

Report to: **Corporate Parenting Panel**

Date: **20 May 2011**

By: **Director of Children's Services**

Title of report: **Annual Progress Report of East Sussex Adoption and Permanence Service
1 April 2010 – 31 March 2011**

Purpose of report: **To outline the performance of the Adoption and Permanence Service between 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011**

RECOMMENDATION: The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report

1. Financial appraisal

1.1 There are no increased costs arising from this report.

2. Supporting information

2.1 The Annual Progress report of the East Sussex Fostering Service is attached as **Appendix 1**.

3. Recommendation

3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report.

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Local Members: All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: none

**Annual Progress Report of East Sussex Adoption and Permanence Service
1 April 2010 – 31 March 2011**

1. Supporting Information

	2009 / 10	2010 /11
1. Number of Children Adopted	32	34
2. Number of Adoption Matches (children)	27	30
3. Number of Permanent Fostering Matches (children)	10	12
4. Number of Special Guardianship Orders	6	19
5. Number of East Sussex Adoptive Matches (children)	20	26
6. Number of Consortium Adoptive Matches (children)	2	3
7. Number of Inter-Agency Matches (children): Permanence: Adoption:	1 5	2 1
8. Number of Prospective Adopters Approved (households)	27	32
9. Number of Permanent Carers Approved (households)	6	7
10. Number of Children Approved for Adoption	35	49
11. Number of Children Approved for Permanence	10	18
12. Number of Approved Adopters waiting to be Matched	13	18
13. Number of Disruptions presented to Panel Permanence Adoption	8 (5) (3)	1 (adoption)
14. Withdrawals (couples)	2	0

2. Recruitment Activity

2.1 There has been a significant rise in numbers of children in the care of East Sussex and in line with this the numbers of children needing adoption has also continued to rise. All areas of adoption service activity have increased from family finding, recruitment and assessment of adopters to adoption support. Notably in the last 12 months the service worked hard to enable 30

children to be matched for adoption and 32 adopters to be approved at Panel (5 more adopters than in 2009/10).

2.2 Recruitment events were organised during national adoption week in November 2010 and in March 2011. 21 potential adopters attended in November and 26 information packs were given out. Adoption staff also attended a joint recruitment event in March with fostering and short break colleagues.

2.3 From April 2010 to 31stth March 2011, 141 information packs have been sent out in response to enquiries about adoption in East Sussex which is also an increase over last year. Following receipt of information packs, 62 households have attended 6 information evenings run by staff from the adoption service. Information evenings are held bi-monthly throughout the year, to ensure that we comply with the Adoption Standards on timescales for group information sessions.

2.4 Following information evenings, 33 prospective adoptive households have requested a home visit by a social worker. The application procedure has changed over previous years in that we are have reconfigured the process to reduce the number of stages that adoptive applicants have to undergo and to release staff time for assessment work. The adoption service continues to run a series of preparation groups throughout the year which are run in 4 day blocks. One of the senior practitioners has been given a lead role in screening prospective adopters in order to deal with issues and queries at an early stage. This process continues to allow a 'weeding out' of unsuitable applicants at the beginning of the process.

2.5 21 sets of prospective adopters attended 3 preparation groups over the year. However a number of new adopters came in via other routes, notably as second time adopters adopting siblings of children already placed or as existing carers of children. 32 adopters were approved as prospective adopters at the Panel by the end of March 2011. A further 6 assessments were started and either withdrew, or were delayed for further work by the applicants.

2.6 The adoption service is proud of the high quality of its preparation groups as well as receiving positive feedback from participants. The service is constantly revising and refining the recruitment process to reflect the ever challenging task of permanently caring for some extremely damaged children. In the light of this, the preparation course has been refreshed this year with some new material and reordering of some of the exercises.

2.7 The service continues to attract a steady number of enquiries from adults interested in adoption. Whilst a significant proportion of staff time is spent undertaking prospective adopter assessments, this has to be constantly balanced against an ever increasing demand for adoption support assessments, many of which involve the prevention of adoption breakdown. In order to increase the overall recruitment of adopters over the coming year, we cannot risk losing our reputation for providing timely and appropriate support when this is needed.

2.8 Confidence in adoption support service provision is particularly pertinent this year in view of the change in the profile of children referred for adoption. There has been a massive increase in the number of sibling groups needing adoption compared to previous years (9 sibling groups representing 20 children, compared to two groups of two children last year) as well as the rising age of children referred for adoption. A frequent issue when recruiting potential adopters for these children is trust, and the question of whether they will be able to get support if it is needed.

2.9 The unprecedented rise in the numbers and the needs of children referred for adoption, has led to the development of a new recruitment strategy for 2011/12 as well as changes in some working practices to try to free up some capacity for more adoption assessments. While this has released some staff availability more will be needed if we are to avoid a significant rise in the spending on interagency placements for children with an agreed plan for adoption.

2.10 The final shortfall at the end of 2010/11 was 6 adoptive households which could potentially cost approximately £80,000 to purchase from the Consortium or other local authorities and could cost up to £144,000 if placements in Voluntary Adoption Agencies are necessary. The continuing rise in demand for adoptive placements is showing no sign of slowing at the start of April 2011 so the figures quoted are likely to be a conservative underestimate of the challenge currently faced in

2011/2012. If we are to increase the numbers of prospective families applying to ESCC rather than to other adoption agencies, dedicated staff recruitment time will be needed and crucially increased capacity to prepare and assess applicants, the cost of which would be far less than the cost of interagency placements.

3. Children with a Plan for adoption

3.1 In 2010/11 49 children were approved for adoption which continues the pattern of increased numbers of children following previous years rise. A significant change over the last 12 months has been the changed profile of this cohort of children. A far higher proportion of children need to be placed in their sibling groups than had consistently been the case in previous years. In previous years over 90% of the children have needed to be placed singly, with only a small number of sibling groups. Over the last year this has changed to 40% of the children needing to be placed with a sibling. This has had a significant impact on the sorts of households needed and on the consequent needs for recruitment activity for adopters. The number of children who were adopted in 2010/11 was 34, again an increase in numbers over 2009/10. Up to 1st April 2011, 30 children have been matched for adoption.

3.2 There are currently 33 children approved for adoption and waiting (and as stated in previous reports this position changes on a weekly basis due to regular panel and linking activity). 13 children are in the process of matching and 20 are waiting for a suitable link although this is reviewed weekly. In addition the Practice Manager and two members of staff have attended a National Adoption Register event and two exchange days across the consortium during the last 12 months as a way of expediting family finding and a number of potential links have been identified as a result.

3.3 The adoption team has again been successful in placing the majority of children with in-house East Sussex adopters. The big push in in-house adoption recruitment has paid off this year resulting in continued low usage of the consortium, independent agencies and other local authorities. However this position is already changing due to the pressures mentioned above and there needs to be a further significant increase of adopters in 2011/12 as demand is currently outstripping supply.

3.4 Where there is a particular placement requirement eg. older children or children with complex needs and / or sibling groups, East Sussex has always been willing to explore other resources to reduce delays in family finding for these children. 3 children were placed in the Consortium in 2010/2011 and 1 child was placed in an independent agency. Other matches are currently being explored to avoid delay.

3.5 A linking meeting for all family finding cases takes place on a weekly basis. We have recently allocated the coordination of this crucial area of Family Finding work to an experienced Senior Practitioner within the team. The new coordinating role and increased profile of this work is intended to achieve a more streamlined process and reduction of any unnecessary delays for children waiting for a suitable adoptive family. In addition it is intended to improve the Adoption Service support to less experienced members of staff, particularly in the Family Support Teams.

3.6 Family finding responsibilities are allocated within the adoption team, and prioritised according to the age, complexity of the child's needs, and whether they are part of a sibling group. In complex cases this can be a time consuming process involving a significant amount of liaison with other agencies and professionals, and sometimes extensive travelling when outside East Sussex.

4. Permanence and Special Guardianship

4.1 In the past year a change has been made to cease presenting SGO matches to the Adoption and Permanence Panel. There is no legal requirement to do this as the Courts have judicial

overview of the suitability of these arrangements for individual children. It had become increasingly difficult to time the presentation of the SGO reports in with court timescales. Only a handful of other Local Authorities take this additional step in placing children with SGO, mainly for quality and assurance purposes, however the volume of court work in the children's teams, as well as the volume of Panel business with the rising numbers of children needing an adoption plan, no longer makes this a viable option. In addition, in order to adhere to the new kinship, family and friends regulations the Adoption and Permanence Panel, together with the Fostering Panel, will need to consider these approvals at an earlier stage.

4.2 With the huge increase in numbers of care proceedings, there has been a drive to improve the quality of permanency planning for all our looked after children. A further permanency planning workshop is being planned in May of this year for all managers in children's teams led by the operations manager of the adoption and permanence service. The service has successfully reinstated the permanency tracking workshops, chaired by operational managers, both in the east and west of the county at least twice a year. The focus of the workshops is to plan, at the earliest opportunity, timely permanency planning options, to track these plans and avoid any drift in care planning. Consultation to all staff is delivered through the specialised adoption and looked after children services.

4.3 The number of children matched with permanent foster carers has increased and currently there are six permanence assessments under way.

5. Adoption Support

5.1 The demands on the adoption support service have been considerable in the last 12 months and all the staff caseloads involve working with adoptive children and their families as well as with adopted adults. The significant increase in the LAC population in East Sussex during the last year led to a need for more adoptive placements which in turn require adoption support service provision placing increased pressure on the Service.

5.2 The adoption support service has made significant links with both education and children and mental health services (CAMHS) in promoting the needs and services required specifically for adopted children and their families.

5.3 There continues to be good collaboration between the service and Health and Education colleagues to improve outcomes for children and where necessary adoption services are commissioned from specialist services. A small but significant group of adopted children require more intensive support from specialist services which are negotiated on a case by case basis.

5.4 The adoption support manager regularly reviews packages of support in line with legislation and in the context of resource pressures.

5.5 The Letter-box Co-ordinator's work has increased. The post holder now manages **568** letter-box contacts, an increase of **38** from the previous year. This complex work requires a high level of administrative scrutiny as well as frequent interventions to ensure ongoing contact for the child. There is dedicated administrative support to this post which reflects the numbers of cases now being dealt with. Almost without exception, all adoptive matches involve at least one Letterbox arrangement, more usually several. This is an area of continual growth and therefore a challenge in the context of finite resources.

5.6 The contact service for adopted children in placement continues to grow and workers are building on their experiences to develop a skilled service in this complex and sensitive area. Currently the service is involved in supporting **145** direct contacts per year, of which they directly supervise **77**. This is a 50% increase on last year, and as with Letterbox activity, an ever-increasing area of adoption support work.

5.7 The adoption support service has two significant contracts with external agencies 'Adoption UK' and 'Norcap'. These contracts are regularly scrutinised and reviewed in the context of

ensuring value for money. These offer value for money services which we have a statutory duty to provide under adoption support legislation, such as support groups and recruitment of support coordinators. In terms of services to adults the adoption service has provided 20 Schedule 2 interviews to adopted adults.

5.8 The team currently offers ongoing adoption support to in excess of **45** families. The degree of the support can be variable but it is often intense and ongoing. Several cases have had to be referred to our locality colleagues where safeguarding is a feature and also where children are on the edge of care. Some have involved child protection plans and allocation within the family support service

5.9 The adoption manager in consultation with senior managers took the decision to cancel the contract with the Post Adoption Centre this year as the service was not viewed as offering 'value for money'. The adoption support manager is in the process of setting up adoption support surgeries to be staffed by a multi disciplinary team to offer a local and more timely service to those adoptive families in need of support.

6. Inter Country Adoption

6.1 In regard to inter country adoption and the decline in number of applications coming through, the adoption service has decided to cancel this contract in view of the low demand and poor value for money. In future any inter country applications will have to be absorbed by the team as an extra pressure.

7. Adoption and Permanence Panel

7.1 The adoption and permanence panel continues to run on a weekly basis and after a disruptive period in December 2010, compromised by the snow, the volume of work has increased and most panels are very busy through to late June. However some panels in spite of high levels of provisional bookings have ended up running with just two or three cases usually because of last minute changes to court timings and or delayed availability of expert reports. The changes invariably involve child care cases.

7.2 Panel members and chairs have viewed the variability with some concern not least because the end result is the delay which this causes to children's permanence plans. Together with our colleagues in legal services we are keeping a watchful eye on this.

7.3 There is an additional concern in relation to panel time and running costs, and the panel will be undertaking further training in early May to prepare them to consider kinship approvals in order to deal with an urgent backlog.

7.4 The adoption panel has participated in two successful training events this year, one run by an external trainer and one run in-house. Two further events are planned for the next 12 months. There is a significant amount of new regulation including new National Minimum Standards and adoption guidance, and training for both the panels and the service will be arranged later on in the spring.

7.5 Panel membership has seen some significant changes in the last year. The panels have lost two independent panel members in the last 6 months and we are in the process of recruiting new members. In addition two new senior practitioners have been recruited to the Panel to replace the two which left last year for reasons of promotion. Due to the retirement of our long standing legal adviser, we now have two new legal advisors one on the west and one on the east panel .

7.6 The annual panel evaluation took place between November 2010 and January 2011 a number of suggestions and improvements have already been implemented as a result of these interviews.

7.7 The fees to independent panel members are currently under review in an attempt to bring them in line with other service providers.

7.8 One of the full time panel administrators has returned from maternity leave on a reduced hour contract.

8. Staffing

8.1 One social worker has recently resigned and we urgently need to recruit to this post in order to meet the challenges of placing the increasing numbers of children approved for adoption.

8.2 In addition, the letterbox coordinator post has been re-configured to a qualified Social Worker post to reflect the increasing complexity and volume of the work - this is complemented by dedicated administrative work to deal with the high volume of correspondence involved in this area of work.

8.3 The staffing situation has had an impact on the efficient and timely service delivery and the service is constantly trying to strike a balance between offering a comprehensive adoption support service as well as recruiting and assessing adopters, family finding and matching children.

9. Training and events

9.1 The adoption service continues to run regular training events for adopters, foster carers and other staff and is frequently consulted for their specialist knowledge. A team building day was held in May 2010 to consolidate the new staff members and to plan the service's priorities. A further day is planned for May 2011

9.2 The Christmas party for adoptive families was cancelled in December due to adverse weather conditions. A successful Easter party was held on 2nd April 2011.

10. Management Priorities 2010/2011

10.1 To achieve all the targets outlined in the adoption and permanence service plan for 2011/2012, especially in relation to the numbers and range of adoptive and permanence families needed for our increasing numbers of looked after children.

10.2 To increase the type and range of adoption and permanence placements to meet the assessed needs of looked after children, especially for children from sibling groups.

10.3 To drive timely permanency planning through the permanency tracking workshops and to improve the quality of practice through training opportunities for key staff.

10.4 To review the range of adoption support services to improve placement stability and outcomes for looked after children as well as achieving best value.

10.5 To increase the involvement of young people, adopters and permanence carers in service planning and delivery.

10.6 To ensure that issues of diversity and equality are integrated into service planning and delivery

10.7 To consolidate our work with partner agencies to improve education and health outcomes for adopted children and children placed in long term permanent foster care.

10.8 To maximise best value and manage the service within allocated resources.

10.9. To implement the Revised Adoption Guidance and the National Minimum Standards for Adoption across the panels and the teams

10.10 Finally, a key priority is to prepare for the Ofsted Inspection which is due in 2011.

Carole Sykes
April 2011

