

**Manchester City Council
Report for Information**

Report to: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee – 10 January 2024

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 2023. 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.
-

Wards Affected: All wards

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

Contact Officers:

Name: Gail Spray
Position: Head of Service
Telephone: 0161 521 9228
E-mail: gail.spray@adoptioncounts.gov.uk

Name: Kristen Roberts
Position: Operations Manager Adoption Support
Telephone: 0161 528 1935
E-mail: Kristen.roberts@adoptioncounts.gov.uk

Name: Sheila Davies
Position: Operations Manager Recruitment Assessment and Family Finding
Telephone: 0161 521 9124
E-mail: Sheila.davies@adoptioncounts.org.uk

Background Documents (available for public inspection):

- Executive Scrutiny Report

1.0 Background/Context

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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

- 2.1 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

- 3.0.1 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.
- 3.0.2 47 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 risen by approximately 38%.

- 3.0.3 38 children were made subject to a Placement Order by the Court. This is an increase of 23% compared to last year.
- 3.0.4 10 children had a Change of Plan away from adoption (one less than last year). Four returned to birth parents, three had a change of plan to long term foster care three to SGO in this period.
- 3.0.5 37 children were placed for adoption joining their adoptive families (one more than last year). 36 of these children being placed with Adoption Counts adopters and one child with interagency adopters.
- 3.0.6 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 37 children placed with adoptive families the average A1 measure was 477 days and the A2 is 137 days. This was impacted considerably by two children – one whose care plan for adoption was delayed awaiting the birth of a sibling and another whose adoptive journey was lengthened after their first adoptive placement was disrupted.
- 3.0.7 19 of these children placed with adoptive parents were above the A1 threshold of 426 days. This included two sets of sibling pairs.
- 3.0.8 16 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.
- 3.0.9 36 children were adopted, the average number of days for A1 611 which is 185 days above the threshold.
- 3.0.10 26 children were outside the threshold with an A1 figure of 1163, 1309 and 1043, respectively.
- 3.0.11 The average A2 figure for these children is 155 which is 34 days above the threshold. Twenty two children were outside the threshold including one whose A2 figure was 364 days.
- 3.0.12 Seven children were placed in an early permanence placement. Where possible 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

3.1 Quality of Children's Reports

- 3.1.1 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.
- 3.1.2 Forty two Manchester child permanence reports (CPR's) audits have been completed during this period.
- 3.1.3 Of the CPRs presented and graded at Shobpa, 43% needed improvement. By presentation at panel 85% were rated good or above. Whilst this demonstrates good impact and an improvement on last year when 74% needed improvement at Shobpa, the aims are 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

- 3.2.1 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 are 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.
- 3.2.2 **Seventy nine** adopters approved in this year.
- 3.2.3 Enquiry numbers have significantly increased this year with **1816 for the full year**.
- 3.2.4 This is an increase of 388 from the previous year. **308 attended our information sessions** and **107 entered the adoption process – 13% less than last year**. **Information evenings** continue to run weekly on-line which ensures timescales are met. **Initial visits 171** in total; this is just 2 fewer than the previous year. **Registrations of Interest** received **107 in total** down from 123 the previous year. Our performance should still be viewed in the context of an ongoing national shortage of adopters. It suggests that the strategies implemented through our Recruitment and Marketing plan continue to be

effective in terms of our adopter sufficiency, although of course we are not complacent and continue to strive to increase our numbers further. We will continue to raise the profile of our agency to achieve adopter sufficiency for our children across our five local authorities, with a surplus to generate income and offset the cost of inter-agency placements for our children who need them.

- 3.2.5 Adopter assessment performance in relation to timescales for Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the assessment process 27% were within timescales for stage 1 and 70% for stage 2.
- 3.2.6 The delays in stage one has been related to statutory checks taking longer, the additional counselling references that are now requested following the Cumbria CSPR, overseas checks causing delay and previous partner references. In relation to systems and processes the Business Support Manager has reviewed these and support from one of the Team Managers has got us back on track in completing statutory checks in a timely way. This will not account however, for the delays in some checks as detailed above.
- 3.2.7 Adopter tracking meetings have been introduced to focus on the timeliness of Stage 1 & Stage 2 assessments whereby individual social workers report on the key dates and progress in relation to assessments being completed. The impact of these meetings will be measured each month to ensure any barriers to meeting timescales are considered.
- 3.2.8 Applicants withdrawing from the assessment process were all considered appropriate by the agency and the adopters, with reasons being change of circumstances, reflective learning changed the adopter's perspective and matching considerations not correlating with the needs of the children waiting.

3.3 Practice Developments

- 3.3.1 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.
- 3.3.2 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.
- 3.3.3 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.

- 3.3.4 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.
- 3.3.5 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.
- 3.3.6 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.
- 3.3.7 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

- 3.4.1 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 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.
- 3.4.2 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

- 3.5.1 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.

- 3.5.2 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.
- 3.5.3 All individuals and families seeking support are offered an adoption support assessment within 12 weeks of approaching the agency. 728 families in total are supported; 223 families from Manchester received support last year, 40 of whom were new families approaching the agency. 44 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 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.
- 3.5.4 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 119 applications to the Adoption Support Fund for children living in Manchester. This drew down £418,599 funding which was used to fund specialist assessment and 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.
- 3.5.5 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, 10 of which were for Manchester children who received education support and specialist consultations and assessment or intervention.
- 3.5.6 44 adopted adults from Manchester approached the agency for support to access their adoption records. These were responded to by a group of specialist workers (1 FTE) and waiting times have reduced to access historic records, which are then sensitively shared.

- 3.5.7 Adoption Support also offered a Letterbox Service, renamed Keeping in Touch Team (KITTT), to support exchange of information safely between birth and adoptive families, to promote their child's identity. There were 367 Manchester families exchanging information in this period, some of which are multiple exchanges within the year to several birth family members.
- 3.5.8 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.
- 3.5.9 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 take place in person, along with in-person family fun days which are well attended and enable adoptive families to seek peer support.

3.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

- Rigorous challenge around children's family members being ruled out as potential carers for a child at an earlier stage in care proceedings to continue.
- 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 continue being 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.

4.0 Governance and Future Opportunities

- 4.1 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

- 5.1 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

- 6.1 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.