



Public Agenda Item: **Yes**

Title: **Adoption Agency Activity Report**

Wards Affected: **All Wards in Torbay**

To: **The Mayor/Council** On: **13 July 2011**

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## **1. Key points and Summary**

1.1 This report is to inform members of the Torbay Children's Services Adoption Agency activities for the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 There is a requirement that Adoption agency activity is reported twice a year to the Executive and to the Adoption Panel. This report covers figures for 1/4/10 to 31/3/11. Figures are also given from previous years as comparisons.
- 2.2 There are timescales to be met when planning adoption for children. The figures include details of how these are being met.
- 2.3 The Executive Head of Safeguarding and Wellbeing made the decisions about adoption cases after he had considered the recommendation of the Adoption Panel. There have been no cases where the decision has differed from that recommended by the Panel.
- 2.4 The plan for a child will come before the Adoption Panel on two occasions: first for approval of whether a child should be placed for adoption (approval of an adoption plan) and again for the consideration of the suitability of particular prospective adoptive parents for the child (approval of placement).
- 2.5 Panel also recommends the approval of prospective adopters and applicants are invited to attend the Panel when their approval is being considered and when a match is being considered. As part of legislation the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) has been set up, where adopters may have their applications reconsidered when the Panel has not recommended their approval and the Agency Decision Maker is minded to turn down the application. The recommendation from this Panel then goes back to the Agency Decision Maker for a decision. A fee is paid by the agency for each case referred to the IRM (currently £2,418) regardless of whether or not the recommendation of the IRM supports the agency's view.

2.6 Under the legislation, the Adoption Panel can also consider a brief assessment report, where it is felt that the assessment should not continue. Applicants can also apply to the IRM if the Agency Decision Maker is minded to turn down an application in these circumstances. Applicants have forty working days to make this decision. There were no applications to the IRM during the period 1/4/10 to 31/3/11.

**Rhona Lewis**  
**Adoption Team Manager**

### **Appendices**

N/A

### **Documents available in members' rooms**

N/A

### **Background Papers**

The following documents/files were used to compile this report:

N/A

## 1. Plans for children

- 1.1 From 1/4/10 to 31/3/11, there were 15 children who the Adoption Panel recommended should be placed for adoption. Of these 15 children, one has now been adopted, three are placed but not yet adopted, one is awaiting the outcome of legal proceedings and placements are being sought for the 10 remaining children, including three sibling groups. The plans for four of these children were only made at the end of the reporting period, so searches are at a very early stage. However, the ages and complexities of their needs, indicate that these children will be difficult to identify suitable placements for easily. One plan for adoption (approved during the previous year) was changed during the court proceedings. (See table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Plans for Children**

<b>Adoption Plans approved</b>													
Children for whom a formal decision has been made that they should be placed for adoption	98/99	99/00	20/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	<b>10/11</b>
White British	5	12	9	16	12	6	14	12	20	15	12	9	<b>13</b>
Other ethnicity		4	1					1	1	1		7	<b>2</b>
Aged 0 to 2 years	4	6	7	8	11	4	10	7	10	8	12	8	<b>6</b>
Aged 3 to 5 years	1	4	2	5	1	2	2	5	7	5		4	<b>6</b>
Aged 6 to 10 years		6	1	3				1	3	3		4	<b>3</b>
Aged 11 years plus							2		1				
<b>Total</b>	5	16	10	16	12	6	14	13	21	16	12		15

## Placements

- 1.2 Panel approved eight placements during this period.
- 1.3 Placements for children are being met in a number of different ways. Torbay does not have a large enough pool of prospective adopters to offer placement choice for Torbay children needing placements. Adopters who live within Torbay are not usually considered appropriate for Torbay children, and because of this, Torbay Adoption Team are also recruiting from neighbouring areas. Prospective adopters from these areas are now coming to Torbay as a result of word of mouth advertising from other Torbay adopters.

Arrangements have been put in place to secure the most cost effective placement for each specific child, dependent on their individual needs, which are substantially less than the usual interagency fee. This includes a reciprocal arrangement with three other unitary authorities, involving a straight exchange of placements with no

costs. This also enables Torbay prospective adopters to stand a better chance of getting a placement for a young child, as they would not be considered for Torbay children and most local authorities do not need to purchase placements for pre school children. Adopters who live in Torbay have also been successfully matched with children from other areas not covered by our reciprocal arrangement, generating income from the interagency fee payable for such placements. (See table 2).

**Table 2**

**Number of children placed from 1/4/10 –31/3/11, by age and the agency providing the placement**

<b>Age of child</b>	<b>Torbay</b>	<b>Reciprocal arrangement (no cost)</b>	<b>Other L.A/Voluntary Adoption agency</b>	<b>Total</b>
0-2 years	<b>3</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
3-5 years	<b>1</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
6-10 years	<b>1</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
11+ years				
All	<b>5</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>

### **Adoption Orders**

- 1.4 The percentage of children who are adopted from local authority care is based on the number of Adoption Orders made in the year. In the period 1/4/10 to 31/3/11 eleven children were adopted.
- 1.5 The percentage of children adopted during the year is also based on the total number of children looked after (for over six months) on the thirty first of March and it is this percentage that is reported. However, almost two thirds of these children are in the ten to eighteen age range and adoption is not likely to be a realistic option for these children, who have close attachments to their birth families.

The numbers of children adopted in recent years, other than the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2004 which was exceptionally high at seventeen, has remained between ten and thirteen per year. The number of children adopted for the year 2010-2011 is, at eleven, within this range, but as the number of children looked after is higher, the percentage rate is therefore lower. However with such small numbers and a fluctuating number of children looked after, the percentage rate appears to suggest a much sharper rise and fall than there has actually been.

- 1.6 The aim of Torbay Council should be, and is, to consider adoption for all children who cannot remain in or return to their birth families (see table 3).

**Table 3**

**Percentages of children adopted from care**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Total number of children looked after</b>	<b>Percentage of all children adopted</b>	<b>Children aged 0-9 years</b>	<b>Percentage of children aged 0-9 years adopted</b>
31/3/99	221	0.90%	87	2.29%
31/3/00	216	3.24%	76	9.21%
31/3/01	238	2.1%	100	5%
31/3/02	205	6.8%	86	16.3%
31/3/03	184	2.7%	50	10%
31/3/04	177	9.6%	55	30.9%
31/3/05	176	6.25%	60	18.33%
31/3/06	149	8.72%	55	23.63%
31/3/07	151	6.6%	61	16.39%
31/3/08	164	6.1%	69	13.0%
31/3/09	156	7.69%	62	19.35%
31/3/10	149	10.06%	50	33.55%
<b>31/3/11</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>6.58%</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>18.03%</b>

Performance regarding this percentage figure can be translated according to the following table

Under 3%	3%-6%	6%-7%	7%-8%	8%-25%
	Ask questions about performance	Acceptable, but possible room for improvement	Good	Very good

**Timescales**

1.7 The National Adoption Standards which came into effect in April 2003 set very clear timescales regarding adoption plans for children and assessments of prospective adopters:

- 1) The time between adoption being identified at a review and the plan being considered at Adoption Panel for a child is 2 months.

In the period 1/4/10 to 31/3/11 compliance with these timescales is 87.5% with 14 out of 16 children.

- 2) The timescales for children being matched with prospective adopters are now measured from the date the decision for adoption is made following Panel to the Panel where a match is agreed. This timescale is 6 months for children where there are court proceedings and 3 months where there are no proceedings. Previously this was measured from the date the court made the Order which authorised the Local Authority to place the child for adoption. This was difficult to achieve and was often just outside at between

7 and 9 months, but is now even more difficult to achieve as there is no control over the length of time taken for the Court proceedings.

- 3) Only one of the children where there were court proceedings was matched within this timescale, and one just outside at 7 months. Two children had such specific needs that it took over 12 months to identify placements for them and the foster carers for two other children wanted to adopt them, the assessment process for this taking it over the timescales for the children.
- 4) Of the two children not in proceedings, one was matched well within the three month timescale, and the other just outside at 4 months. This was only outside the timescales due to attempts to match the ethnicity of the child.
- 5) The timescales for matching children are being closely monitored and an emphasis put on matching children as quickly as possible. Two posts from the permanency planning team have been transferred to the adoption team so that these workers can focus specifically on preparing children for adoption placements, family finding and matching. Once this is fully established, it is hoped that this will speed up the process and children will be matched and placed more quickly. However, there will always be some children for whom it is difficult to identify a placement, others where there are protracted legal proceedings and others with whom work needs to be done prior to placement which cannot be started until the legal proceedings have concluded.

1.8 There are timescales for prospective adopters with regard to sending out information and dealing with initial enquiries, all of which are 100% compliant. There are also timescales between the acceptance of an application and it going to the Adoption Panel. These timescales have changed with the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and are not reported on in detail. They are largely being met, other than unavoidable circumstances such as staff sickness leading to a delayed panel date and requests by prospective adopters to slow down the assessment process.

### **Prospective Adopters**

- 1.9 Torbay's Adoption Team, set up to recruit and assess prospective adopters, was not set up until the beginning of 2004 and prior to that any prospective adopters, other than foster carers, were approved by Families for Children and were dealt with by their Adoption Panel.
- 1.10 The Adoption Team commenced their first assessments at the end of May 2004, and figures for these adopters showed in the figures for 2004/2005 but were low (seven), as the team had been newly created and the basic foundations needed to be set up for the service before being able to recruit prospective adopters. These figures then showed an increase and sixteen adopters were approved during 2005/2006. This remained at a similar level for 2006/2007 with fifteen being approved as well as two inter-country adopters. Two prospective adopters were not approved. In 2008/2009 ten prospective adopters were approved and one withdrew following approval. One withdrew during the assessment.

During the period 1/4/10 to 31/3/11, only seven prospective adopters were approved. One set of prospective adopters withdrew (having been approved in a previous year). Numbers approved this year are low. The number of enquiries fell dramatically. This was reflected throughout the region and was felt to be caused by the financial crisis and people's uncertainties about this. Enquiries have started to increase again, and more emphasis is being put on recruitment with specific areas being targeted on a regular basis. However, only about 20% of enquiries result in approvals and taking account of the time to undertake assessments, the numbers for next year are likely to be lower as well.

In response the Adoption Service have increased recruitment activity and have held several recruitment events, including South Devon College and at local businesses in Plymouth and Exeter. Advertising posters have been sent to various faith organisations, GP surgeries, veterinary centres and animal rescue centres in target areas to be displayed and these will continue to be sent on a twice yearly basis. Informal information days are held bi-monthly and these events are advertised on local radio stations and posters are on display in various locations in Plymouth and Exeter and surrounding areas. These events were moved to a more accessible location for prospective adopters travelling from the Plymouth and Exeter areas to increase attendance. Other planned recruitment campaigns include the Torbay Council consultation caravan in Exeter in July, following a successful event last year and Plymouth Drake Circus during National Adoption Week. The Adoption Service is also investigating the costings of several ideas including advertising on buses, school newsletters, leaflet drops and an advert on pay slips of staff in large organisations.

Once the adoption orders are made on their children, adopters are then offered adoption support. Despite an increase in staffing in the post adoption service, the demands for this service have seen a dramatic increase in recent years and the service is up to capacity and often has a waiting list for referrals. This led to two of the recommendations from the most recent inspection, one to ensure there are sufficient resources to respond promptly to requests and another to ensure in all cases an allocated worker is available for birth parents as soon as a plan for adoption is identified. Despite the appointment of further staff in August 2010 these issues continue to some extent as the demand for services increases and the needs of children being placed for adoption are more complex. The issue continues to be monitored. (See table 4).

**Table 4**

**Prospective adopters approved  
(Excluding overseas adopters)**

<b>Age of Child</b>	98 /99	99 /00	20 /01	20 /02	2002 -3	2003 -4	2004 -5	2005 -6	2007 - 2008	2008 - 2009	2009 - 2010	<b>2010 - 2011</b>
<b>0 to 2 years</b>	2	1	2		2	2	4	7	2	7	7	<b>1</b>
<b>3 to 5 years</b>		2	1				1	5	4	1	4	<b>3</b>
<b>6 to 10 years</b>							1	4	3	2	3	<b>3</b>
<b>11 years plus</b>	1						1					
<b>Total</b>	3	3	3	0	2	2	7	16	9	10	14	<b>7</b>

Families are counted in the age range corresponding to the *maximum* age of children for whom they can be considered. One of the applicants approved was single. One family, approved in a previous year, withdrew following a lengthy wait during which no appropriate placement was identified.

- 1.11 Of the seven adopters approved, five have had children placed (one with Torbay children and four with a child from another local authority). One is currently being considered for a child from Torbay and one is still available for placements.

The adoption social workers actively seek appropriate placements for Torbay Council prospective adopters and there are currently seven available families (including some approved outside the dates within this report). (See table 5).

**Table 5**

**Prospective adopters matched 1/4/09-31/3/10**

Where there was more than one child placed, the placement is indicated by the age of the oldest child

<b>Age of child</b>	<b>Torbay</b>	<b>Reciprocal arrangement (no cost)</b>	<b>Other L.A/Voluntary Adoption agency</b>	<b>Total</b>
0-2 years	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>
3-5 years			<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
6-10 years	<b>1</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
11+ years				
<b>All</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>

There has been one disruption of a child from another local authority placed with Torbay adopters.

**Intercountry Adoptions**

- 1.12 Assessments of people wishing to adopt a child from abroad used to be undertaken by social workers employed on a sessional basis. This is the only adoption work for which local authorities can make a charge, and applicants were charged for this. This is so that the work does not take up resources which could be used for placing local children. Having only dealt with two of these assessments since Torbay became a unitary authority, since April 2006, there were then three assessments. Whilst these were charged for, this does not cover all the costs involved and because of the rapidly changing criteria of all the countries involved, it was difficult to keep up to date and to provide a good service. For these reasons, it was decided to contract this work out from the first of April 2007 to a voluntary agency, Parents and Children Together (PACT). For an annual fee, PACT now deals with all intercountry adoption work from enquiry through to placement. They charge the applicants directly for the assessment. Dealing regularly with these cases gives applicants the specialist information and advice it has been difficult to provide. The last of the assessments undertaken by Torbay Council was approved during the



year 2007/2008 but there is still one family waiting for a match (a relative of one of the applicants). Work involved once the applicants are matched and a child is placed cannot be charged for. This work is currently undertaken within the Adoption Team.

### **Post adoption work**

- 1.13 The Adoption Support Services Regulations came into effect in November 2003, placing duties on adoption agencies to provide counselling, advice and information, support groups for adoptive families, a modernised system of financial support, assistance with contact arrangements, therapeutic services for adopted children and services to ensure continuance of adopted relationships. The adoption support service has undertaken all these requirements.

### **Work with Birth relatives**

- 1.14 The National Adoption Standards require that birth parents have access to independent support when adoption is planned and for support both pre and post adoption. In order to secure this independent support, Torbay contracted this work to the South West Adoption Network (SWAN) from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2004. This complied with one of the requirements, which was not fully met at the time of the inspection in July 2004. This contract was not renewed from the end of March 2006, as it was not found to be cost effective. There was a large increase in demand for this service since it was brought back in house. Numbers decreased in the year 2008-2009 from 34 to 20, increasing again to 36 in April 2010. However, the level of support and complexity of work has significantly increased and staffing levels meant that a waiting list had to be held, leading to one of the recommendations from the November 2009 inspection. This has been addressed and the waiting list is now minimal. The recent appointment to vacant posts will further address this issue. Three members of the team have completed a certificate in counselling to undertake this work.

Birth relative support groups were suspended due to lack of take up and in the year 2009-2010 were replaced with a set of courses designed to equip birth relatives with the skills to cope with loss and grief, support the child in moving on, participating in post adoption contact and making positive choices for themselves. This worked well initially, but at the end of the year attendance dropped off and the viability and format of the group is being re-evaluated following consultation with service users.

- 1.15 The workers have also been running a group for children who have had a sibling adopted. Whilst there is no requirement under the regulations to provide a group for these children, it was identified as a need as a lot of these children had been referred for support. With an increase in numbers the aim is to split this group into two groups of different ages but current staffing levels means this is not yet possible.

Two social workers trained in therapeutic techniques are working directly with a number of children, which has been beneficial in helping placement stability and preparation for moving on to adoption.

A therapy clinic is run on a weekly basis, involving one of the community care workers in conjunction with CAMHS. This offers an assessment of attachment between parent and child and strategies to improve this.

### Contact arrangements

- 1.16 Following formation of Torbay’s adoption service, the team took over responsibility for setting up systems and running the contact arrangements, which had been very ad hoc. Few plans for children being placed for adoption include no ongoing contact, whether face to face or “letterbox” (the exchange of information), with a birth family member, and most include a number of different family members. There has been a dramatic increase in activity since the facility was established in 2004 when there were 8 exchanges. Letterbox activity increased to 380 in 2008, 421 in 2009, 473 in 2010 and by April 2011 was at 567. In 2010 the exchanges involved 290 people. This number rose to 343 by April 2011. All exchanges are monitored and help is given to all parties involved to ensure that the contents are positive and appropriate. The inspection in November 2009 commented favourably about the way this service is being run.

The number of direct contact arrangements has also been rising with plans being made for children often including at least one direct contact per year. These increased from 32 in 2008, to 39 in 2009, and to 45 in 2010. The number of direct contacts facilitated and supervised by the team has doubled since 2007 and like the letterbox has increased dramatically since the team was established in 2004. This year, however, the number has dropped back to 35, with arrangements for some children changing due to their changing needs. The numbers of people involved in each contact varies, but some of the arrangements are for large groups – two involve at least ten people. Contacts involving large sibling groups are becoming more common and require at least two supervisors. Each of the direct contacts takes an average of 15 hours work each time. It includes pre and post contact support for all parties, as well as arranging the venue and supervising the actual contact. A lot of contacts involve school age children and cannot all be done during school holidays, so a lot take place at the weekend. (See table 6).

**Table 6**  
**Contact arrangements**

	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>
<b>Letterbox-number of exchanges</b>	380	421	473	<b>567</b>
<b>Letterbox-number of people involved</b>			290	<b>343</b>
<b>Direct contacts</b>	32	39	45	<b>35</b>

## **Work with adoptive families**

- 1.17 Work with families following a post adoption assessment of need have increased dramatically from 10 in 2007, 33 in 2008, 37 in April 2009, 47 in April 2010 to 59 in April 2011. The majority of these referrals relate to children and young people who require direct work and support with life story work. These figures do not include other work also undertaken, such as support for children during placement difficulties and individual work with siblings who are not being adopted.

Social groups for adopters continue to be held three times a year. Adopters are also offered training on a variety of topics, which during 2010-2011 included trauma and loss in the adoption process, lifestory books and the family finding and matching process.

A group for adopted young people started in 2010 proved to be so successful it was split into two different age groups. Membership currently stands at 11 young people between the ages of 13 and 18 and 9 aged 8 to 12.

## **Work with adults**

- 1.18 Changes to work with adults who have been adopted have resulted from the Adoption and Children Act 2002 coming into effect on 30 December 2005. The service for those people required to have counselling can only be undertaken by trained adoption counsellors of whom there are only three during the year 2009-2010. This work can not always be prioritised due to undertaking assessments of prospective adopters and the placement of children which must be prioritised. Numbers increased dramatically and resulted in delays for people requiring this service. Following the inspection, a number of measures were taken to address the delays. 9 additional staff undertook training to become adoption counsellors and sessional workers were used to deal with cases on the waiting list. Some of these pieces of work can be very short, sometimes only one counselling session, but others can take a lot of time over a long period. Because the time commitment is not known before starting the work, this has implications for the allocation of the work. Some of the trained counsellors have since left Torbay Council and their cases have had to be reallocated, meaning there is still a waiting list for this service, but this has reduced. It is anticipated that numbers will continue to rise due to increased coverage of adoption issues by the media.
- 1.19 The Adoption team also deal with self-referrals and referrals from birth relatives. Where these referrals are requests for help and advice in tracing family members they are being advised that, as Torbay Council is not registered as an intermediary agency, we are not able to help. We still offer counselling, but not help or advice in tracing. This does not reflect any work done prior to referring people on to a registered intermediary service, or the accessing of information from files to provide to the intermediary. This can be a time consuming piece of work. The decision not to register at this time was taken due to no additional funding being made available which would have meant that cases would only have been able to be dealt with at the expense of assessments of prospective adopters and planning for children. Torbay Council would have been unable to provide the levels of service people are entitled to and require. The decision about registration is kept under review but staffing levels do not indicate that this will be able to change in the foreseeable future.