Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

19 July 2016

Subject: Wiltshire Council Adoption Service: 2015-16 Year End Report

Cabinet member: Councillor Laura Mayes – Children's Services

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary

This report should be read in conjunction with the Adoption West Cabinet Report which is also being considered at the Cabinet meeting on 19 July 2016.

It is a statutory requirement that the Adoption Service provides a year-end report to the Council. It describes the management arrangements, outcomes, priorities and finances of the Agency for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.

In March 2013, Wiltshire Council's Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted with the overall effectiveness of the service being judged as Adequate. In July 2015, Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted with the overall judgement being Requires Improvement (RI). As stated in the six month Adoption Report, Children's Services is not complacent or satisfied with this; however, the grade criteria changed between 2013 and 2015 with RI being broadly equivalent to Adequate. Two main areas for improvement were indicated regarding the Adoption Service:

- The need for timeliness of the assessment of adopters and their match with a child to be adopted, and
- The need for timeliness of the adoption of children with complex needs.

In 2014/15, 27 adoption orders were granted and 35 families were approved as suitable to adopt. For the year 2015/16, 22 adoption orders were granted and 13 families were approved as suitable to adopt. Of note, is that the number of newly approved adopters is low. This was because the number of children requiring adoption decreased and the pool of available adopters was adequate. Looking ahead, it is anticipated that 35-40 children will require orders in the full year (an approximate benchmark is 10% of the care population) and the Adoption Service now aims to recruit 30 adoptive families through targeted and general recruitment in order to meet anticipated needs. Recruitment activity is in place and initial indications are positive.

The national improvement of adoption performance has received considerable attention over the last two years, largely driven by the Government's commitment to improving adoption services in terms of numbers of children

being adopted and the timeliness of matches for children requiring adoptive placements. Comparative performance is measured using the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows overall continued improvement. It is recognised that further acceleration of improvement is needed although the overall trajectory is positive.

In spring 2015, the Government made it an expectation that local authorities were to develop collaborative arrangements to further improve adoption performance. The regional response to this was to further develop and invigorate the Adoption West initiative, now comprising of six local authorities working together to deliver joint adoption (and, currently proposed, permanence) arrangements. Wiltshire Council Adoption Agency is a member of Adoption West.

Alongside Adoption West, there are a number of internal changes and developments within the Adoption Service, arising from inspection, ongoing review of the effectiveness of the Service and the need for continual improvement. These will build upon the progress reported to Cabinet in November 2015 and further accelerate the pace of improvement in the local authority.

Proposal(s)

It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

Reason for Proposal

Wiltshire Council is an Adoption Agency registered with Ofsted. The 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards (25.6) and 2013 Statutory Guidance (3.93 and 5.39) describe the information that is required to be reported to the executive side of the local authority every six months in order to provide assurance that the adoption agency is complying with the conditions of registration whilst being effective and achieving good outcomes for children and service users.

Carolyn Godfrey
Corporate Director

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

19 July 2016

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Key Decision: No

Purpose of Report

1. This report provides a year-end report to Cabinet regarding the performance of the Adoption Service within Wiltshire Council. It is a requirement of the condition of registration as described in 2014 Adoption Minimum Standards and 2013 Statutory Guidance that Cabinet is satisfied that the Adoption Agency complies with the conditions of registration, is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children.

2. Cabinet last received a report regarding the Adoption Service in November 2015, covering the period from 1 April 2015 to 30 September 2015 (Q1-2). This report relates to the full year 2015/16 reporting period (Q1-4).

3. Following the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in July 2015, (arriving at the judgement of Requires Improvement) which included the Adoption Service, a number of strengths were noted (see below) alongside two main issues that required further attention:

   - The timeliness of the assessment of adopters and their match with a child to be adopted, and
   - The timeliness of the adoption of children with complex needs.

4. This report includes information regarding the management of the Adoption Service, the Adoption Scorecard, children who require adoptive placements and those who are placed, the recruitment and approval of adopters, the disruption of placements, children where the plan for adoption changes and the work of the Adoption Panel.

5. It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

6. The Wiltshire Council Adoption Service is a central priority as set out in the Wiltshire Council Business Plan 2013-2017 as part of the key priority to protect those who are most vulnerable. Two specific actions in the Plan are:

- To develop an outstanding Adoption Service for all children for whom adoption is in their best interest, and
- To work with voluntary sector partners to ensure that we offer and deliver a comprehensive array of adoption support services.

Main Considerations for the Council

7. The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. In 2013/14, 40 children were adopted. In 2014/15 27 children were adopted and in 2015/16 this number was 22. Of these 21 (96%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interest being made. This will reflect positively in the A2 measure going forward. In 2013/14, 40 adoptive families were approved, in 2014/15, 35 families were approved. In 2015/16 13 adoptive families were approved as suitable to adopt. This number needs to increase in the current year and initial indications are positive; there has been an increase in the number of applications to become adopters from 17 in 2014/15 to 29 in 2015/16 with a further increase anticipated on 2016/17.

8. Wiltshire's current Adoption Scorecard (most recently published performance to March 2015) shows overall continued improvement. There are three key measures that are included:

A1: the average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted:

- The local authority three year average (2012-15) is 610 days. This is shorter than the 1 year and 3 year trends from 2014 and 2011-14 and slightly higher than the England 3 year average of 593 days. The national target for 2013-16 is 426 days. The Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- Excluding 8 legacy cases this figure becomes 567 for 2012-15.
- Including Fostering for Adoption placements and legacy cases, unverified Wiltshire data (predicted data based on current management information used to forecast performance) estimates the figure for 2013-16 as 529 days, a marked improvement on 610 days and less that the England average.

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:

- The local authority three year average (2015-16) is 161 days. This is longer than the 1 year trend in 2014 and shorter than the 3 year trend (2012-15). It is shorter than the England 3 year average of 223 days.
- Excluding 8 legacy cases this figure becomes 146 for 2012-15
- Including legacy cases where they remain in the three year period, unverified Wiltshire data estimates the figure for 2013-16 as 154 days. The national target for 2013-16 is 121 days

(Legacy cases include children over 4 years old by the time a Should Be Placed for Adoption decision was made, children with complex behavioural, health or development needs and part of a large sibling group where there have been complex care proceedings. Of these all but two were adopted in the three year period, with the anticipation that the remaining 2 will be adopted 2016/17. This means that over time, A1 and A2 will continue to improve as these children will not be in the cohort.)
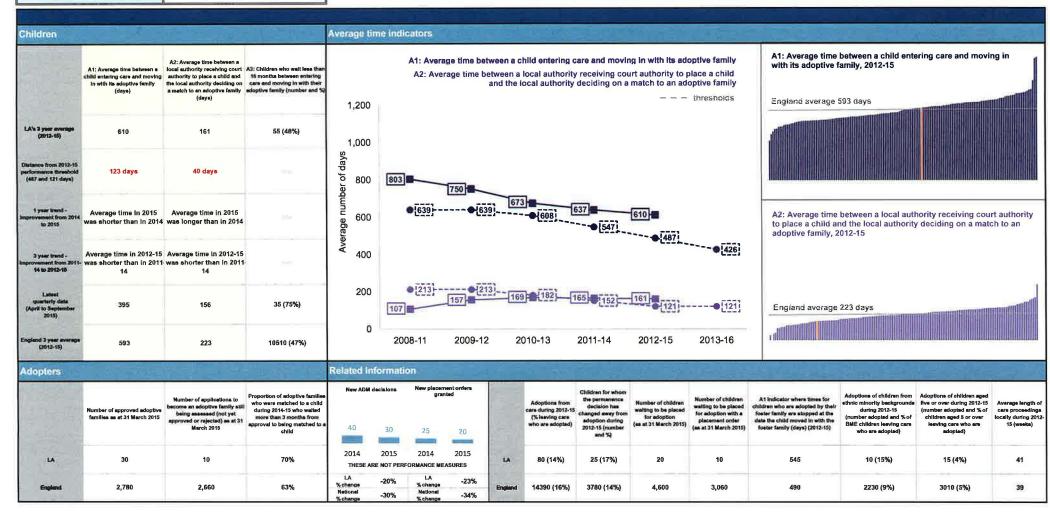
A3: the number of children who waited less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family:

- There were 55 (48%) children who waited less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. The England three year average (2012-15) is 47%. Unverified Wiltshire data estimates the figure for 2013-16 as 78 children (57%).

9. It should be noted that the most recent Scorecard three year averages relate to 2012-15, therefore there has been a further year of work taking place in Wiltshire which has produced the unverified averages described above. This data indicates that, in addition to the improvement shown in the Scorecard, the three key measures have continued to improve this year, with the overall pace and trajectory of improvement being positive. The most significant improvement in indicator A1 which is showing an improvement of approximately 10%, meaning that more children are being placed in their adoptive placements in a shorter time after being received into care. Although this is good progress, further attention needs to be paid to this to close the gap with the national target.

10. A2 is also showing improvement although the pace has slowed and so particular attention is being given to the process of identifying an appropriate, matched placement for a child. Changes have been made to the process to ensure that home finding starts at the earliest opportunity and that all activities are monitored and completed in a timely fashion. This work will continue in the coming year.

11. The full Scorecard is as follows:

Adoption Scorecard

See methodology and guidance document for further information

Children

	A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family (days)	A2: 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 (days)	A3: Children who wait less than 16 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %)
LA's 3 year average (2012-15)	610	161	55 (48%)
Distance from 2012-15 performance threshold (487 and 121 days)	123 days	40 days	n/a
1 year trend - Improvement from 2014 to 2015	Average time in 2015 was shorter than in 2014	Average time in 2015 was longer than in 2014	n/a
3 year trend - Improvement from 2011-14 to 2012-15	Average time in 2012-15 was shorter than in 2011-14	Average time in 2012-15 was shorter than in 2011-14	n/a
Latest quarterly data (April to September 2015)	395	156	35 (75%)
England 3 year average (2012-15)	593	223	10510 (47%)

Average time indicators

A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family

A2: 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

– – – thresholds

Chart values — A1: 803, 750, 673, 637, 610 (solid); 639, 639, 608, 547, 487, 426 (dashed).
Chart values — A2: 107, 157, 169, 182, 165, 152, 161, 121 (solid); 213, 213, 121 (dashed).
X-axis: 2008-11, 2009-12, 2010-13, 2011-14, 2012-15, 2013-16.

A1: Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, 2012-15

England average 593 days

A2: 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, 2012-15

England average 223 days

Adopters

Related Information

	Number of approved adoptive families as at 31 March 2015	Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March 2015	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2014-15 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child	New ADM decisions		New placement orders granted				Adoptions from care during 2012-15 (% leaving care who are adopted)	Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2012-15 (number and %)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March 2015)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2015)	A1 indicator where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days) (2012-15)	Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds during 2012-15 (number adopted and % of BME children leaving care who are adopted)	Adoptions of children aged five or over during 2012-15 (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted)	Average length of care proceedings locally during 2012-15 (weeks)
				40	30	25	20										
				2014	2015	2014	2015										
LA	30	10	70%					LA	80 (14%)	25 (17%)	20	10	545	10 (15%)	15 (4%)	41
England	2,780	2,660	63%	LA % change -20%		LA % change -23%		England	14390 (16%)	3780 (14%)	4,600	3,060	490	2230 (9%)	3010 (5%)	39
				National % change -30%		National % change -34%										

THESE ARE NOT PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Following the Prime Minister's announcement in November 2015 of plans to increase the number of children in Fostering for Adoption (FFA) placements, future scorecards will include an indicator that highlights the number of children in these placements in each local authority. This has not been included this year due to the low numbers involved: 1% of foster placements were FFA or concurrent planning placements at 31 March 2015. Only 34 authorities have a proportion higher than this and 68 local authorities (excluding Isles of Scilly) reported no children in FFA or concurrent placements.

12. Management arrangements and staffing are compliant with regulation in terms of qualification and experience. The Corporate Director (with the responsibility of Director of Children's Services) has overall responsibility for the Adoption Service. Reporting to the DCS is the Associate Director with responsibility for Children's Services, a permanent Head of Service – Care and Placement Services was secured in post in March 2015 and has day-to-day operational responsibility for the Service. In addition there is a permanently appointed Service Manager and an Acting Adoption Team Manager in post. This has brought strength and capacity to the Service with an opportunity to develop the strategy for improvement, ensure appropriate line management arrangements in the Service, provide operational accountability and maintain the important contribution to the regional Adoption West project.

13. The core task of the Adoption Service is to provide secure and stable adoptive placements for children who require legal permanence and are no longer able to remain living safely with their parents or other family members. Services provided are broadly delivered by two teams:

- The Adoption Recruitment and Assessment Team: provides permanency for children through the recruitment, assessment and preparation of prospective adopters. Recommended for approval by the Adoption Panel and endorsed by the Agency Decision Maker, adopters are then matched with children through the home finding process.
- The Adoption Support Team: supports adoptive families and their children to ensure placement stability. It also provides support to Special Guardians. Services include therapeutic support, counselling, training, family days, newsletters and a link to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This team is also responsible for managing referrals to the Adoption Support Fund which increases adopters' access to specific services for adoption support.
- In addition, the Adoption Service is responsible for providing an intermediary service adopted adults and birth relatives wishing to trace family members, for those wishing to trace adopted children, support for non-agency adoptions (typically step-parents wishing to adopt), and those wishing to adopt children from overseas.

14. The establishment operational staffing of the Service (Recruitment and Assessment and Adoption Support) comprises one full-time equivalent Team Manager (currently covered in an acting capacity due to long term sickness and phased return of the substantive post holder) and one full time equivalent Assistant Team Manager (this post is currently not actively filled due to the implications of the phased return to work). There are 7.5 full time equivalent qualified social work posts of which, one is currently vacant. There are three full time equivalent Adoption Support Workers who, between them, have responsibilities across the full range of work within the Adoption Service. This is a small team with county-wide responsibilities. The demands upon the team are growing with the increase of Special Guardianship Orders in Wiltshire and the work

generated by adoption breakdowns that can occur at any time post-Adoption Order. Most commonly, these involve adolescents who are challenging and can be hard to place if they are unable to remain with their adoptive families.

15. A development plan, supported by an adopter recruitment strategy, was published in autumn 2015. This reflects the priorities of the Service and the areas of improvement indicated in the Ofsted inspection of 2015. Within the overarching Children's Improvement Plan, the Looked After Children Improvement Plan includes the following priorities directly relevant to the Adoption Service:

- Design and implement adoption team performance measures to enable SMT to monitor and hold the service to account (2.1.4). Whilst a formal set of Key Performance Indicators has not been agreed, there is better monitoring and reporting of performance through monthly management reports, performance review and reporting to cabinet.
- Develop and deliver an effective adoption team development plan and recruitment strategy through to transfer to Adoption West (2.1.15). These are now in place and in addition to continual review will be formally reviewed in Autumn 2016.
- Clarify the Adoption and Special Guardianship support offer using the Adoption Passport and the creation of a customer-focused Adoption Charter (2.2.8). The Passport is agreed and in place and incudes all aspects of support that would be described as part of an Adoption Charter.

16. The priorities of the Adoption Service Development Plan include:

- Suitable adoptive families will be identified without delay for children for whom adoption is in their best interest
- Adopter recruitment and retention
- Provide an effective and efficient home finding service
- Develop and implement an adopters' training pathway
- Promote the concepts of concurrency and Fostering to Adopt
- Provide an Adoption Service that is responsive to the needs of adopters, special guardians, adopted children and their families
- Ensure that the Adoption Panel is effective
- Ensure that the Adoption Service is integral to the development of Adoption West

17. As indicated, the Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services carried out in July 2015 graded the Service as Requires Improvement. A culture of continuous improvement was noted with a positive trajectory towards Good. Children and young people were considered to enter Care when they needed to and the timeliness of care proceedings had improved. Inspectors identified an Adoption Service that "made well informed and well matched placements supported by effective family finding". There was evidence that good performance information was used to inform practice and service development. Adopters were considered to be prepared and assessed well and the Adoption Support Team was seen to be effective, innovative and forward looking. The Adoption Panel and Agency Decision

Maker (ADM) ensured that children were effectively matched with the most appropriate families.

18. As described in the previous report to Cabinet, in early 2015, the Government stated that local authorities (and Voluntary Adoption Agencies) should work collaboratively to ensure more effective arrangements were in place to deliver adoption where it was considered to be in a child's best interest. Adoption West was already in development and, with added impetus, it is now the regional response to this initiative. Now comprising of six local authorities and locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Adoption West is shaping a response which is currently based on a collaborative model of service delivery, which will be expected to improve the timeliness of adoption and other permanence options such as Special Guardianship. A service specification is being developed with support and some initial project funding from the Department for Education.

19. There are potentially significant implications for the Adoption Service and staff in Wiltshire which will become more apparent as the detailed project proposal is developed. It is anticipated that Adoption West will deliver significant economies arising from the removal of local authority based teams to be replaced by a single organisation, operating as a regional Adoption Agency. The final shape of this service is not yet determined but will be expected to ensure parity of access to services across the Adoption West area. The scope will include administration, direct services pre and post approval, Special Guardianship and Adoption Panel function.

20. The project is managed through the Governance Group which consists of the Associate Directors from each authority who in turn report to their DCS who meet when required. The Governance group is supported by a Service Leads group. The task is to ensure that the new service is robust and can deliver and sustain improvement, meeting the particular needs of the region, each of the six local authorities and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies. It is anticipated that there will benefits to be gained in terms of the recruitment and sharing of a pool of adopters across the area who can best meet the needs of children requiring adoptive placements and therefore increased opportunity for timely matching of children with adoptive families, particularly those who may be considered harder to place.

21. Pending the publication of a detailed implementation plan, the first stage of implementation is currently anticipated for spring 2017. Following this, development will continue to ensure the agreed core functions of Adoption West are delivered with the new service becoming fully operational in April 2018. Clear management, regulatory and accountability arrangements will need to be in place. It is not clear what the demands placed upon this local authority in terms of resourcing and finance are likely to be. A local group is in place to monitor the impact of the development of Adoption West upon Wiltshire as it progresses. This includes consideration of human resource, ICT, legal and budgetary issues.

22. As required to be provided to Cabinet, this report also provides performance information relating to the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.

23. Profile of children waiting for an adoptive placement

Legal status	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Section 20	20	1	0
Interim Care Order	19	11	7
Care Order	1	4	5
None	0	0	1
Total	**40**	**16**	**13**

Ethnic Origin	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
White British	35	14	7
Mixed/Other	5	2	2
White Irish			1
Other Ethnic Group			3
Total	**40**	**16**	**13**

Age	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
0-11 months	6	5	1
12-23 months	13	2	7
2-4 years	12	4	3
5-10 years	9	5	2
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	40	16	13

24. Children adopted

Age	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
0-11 months	1	0	0
12-23 months	5	8	7
2-4 years	20	13	7
5-10 years	13	6	8
11 and over	1	0	0
Total	40	27	22

Children matched out of county	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
	5 children in 4 placements	6 children in 5 placements	4 children in 3 placements

Out of county children matched with Wiltshire adopters	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
	16 children in	11 children in	7 children in 5

		11 placements	9 placements	placements

25. Rescissions of Placement Orders and Disruptions

25.1 In the three year period 2012-15 the permanence decision for 25 children (17% of all children for whom an initial decision was made that adoption was in their best interest) moved away from adoption leading to the rescission of Adoption and Placement Orders. The England figure for this period was 14 %. Of these 25, 7 rescissions were made in 2015-16. There are a further 5 children who are currently in this rescission process. This indicates that there is effective permanence planning for children in care in Wiltshire and plans are scrutinised robustly to ensure that they are in the best interest of the child.

- 25.2 During 2015-16, there has been one adoption placement disruption notified to the Adoption Service before an Adoption Order was made. A formal disruption meeting was held and learning points identified. A number of these were case specific and others related to the need to restate best practice: for example, ensuring the effectiveness of transition plans to introduce children to adopters and ensuring that the day-to-day and more complex needs of a child are fully understood. There have been three placement breakdowns that occurred post-order, when children return to being looked after. The average age of the children was 15. None of the children had been placed by Wiltshire but one was with a Wiltshire adopter and two with non-Wiltshire adopters.

26. Prospective adopters

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Enquiries to be an adopter	137	20	147
Applications to be an adopter	67	17	29
Number of newly approved adopters	40	35	13
Application to approval: 0-3 months	4	1	0
4-6 months	17	4	4
7-12 months	18	27	7
Over 12 months	1	3	2
Number approved adopters unmatched	24	31	21
Number approved adopters matched	26	20	17

Of the 21 adopters unmatched and "waiting", 2 were linked and waiting to go to Adoption Panel for a match and 4 had withdrawn from wanting to adopt and required deregistration, leaving 15 families actively looking to be matched with children. There were 13 children who were waiting for placements at the year end. Although it is anticipated that these children will be placed with Wiltshire adopters, it is nationally recognised that it remains more challenging to find placements for children with complex needs, older children and sibling groups.

27. Statistical Neighbours

The following table provides comparative information relating to Wiltshire's Statistical neighbours.

Local Authority	A1 (days)	A2 (days)	A3 (%)
Wiltshire	610	161	48
Unverified Wiltshire 13/16	529	154	57
Gloucestershire	527	104	40
Shropshire	391	66	71
Cambridgeshire	482	114	50
Dorset	498	128	55
Bath & NE Somerset	455	167	59
Devon	514	167	51
Worcestershire	649	289	48
Hampshire	573	214	46
West Sussex	509	167	57
Oxfordshire	436	133	73

28. Financial summary of the agency

28.1 The tables below indicate the budget, actual and predicted expenditure for the financial years 2013/14 to 2016/17. Of particular note is the increase of expenditure for Special Guardianship Allowances, leading to a budget overspend. In addition, there is a reducing number of adoptive placements being provided (at cost) to other local authorities as the overall number of children requiring adoption nationally declines.

2013/14	Budget (£)*	Actual Expenditure
Salaries and team running costs	600,230	737,716
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	7,332
Adoption allowances (all types)	742,500	668,965
Special Guardianship Allowances	127,400	490,076
Adoption income	0	-365,016
Total	**1,487,130**	**1,539,073**

2014/15	Budget (£)*	Actual Expenditure
Salaries and team running costs	534,900	534,478
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	16,979
Adoption allowances (all types)	642,500	667,443
Special Guardianship Allowances	227,400	655,490

Adoption income	-60,000	-258,247
Total	**1,361,800**	**1,616,143**
2015/16	**Budget (£)***	**Provisional Outturn**
Salaries and team running costs	524,500	540,648
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	15,881
Adoption allowances (all types)	501,500	705,041
Special Guardianship Allowances	510,000	1,085,678
Adoption income	-200,000	-165,287
Total	**1,353,000**	**2,181,961**
2016/17	**Budget (£)***	
Salaries and team running costs	552,200	
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	
Adoption allowances (all types)	501,500	
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,175,000	
Adoption income	-200,000	
Total	2,045,700	

28.2 There has continued to be a number of adoptive families who are financially supported, as follows:

	At 31 March 2014 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2015 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2016 Children/Carers
RO Allowance	20/15	20/15	20/16
Adoption Allowance	63/44	63/52	50/40
Other	0	0	0
Total	83/59	83/67	70/56

28.3 In addition the local authority has received monies from the Adoption Reform Grant and the Adoption Support Grant.

28.4 In addition:

	2013/14 Actual Expenditure	2014/15 Actual Expenditure	2015/16 Provisional Outturn
RO Allowance	99,426	96,978	110,980

Adoption Allowance	327,313	369,196	392,080
Other	242,226	201,269	166,940
TOTAL	668,965	667,443	670,000

28.5 The provisional outturn budget for Adoption Allowances has risen, despite the number of children attracting these allowances decreasing. This reflects more "complex" adoptions being supported (often in adolescence and to prevent placement breakdown). In addition, the limitations of the Adoption Support Fund only financing therapy for children, means that some adoptive placements require additional financial support to maintain stability.

29. Adoption Panel

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
No. Panels held	24	25	21
Adoptive families considered	41	36	14 (including one deferred and not reconsidered)
Matches considered	26	27	28
Relinquished Children	Not available	0	2
Reviews of Adopters notified	Not available	0	0

29.1 The Adoption Panel complies with Regulation. It is chaired by a suitably skilled and experienced Independent Chair who ensures that the functions of panel are delivered effectively. This was confirmed in the outcome of the Ofsted inspection. There is an Agency Panel Adviser in place to ensure that the panel is adequately supported at all times. To ensure that panels are quorate, there is a central pool of panel members established which includes members with direct experience of adoption. There is a dedicated Administration Team in place to support the work of the Adoption Panel.

29.2 All Panel members, including the Chair, receive annual appraisals which consider their effectiveness as panel members and any areas for development. There is an annual training day, the most recent taking place in May 2016, which ensures that panel members are updated regarding statutory and legislation changes along with Agency developments and improvements to practice. Panel members have an opportunity to consider how well the Panel is operating and what could be done better. The Chair meets regularly with the Panel Adviser and Head of Service to discuss operational or developmental issues relating to the panel's work, making and changes and improvements as required.

29.3 The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is considered to be robust, as endorsed by Ofsted. In order to ensure capacity and availability, there are three senior

managers who take the ADM responsibility on a rota basis within the organisation, with administrative support and a clear process in place to make sure that ADM decisions are made within timescale. This means that adopters are informed of decisions promptly following Panel recommendations.

30. Commentary

30.1 The main externally reported performance information is included in the Adoption Scorecard and is summarised above. It can be seen that there has been steady improvement in performance over the three year rolling period. Although it is not directly reflected in the actual Scorecard, the impact upon reported performance should be noted where legacy cases are taken into account.

30.2 Although year on year improvement is evident when considering the two aspects of the service that Ofsted indicated as needing attention: the time between assessment of adopters and matching and the timeliness of the adoption of children where it was considered to be in their best interest, including those with complex needs, it is clear that the pace of improvement requires further acceleration to bring about greater improvement although the overall trajectory is positive. Starting from a poor position in 2008-11, practice has improved year on year as a result of improved planning that is focussed on outcomes for children and is part of the wider Looked After Children improvement agenda. Robust management arrangements are in place, providing a solid foundation for continued improvement.

30.3 Improved performance at **A1** requires the permanence planning to be timely and responsive to a child's needs. The second review (held about four months after a child becomes looked after) has to identify an appropriate plan where the decision is that permanence is the preferred option. In order to ensure timely planning and decision making, the role of the Reviewing Officer, working alongside the child's Social Worker, has been strengthened to provide challenge and oversight to a case. This is checked through audit. The revised terms of reference of the monthly Permanence Panel ensures that children have an appropriate plan for permanence, including adoption, at the right time in their care pathway. In addition, the pace at which matters proceed through the legal process has improved. The average time between the initiation and conclusion of care proceedings has shortened from 28.5 weeks at the end of June 2014 to 24.6 weeks at the end of June 2015 to 23.6 weeks in March 2016.

30.4 Cabinet will be concerned about the number of adopters recommended for approval in 2015-16. In previous years, Adoption recruitment had focused on increasing the pool of adopters, almost regardless of specific matching considerations. This achieved a net increase in adopters; however, it left a number of children with specific needs ("harder to place") waiting and also a number of adopters who had very specific ideas about the profile of children that they wanted to adopt. Due to this, the number of adopters "waiting" rose to over 30 by the end of 2014/15 and the decision was made during the course of that year to largely "close the door" to recruitment. This is reflected in the number of adopters approved at panel in 2015/16. However, this meant that the pool of adopters was gradually being matched with children requiring adoption; a number of adopters remained unmatched but with very precise requirements that

did not match the children who needed placement and the overall pool of "active" adopters was dwindling without replacement.

30.5 In autumn 2015 the decision was made to return to a general recruitment approach, augmented by targeted recruitment regarding specific children, if required. Numbers of families entering the recruitment and assessment process are beginning to grow again with approximately 20 Initial Enquiries at year end and 18 in the assessment process. It is anticipated that this will lead to an improved A1 measure. There may be a risk that some adopters have to wait to be matched with a child and so the balance of recruitment needs is important. Adopters may be recruited either locally or via another adoption agency for specific children waiting, including national searches for children considered 'hard to place'. This strategy will result in less children waiting while adopters are found as it will provide families for children across the range of needs, including those who are considered harder to place. The development of Adoption West will have an impact here.

30.6 The Adoption Service is working to recruit adopters who can act as foster carers for children who do not yet have a Placement Order, but for whom the long-term plan is adoption – Fostering for Adoption. Alongside this, adopters who can offer concurrent placements are required. Potential adopters need to be able to manage the uncertainties of these arrangements and the local authority should be confident in presenting the legal case to court and being assertive in matching children with adopters where it is in their best interest to do so. This will improve timeliness and, therefore, Scorecard performance

30.7 Ensuring ADM capacity, the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) process is designed to meet statutory requirements and not bring undue delay into the system. By ensuring that home finding and matching work can begin at the earliest opportunity, this reduces the time that children wait to be matched. The ADM process relating to "Should be Placed for Adoption" decisions has been reviewed so that they are timetabled to be made 10 weeks before the Placement Order hearing is anticipated at court. ADM decisions regarding recommendations made by adoption panel for matches are made within ten working days of panel minutes being received, in line with requirements. This activity, linked to the development of Fostering for Adoption and concurrent planning, will allow placements to be made and matches agreed through Panel quickly and without reducing the rigour applied to ensuring that all decisions are in the child's best interest. All of this activity will support improvement of **A2**.

30.8 It is anticipated that **A3** performance will continue to significantly improve as the scrutiny and challenge provided by the Independent Reviewing Service and the work of Permanence Panel take effect. The emphasis placed on effective planning means that a number of children, where adoption was identified as being in the child's best interest, have had the ADM decision reversed and the Placement Order rescinded, with an alternative permanence plan agreed. Current care planning practice and robust challenge will not allow cases to drift, thus securing permanence for children.

30.8 The Adoption Service has considered performance against statistical neighbours. The table above (paragraph 27) provides comparative data. It is important to note that, as described in previous Cabinet reports, although Wiltshire is still behind some Statistical Neighbours and national targets, the local

authority began its significant improvement from a "lower base" of performance, therefore the overall gap has narrowed and the trajectory of improvement is on course to reach the performance of others. In terms of the unverified performance anticipated for 2013/16 it can be seen that this will be likely to enhance the position of Wiltshire Adoption Service in the Statistical Neighbour group.

31. Next Steps

To continue to improve the effectiveness of the Adoption Service, within the Looked After Children Improvement Plan, the Local Authority will need to:

- Continue to work with the local judiciary in order to further improve the way that the courts deal with care cases in a timely manner and understand the potential delays for children where additional family members may be considered as carers late in proceedings or where additional assessments are indicated:
- Develop the potential of placing children at the earliest possibility with adoptive parents under Fostering for Adoption and Concurrency arrangements.
- Use positive Home Finding practice to ensure the effectiveness of process to bring about timely identification of potential matches for children who require adoption.
- Ensure a sufficiency of adopters who are able to meet the diverse needs of the population of children requiring adoption in Wiltshire. A suitably diverse pool of approved adopters allows matching to begin early in the process, often before a Placement Order is made.
- In cases where it is recognised that the agency may struggle to match children with in-house prospective adopters, request Court consent to feature the children's profiles beyond Wiltshire's boundaries and be pro-active in referring children to regional and national placement finding services once a Placement Order has been granted (sooner with the consent of the court).
- Ensure that formal Disruption Meetings take place where adoption placements breakdown before Adoption Orders are made in order to consider key learning in to inform whole service improvement.
- Work with the developing Adoption West consortium, identifying opportunities to lead developments and initiatives in order to improve adoption outcomes in the region.

Background

32. The Adoption Service provides permanency for children who are no longer able to live safely with their parents or other family members. This is achieved through the provision of quality adoptive placements for children who live in Wiltshire and where a decision has been made that adoption is in their best interest.

33. The fundamental requirement of the Service is that children are placed with families who have been assessed as being suitable to adopt. A recommendation of suitability is made by the Adoption Panel and this is ratified as a decision by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). Through this process, there is rigorous assurance that approved adopters can provide safe, secure and enduring family placements for this vulnerable group of children. His allows them to grow, develop and thrive in a nurturing, supportive and loving family environment, removed from the stigma of being Looked After by the local authority.

34. In order to do this, there must be an appropriate range of enduring adoption placements to meet the assessed needs of children who need permanent adoptive families. These families must promote stability, safety and positive outcomes for children by working in partnership with all agencies as required.

35. The legislative basis of this work is the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the accompanying 2005 Regulations. As indicated, Ofsted inspected the Service in March 2013 and it was inspected again as part of the wider Ofsted inspection of Children's Services in July 2015.

36. The local authority, through reporting to Cabinet, must be assured of regulatory compliance and effectiveness through performance monitoring, challenge and improvement planning. The Looked After Children (LAC) Improvement Plan is the focus of this and it, in turn, reports to the over-arching Children's Services Improvement Board.

37. The Adoption Service continues to be able to recruit adopters for infants and younger children. Through a programme of general and targeted recruitment, this will be maintained and the pool of adopters will be expanded to include those who are able to provide permanence for children who may be considered "harder to place". This group includes older children, sibling groups and children with disabilities. The Service is part of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) which works regionally to identify matches for children across the area. Where necessary, children are also referred to the National Adoption Register (NAR) which provides national opportunity to identify adopters for children who cannot be placed locally.

38. Adoption West is a regional development involving six local authorities and a small number of locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies. The aim is to provide a single Adoption Agency for the region in line with government requirement – from the point of expression of interest to adopt, through to assessment and approval at panel and beyond, to Adoption Support. It is also likely to include other routes to permanence, for example, Special Guardianship. Adoption West is intended to have significant impact on outcomes for children as it will deliver a more effective regional response to

adoption and the needs of children. However, the final "shape" of the service is not yet clear and nor are the implications for the Adoption Service and staff in Wiltshire. It is anticipated that all functions will be delivered by the new agency and no longer remain with the local authority.

Safeguarding Implications

39. Wiltshire Council Adoption Service is part of Children's Services, all of which are delivered in accordance with Wiltshire Children's Services Policy and Procedures, overseen by the Wiltshire Safeguarding Children Board. The local authority has clear and effective safeguarding procedures in place for children and vulnerable adults.

40. This report is for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Public Health Implications

41. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Corporate Procurement Implications

42. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal (detailing conclusions identified from Equality Analysis, sections 4 and 5)

43. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

44. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Risk Assessment

45. Risks that may arise if the performance and management of the Adoption Service is not effective and it does not achieve good outcomes for children:

- Safeguarding risk to looked after children if they are placed with adopters who have not been fully assessed, prepared and supported. Safeguarding is considered a high level risk within the corporate risk register
- An inadequate supply of adopters to meet the needs of children requiring permanence through adoption
- Reputational risk if the Agency is not effective and does not achieve good outcomes for children who require adoption
- Reputational risk if statutory timescales are not meet regarding adoption
- Reputational risk if the Agency is rated as Inadequate through inspection
- Financial risk if placements are made, are unstable and subsequently breakdown leading to children returning to local authority care

- Looking ahead, there are risks associated with the safety and effectiveness of service delivery should the development of the commissioned Adoption West service not be robust.

Effective delivery of the Service, improvement plan, reporting and challenge will mitigate these risks.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

46. See above. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

47. See above. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Financial Implications

48. The budget for the Adoption Service is indicated, in summary, above. Over recent years, the Government has provided additional money over the base budget through the Adoption Reform Grant, the Adoption Support Grant and, more recently, to Adoption West in order to promote regional collaboration. The Service has been managing within budget due to external incomes collected. The cost of supporting an adopted child is less than the average cost of looking after a child in the care system and is often time limited as opposed to costs of care which extend to 18 years old and beyond. It is noted that the development of Adoption West may result in financial implications in the future. However, at this stage of development there is no information available to indicate what these may be.

Legal Implications

49. It is a requirement of registration as an Adoption Agency that the Executive side of the Council receive written reports every six months regarding the effectiveness, compliance and management of the Agency. This report ensures that legal requirements are met. There are no additional legal implications arising.

Options Considered

50. Not applicable - for note by Wiltshire Council Cabinet.

Conclusion

51. Recent years have seen considerable change within the world of adoption and a focus on improving adoption performance. This has led to the need to review and develop services, amend policy and practice and so increase the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. At

the heart of this is the belief that, for some children, adoption is the best route to legal permanence, security and the opportunity to achieve their potential. Wiltshire Council's Adoption Service is committed to improving service delivery and, therefore, outcomes for children. (It is anticipated that Adoption West will bring further significant change and improvement in coming years.) The Adoption Service works collaboratively within the Council area and regionally to ensure a whole service approach to prevent delay in securing appropriate adoptive placements in a timely way.

52. Building upon the performance and improvement of recent years and using the impetus and direction provided by the Ofsted inspection of July 2015, the rate of improvement for the Adoption Service will continue to increase and better outcomes will be achieved for children.

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Background Papers

The following documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices

None