

Report for Children and Young People's Select Committee – Adoption Indicator A2

A2 Indicator 1 April 2011 – 31 March 2014

1. A2 is a key indicator which tests the speed and effectiveness of family-finding. It measures the average time it takes for a local authority to match a child to an adoptive family once it has been decided that adoption is the best option.
2. The national Adoption Scorecard, which publishes information for each local authority about adoption performance, reports on measures for the timeliness of the adoption process using a three year average.
3. Nationally, the threshold (i.e target) for the A2 indicator was set at seven months (213 days) for the years 2008 – 11, aiming to reduce this to four months (121 days) by 2013 -16. Currently, the threshold for years 2011 -14 is set at 152 days.
4. The current national average for 2011-14 is 217 days; for Stockton-on-Tees it is 269 days.
5. Family-finding is a part of the adoption process which is the sole responsibility of the local authority.

Family finding and matching process

6. There are a number of ways to try and identify an adoptive family for a child:
 - In house approved prospective adopters - this is the quickest and easiest route, however it relies on us having capacity and prospective adopters who feel they can meet the needs of the children waiting at that point in time.
 - Referral to the national adoption register; this is a national database where local authorities can refer children waiting and prospective adopters waiting. The computerised data base and a team of register workers will identify potential links on set criteria and forward those links to the family finding social workers for further exploration. Advantages are that children's details are spread wide and far and details of prospective adopters nationally can be shared with family finding social workers. The disadvantages are that it is very time consuming for workers to sift through potential links.
 - Profiles of children waiting posted out to all Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption agencies.
 - Regional exchange meetings; we meet bi monthly with the 12 Local Authority and 2 voluntary adoption agencies. We exchange information with regard to children waiting and prospective adopters waiting.
 - DVD profiling event; this involves us inviting prospective adopters who are waiting (from the region) to an event where we show DVD's of the children and they also have opportunity to meet with the child's foster carer so they can get first-hand knowledge of the children
 - Adoption activity event; children waiting and prospective adopters waiting attend a regional event where they have opportunity to meet each other in a fun way, such as playing sports and games together. These types of events are not for all children or prospective adopters as they do provoke different opinions. Children, if of an age and understanding, need to be aware of what the event is for and a lot of preparation for the children is required. These events therefore need to be planned in advance and are therefore not a quick way of family finding.

- Advertising in publications; there are national publications where children's details can be advertised and prospective adopters who subscribe to the publications can view the children and put themselves forward for consideration.

7. Matching Process

- The family finder and child's social worker consider the responses and 'shortlist' the prospective adopters to be visited.
- A matching meeting is then held to consider the potential of the matches and a decision made on which prospective adopter(s) to visit and a list of matters to consider during the visit is drawn up.
- Social workers visit the selected prospective adopters having previously given the prospective adopters a copy of the reports about the child.
- A feedback meeting is held after the visit to agree on whether to proceed or whether further information is needed to help the decision making.
- Once a prospective adopter has been identified meetings with the foster carer and the agency medical adviser are arranged in order for them to gain further information.
- The social workers have to complete an Adoption Placement Report and an Adoption Support Plan and this, alongside other reports, is referred to the adoption panel.
- The adoption panel reach a recommendation on whether child X should be placed with prospective adopter X.
- These reports and the minutes of the panel have to be referred to the Agency Decision Maker who makes the final decision.
- The date on which the Agency Decision Maker makes his decision is the date reported to the Adoption Scorecard.
- The last OFSTED inspection of the adoption service in 2011 rated it as Outstanding and the feedback highlighted that we had a thorough matching process in place to consider the appropriateness of adoption placement

The 2011 -2014 Adoption Scorecard cohort

8. There were 63 children involved in this cohort.
9. Just over half the children (32) were matched within either the 152 day threshold (17 children) or the national average of 217 days (15 children).
10. The following table demonstrates that the majority of children who either met the scorecard threshold or the national average were placed with in-house approved adopters.

No of days	No of children	Placed within own	Placed interagency
0 - 152	17	14	3
153 - 217	15	12	3
218 – 300	11	3	8
301 - 390	7	3	4
391 - 480	6	3	3
481 - 945	7	1	6

11. The following table demonstrates the number of adoption plans agreed in the period covering the Scorecard and it shows a year on year significant increase particularly in the years 2010 through to 2013.

Year	No of plans
2008/2009	16
2009/2010	21
2010/2011	32
2011/2012	36
2012/2013	49
2013/2014	29
2014/2015	14 (to date)

12. The following table shows the numbers of prospective adopters approved in the same years.

Year	No of approvals
2008/2009	10
2009/2010	9
2010/2011	13
2011/2012	9
2012/2013	10
2013/2014	10
2014/2015	12 (to date)

13. The recruitment figures have remained static during the periods of time when the adoption plans rose significantly.
14. It is generally difficult to predict the numbers and age ranges of the next children who will have adoption plans made and therefore recruitment targets are driven by the current characteristics of children waiting. This potentially could lead to a mismatch of children waiting and adopters waiting.
15. Of the 20 children for whom the threshold timescale was exceeded significantly (301 days plus)
- 12 were part of a sibling group (including sibling group of 3 children)
 - 14 were under the age of 2yr old
 - 6 were aged between 3 – 4yr old
 - 7 children were placed with in-house adopters
 - 13 children were placed interagency
16. For some of the sibling groups the plan for adoption for each of them may have been made at a different time, for example where a sibling is born after the first sibling's plan had been agreed or the second sibling entered care at a later date and a plan to place the children together in adoption was in the pipeline but the process for the second sibling had not concluded. As a consequence the first sibling's family finding is held up. The second sibling timescale may be within the scorecard threshold, but the first sibling is outside of the threshold

Case examples of why some children's situations exceed the threshold timescales

17. One sibling group of three children had a wide age range from youngest being 2 year old and eldest aged 6 years old at the point of the Placement Order being made .The two youngest

children had significant developmental delay and genetic testing and developmental assessments were ongoing to establish the root cause of delay and the support that would be needed for each child.

18. There are a limited number of prospective adopters prepared to take a sibling group of three let alone where two children have significant delay. In this situation there were great efforts to find a family for all three together before a decision was reached to try and place the children separately. The sibling relationship was such that it was felt important to seek adoptive parents who could commit to ensuring the siblings had direct contact with each other. Not all prospective adopters can manage direct contact for a number of different reasons so this further limits the response when seeking adoptive families. The children at that time were also placed in two separate foster placements, the younger two together and the elder child in a separate foster care placement. The children's foster placements were stable and had been their only placements.
19. The three siblings are all now adopted separately, they are all secure and happy and they all see each other regularly.
20. It took 945 and 719 days to decide on the matches for the two youngest children (the third sibling is in a different year's cohort).
21. One child aged 3 yr. old – it took 861 days to identify and decide on his match. This child had health needs and had attachment difficulties and extensive family finding efforts were made without success. We eventually identified someone within the professional network of people supporting the child who would consider adoption for him. This person had to be assessed and approved as an adopter and this process in itself is time consuming. This child successfully moved on from a stable foster placement into adoption with someone he knew and trusted.
22. A 1 year old child who had been born to a mother who used drugs and alcohol during pregnancy and there were signs that the child had been born affected by this. In addition, the child was subject to medical investigations with regard to a growth on the spine. The family finding and decision about the match took 820 days as there were potential prospective adopters identified, however they withdrew as they decided they could not manage the medical and developmental uncertainty.

Disruption

23. Disruption of an adoption placement is where the matching process has taken place and the children have been placed for adoption, but not yet adopted and the prospective adopter decides that they cannot adopt that child and the child is returned to foster care placement.
24. In the 2011 – 2014 period there have been 3 adoption disruptions. This compares to 0 disruptions during the years 2005 - 2012.
25. In one case of two siblings being placed together, the breakdown was due to unknown regressive factors, including sexualised behaviours of the elder sibling. Despite extensive support and therapy, due to the risks he presented to other children, the adopters felt unable to continue to care for him. The younger sibling remained with the adopters and is now adopted.

26. In the second case of a 2 year old child, the prospective adopters had difficulties in managing attachments with the child and ended the placement. The plan is still adoption and this child is now placed again with prospective adopters.
27. The third case was a 4 year old for whom again the prospective adopters struggled with attachments. This child returned to foster care and the plan remained adoption. This child is now adopted and doing well.
28. It is essential to maintain a thorough and careful matching process to avoid disruptions wherever possible. There is a balance to be made to ensure that targets for timeliness do not compromise the success of the matching process.

Summary

29. Despite the delay for some children in relation to the timeliness of placements, and the range of presenting difficulties and complexities, the outcomes for those children have been very positive and the fact that we do not 'give up' has to be commended.
30. The characteristics and complex situations for children are only a part of the picture which impacts on our performance. Other contributory factors can be identified as follows.
31. Capacity within the team responsible for family finding has presented some challenges, although this is being addressed and the staff resource base has increased.
32. The children who met the scorecard threshold were mostly placed with in-house adopters, for whom recruitment has remained fairly static in recent years. There is now a permanent recruitment and marketing officer in post in the Child Placement team to provide a stronger approach to encouraging prospective adopters to apply to Stockton-on-Tees.
33. Systems and processes – the local authorities with more timely performance tend to start the family finding process at an earlier stage than we do (before the Placement Order). This approach relies on having sufficient in-house prospective adopters available and having the appropriate reports available (as the reports about the children are a vital tool for family finding). Taking account of this practice, we are now undertaking some work to streamline and update our processes and documents to improve the time available for family finding to take place.