and consider the content of the action plan.
- (2) Recommend any aspects of consideration, amendment or clarification as required.