

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

3 July 2017

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

Cabinet member: Councillor Laura Mayes – Children’s Services

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary

It is a statutory requirement that the Adoption Service provides a six month and year-end report to the Council. This annual report describes the management arrangements, outcomes, priorities and finances of the Agency for the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017.

Wiltshire Council’s Adoption Service was most recently inspected by Ofsted in July 2015 as part of the wider inspection of Children’s Services. The overall judgement was Requires Improvement (RI). As previously reported, Children’s Services was not complacent or satisfied with this and work to improve has continued. 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 2015/16, 22 adoption orders were granted and 13 families were approved as suitable to adopt. For the year 2016/17, 33 adoption orders were granted and 26 families were approved as suitable to adopt. Of note, is that the number of newly approved adopters in 2015/16 was low because the number of children requiring adoption decreased and the pool of available adopters was adequate. It was anticipated that 35-40 children would require adoption in the full year 2016/17 (an approximate benchmark is 10% of the care population). Therefore, the recruitment target was revised with the aim to recruit 30 adoptive families through targeted and general recruitment to meet anticipated needs. Recruitment and assessment activity remains in place and initial indications are positive as evidenced in the full report.

Driven by the Government’s previous commitment to improving adoption services in terms of numbers of children being adopted and the timeliness of matches for children requiring adoptive placements, the development of the Adoption Service has continued. Comparative performance is measured using the Adoption Scorecard which, for Wiltshire, shows overall continued improvement. In the previous annual report, it was recognised that further

acceleration of improvement was needed although the overall trajectory was positive. This improvement can be seen but future development activity is now clearly focussed on the Adoption West initiative.

In spring 2015, the Government made it an expectation that local authorities were to develop collaborative arrangements to improve adoption performance. The regional response to this was to further develop and invigorate the Adoption West initiative, comprising of six local authorities and a small number of locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies working together to design and deliver a new adoption agency. Wiltshire Council is a member of the Adoption West partnership.

Cabinet has already received detailed information regarding Adoption West and the role, responsibility and accountability arrangements that are being developed.

Proposal

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 regularly reported to the executive side of the local authority 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. This is done by means of an annual report and an interim six month report.

Carolyn Godfrey
Corporate Director

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

3 July 2017

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

Cabinet member: Councillor Laura Mayes – Children’s Services

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 July 2016, covering the period from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016. This report relates to the full year 2016/17 reporting period.
3. The Ofsted inspection of Children’s Services in July 2015, (arriving at the judgement of Requires Improvement) which included the Adoption Service, noted several strengths (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.
7. Whilst identifying adoptive families for Wiltshire, children will remain a priority. The arrival of Adoption West as the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) will mean that the placing of children in adoptive families will become the responsibility of the new agency.

Main Considerations for the Council

8. The main consideration for the Council is to be assured about statutory compliance and the effectiveness of the Adoption Service. In 2014/15, 27 children were adopted. In 2015/16 22 children were adopted and in 2016/17 this number was 33. Of these, 30 (91%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that adoption was in their best interest being made. In 2014/15, 35 adoptive families were approved, in 2015/16, 13 families were approved. In 2016/17 26 families were approved as suitable to adopt. This reflects the required increase as indicated above.
9. Wiltshire's current Adoption Scorecard (most recently published performance to March 2016) shows overall continued improvement. It is not clear what national reporting will be in place when the RAA is in operation. At present, each local authority Adoption Agency has a scorecard and 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 (2013-16) is 545 days. (For 2012-15 it was 610 days.) This is shorter than the one year and three year trends from 2015 and 2012-15 and shorter than the England three-year average of 558 days. The Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- Excluding 2 legacy cases this figure becomes 325 for 2016-17.
- Including Fostering for Adoption placements and legacy cases, unverified Wiltshire data estimates the figure for 2014-17 as 463 days, a marked improvement on 545 days and significantly less than 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 (2013-16) is 158 days. (For 2012-15 it was 161 days.) This is shorter than the one year and three year trends from 2015 and 2012-15). It is shorter than the England three-year average of 226 days. The Scorecard shows steady improvement over time.
- Excluding 2 legacy cases this figure becomes 144 for 2016-17
- Including legacy cases where they remain in the three-year period, unverified Wiltshire data estimates the figure for 2014-17 as 188 days.

(Legacy cases include children whose care proceedings pre-date changes in adoption regulations in 2013. The last 2 children who were include in this group had Adoption Orders made in May 2016 and these figures are currently included in the scorecard figures as detailed above. However, this means that over time, should a specific Wiltshire scorecard continue to be published, A1 and A2 will continue to improve as these children will not be in the three-year cohort after 2019.)

A3: the number of children who waited less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family:

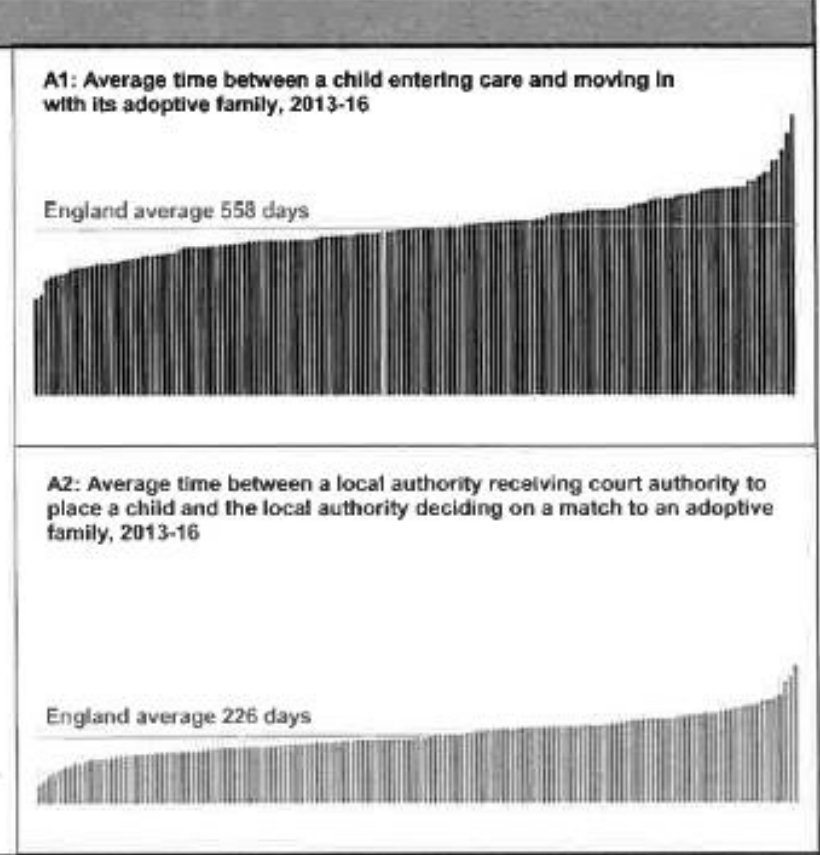
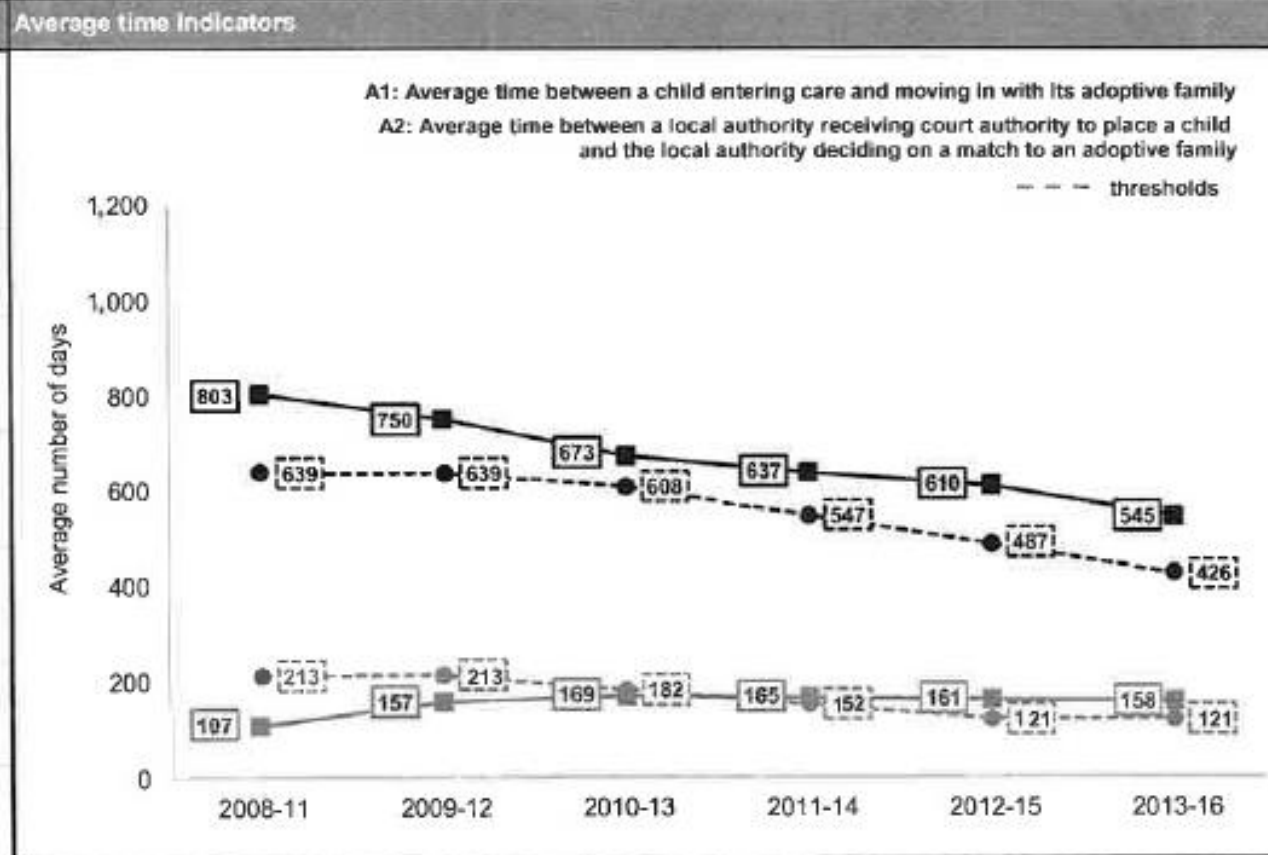
- There were 70 (56%) children who waited less than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. This is an increase from 55 (48%) in the previous cycle. The England three-year average (2013-16) is 55%. Unverified Wiltshire data estimates the figure for 2014-17 as 93 children (75%).
10. It should be noted that the most recent Scorecard three year averages relate to 2013-16, 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 relates to indicators A1 (which is showing an improvement of over 10%, meaning that more children are being placed in their adoptive placements in a shorter time after being received into care) and A3 where there is an improvement of about 20 percentage points. This is good progress and needs to be maintained whilst the Wiltshire Adoption Agency continues to function, carrying momentum into Adoption West.
 11. 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.
 12. The full Scorecard is as follows:

Adoption Scorecard

Choose Local Authority	Wiltshire
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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 (2013-16)	545	158	70 (58%)
Distance from 2013-16 performance thresholds (425 and 121 days)	119 days	37 days	n/a
1 year trend - improvement from 2015 to 2016	Average time in 2016 was shorter than in 2015	Average time in 2016 was shorter than in 2015	n/a
3 year trend - improvement from 2012-15 to 2013-16	Average time in 2013-16 was shorter than in 2012-15	Average time in 2013-16 was shorter than in 2012-15	n/a
Latest quarterly data (April to September 2016)	539	253	45 (47%)
England 3 year average (2013-16)	558	226	12020 (55%)



Adopters

Number of approved adoptive families as at 31 March 2016	Number of applications to become an adoptive family still being assessed (not yet approved or rejected) as at 31 March 2016	Proportion of adoptive families who were matched to a child during 2015-16 who waited more than 3 months from approval to being matched to a child	New ADM decisions				Adoptions from care during 2013-16 (with % leaving care who are adopted)	Children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption during 2013-16 (number and %)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption (as at 31 March 2016)	Number of children waiting to be placed for adoption with a placement order (as at 31 March 2016)	A1 times when times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family (days) (2013-16)	Number of children in a Fostering for Adoption / Concurrent Planning foster placement (as at 31 March 2016)	Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds during 2013-16 (number adopted and % of BME children leaving care who are adopted)	Adoptions of children aged five or over during 2013-16 (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted)	Average length of care (weeks) (2013-16)
			2015	2016	2015	2016									
LA	-	-	35	30	20	25	90 (16%)	30 (18%)	20	10	505	x	10 (17%)	15 (5%)	28
England	2,530	1,730	73%	LA % change National % change	-12%	2%	15100 (16%)	3520 (14%)	3,060	2,410	402	320	2330 (6%)	3180 (5%)	30

THESE ARE NOT PERFORMANCE MEASURES

13. 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, the Head of Service – Care and Placement Services has day-to-day operational responsibility for the Service. There is a Service Manager and Adoption Team Manager in post. This has brought strength and clear accountability 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 an important and continuing significant contribution to the development of Adoption West.
14. 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 with decisions made 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' and Special Guardian's access to specific services for adoption support.
 - In addition, the Adoption Service is responsible for providing an intermediary service for 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.
15. The establishment operational staffing of the Service (Recruitment and Assessment and Adoption Support) comprises one full-time equivalent Team Manager and one full time equivalent Assistant Team Manager (the post holder is currently long term sick and subject to absence monitoring and an Improving Work Performance programme). There are 8 full time equivalent qualified social work posts. One full time social worker is also currently long term sick which is being managed via absence monitoring processes. There are 1.95 full time equivalent Adoption Support Workers who, between them, have responsibilities across the full range of support work within the Adoption Service. This is a small team with county-wide responsibilities. The demands upon the team have significantly grown with the increase of Special Guardianship Orders in Wiltshire. They also have responsibility for the work generated by potential 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.

16. A development plan, supported by an adopter recruitment strategy, was published in autumn 2015 and refreshed in autumn 2016. This reflects the priorities of the Service and the areas of improvement indicated in the Ofsted inspection of 2015, linking to the improvements evident within the Scorecard. Within the overarching Children's Improvement Plan, it is anticipated that when refreshed, the Looked After Children Improvement Plan will include a priority directly relevant to the Adoption Service and engagement with Adoption West: To engage with the development and implementation of Adoption West - this will ensure that the interests are met of adults living in Wiltshire who wish to adopt and children who require adoptive placements.
17. The priorities of the 2016-17 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
 - Implement an adopters' training pathway
 - Promote the concepts of Early Permanence
 - Provide an adoption support 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
18. The Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services carried out in July 2015 graded the overall 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. These judgments describe the foundation of continuing improvement.
19. As described in the previous annual report to Cabinet, in early 2015 the Government stated that local authorities (and Voluntary Adoption Agencies) should work collaboratively to ensure more effective arrangements are in place to deliver adoption where it was in a child's best interest. Adoption West is the local response to this initiative. Now comprising of six local authorities and locally operating Voluntary Adoption Agencies, Adoption West is shaping a response which will be in the form of an independently operating Adoption Agency. Cabinet has already been asked to give approval to the design, budget and implementation arrangements of the partnership. It is anticipated that Adoption West will improve the timeliness of adoption for children whilst providing other aspects of the work carried out by current local authority Adoption Agencies. Staff and managers from Wiltshire are fully involved in the development to not only ensure it is an effective agency but also that the

interests of children and adopters from Wiltshire are well served. This is a significant commitment from the Service and care should be taken that it does not affect “business as usual”.

20. There are significant implications for the Adoption Service and staff in Wiltshire. It is anticipated that Adoption West will deliver some economies arising from the removal of local authority based teams to be replaced by Adoption West. The final structure of this service is not yet determined but it 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), and the Adoption Panel function. Staff will be provided for the new agency by moving existing workers from the local authority Adoption Teams into Adoption West. Work is underway with Human resource and Union colleagues to ensure this occurs in the right manner and at the right time.
21. 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 Manager group. The task is to ensure that the new service is robust and can deliver and sustain improvement, meeting the needs of the region, each of the six local authorities and the Voluntary Adoption Agencies. There will be benefits 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.
22. The first stage of implementation is planned for autumn 2017 with the closing of local authority Adoption Panels and the introduction of Adoption West panels. Interim arrangements are being planned so that they operate ahead of the next phase of implementation in spring 2018. Clear management, regulatory and accountability arrangements will need to be in place. 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.
23. As required to be provided to Cabinet, this report provides performance information relating to the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017.

Profile of children waiting for an adoptive placement

Legal status	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Section 20	1	0	0
Interim Care Order	11	7	7
Care Order	4	5	7
None	0	1	10
Total	16	13	24

Ethnic Origin	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
White British	14	7	20
Mixed/Other	2	2	3
White Irish	0	1	0

Other Ethnic Group	0	3	1
Total	16	13	24

Age	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
0-11 months	5	1	4
12-23 months	2	7	3
2-4 years	4	3	11
5-10 years	5	2	6
11 and over	0	0	0
Total	16	13	24

24. To be noted is that a number of children remained at home with birth family whilst subject to care proceedings with a care plan for adoption. This meant that other permanence options (such as Special Guardianship Orders) will be considered by the court for these children.

Children adopted

Age	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
0-11 months	0	0	3
12-23 months	8	7	7
2-4 years	13	7	14
5-10 years	6	8	8
11 and over	0	0	1
Total	27	22	33

Children matched out of county	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
	6 children in 5 placements	4 children in 3 placements	15 children in 11 placements

Out of county children matched with Wiltshire adopters	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
	11 children in 9 placements	7 children in 5 placements	8 children in 5 placements

Rescissions of Placement Orders and Disruptions

25. In the three year period 2013-16 the permanence decision for 30 children (18% 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 %. Wiltshire applies rigorous scrutiny to care planning and over a three year period, it is inevitable that there will be developments in a case or a child's situation that means that adoption is no longer in that child's best interest; for example, a family member or parent can resume the care of a child where it had not previously been envisaged. (This is a three-year measure and so the difference between the local and national actual number is very small.) Of

these 30, 1 rescission was made in 2016-17. There are a further 2 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.

26. During 2016-17, 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. Several of these were case specific and others related to the need to restate best practice: for example, ensuring that the needs of an older child are understood in the context of their early childhood experiences and the challenge of adapting a “natural” parenting style to reflect the needs of a child. There have been two 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.

Prospective adopters

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Enquiries to be an adopter	20	147	85
Applications to be an adopter	17	29	n/a
Number of newly approved adopters	35	13	26
Application to approval: 0-3 months	1	0	3
4-6 months	4	4	15
7-12 months	27	7	7
Over 12 months	3	2	1
Number approved adopters unmatched	31	21	14
Number approved adopters matched	20	17	14

27. Of the 14 adopters unmatched and “waiting”, 3 were linked and waiting to go to Adoption Panel for a match and 3 had withdrawn from wanting to adopt and required deregistration, leaving 11 families actively looking to be matched with children. There were 6 children with Placement Orders 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.

Financial summary of the agency

28. The tables below indicate the budget, actual and predicted expenditure for the financial years 2014/15 to 2017/18. 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.

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 (£)*	Actual Expenditure
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 (£)*	Actual Expenditure
Salaries and team running costs	552,600	536,849
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	65
Adoption allowances (all types)	501,500	802,030
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,026,600	1,386,156
Adoption income	-200,000	-307,420
Total	1,897,700	2,417,679
2017/18	Budget (£)*	Predicted Outturn
Salaries and team running costs	557,900	
Adopter recruitment and training	17,000	
Adoption allowances (all types)	501,500	
Special Guardianship Allowances	1,835,600	
Adoption income	-200,000	
Total	2,712,000	

29. There have continued to be adoptive families who are financially supported:

	At 31 March 2015 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2016 Children/Carers	At 31 March 2017 Children/Carers
RO Allowance	20/15	20/16	14/11
Adoption Allowance	63/52	50/40	38/31
Other (SGO)	121/91	165/124	184/136

Total	204/158	235/180	236/178
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30. In addition the local authority has received monies from the Adoption Reform Grant and the Adoption Support Grant.

31. In addition:

	2014/15 Actual Expenditure (£)	2014/15 Actual Expenditure (£)	2015/16 Provisional Outturn (£)
RO Allowance	96,978	123,472	108,706
Adoption Allowance	369,196	371,081	332,757
Other (SGO)	201,269	1,081,967	1,397,912
TOTAL	667,443	1,576,520	1,839,375

32. 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.

Adoption Panel

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
No. Panels held	25	21	19
Adoptive families considered	36	14 (including one deferred and not reconsidered)	25
Matches considered	27	28	31
Relinquished Children	0	2	0
Reviews of Adopters notified	0	0	0

33. 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 always adequately supported. To ensure that panels are quorate, there is a central list of panel members established which includes members with direct experience of adoption including those who have been adopted. There is a dedicated Administration Team in place to support the work of the Adoption Panel.

34. 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 September 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 any changes and improvements as required.

35. The arrangement for Panel recommendations being considered by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is robust, as endorsed by Ofsted. To ensure capacity and availability, there are currently two 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.

Commentary

36. 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 Scorecard, the impact upon reported performance should be noted where legacy cases are considered.
37. Although year on year improvement is evident when considering the two main areas of development (the time between assessment of adopters and matching and the timeliness of the adoption of children where it was in their best interest, including those with complex needs), the unverified data indicates that the pace of improvement now needs to be sustained through to the implementation of Adoption West to maintain improvement. Starting from a poor position in 2008-11, practice has improved year on year because 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. There is now less than a year before Adoption West becomes the local adoption agency when most aspects of performance will become the responsibility of that organisation.
38. Improved performance at **A1** requires the permanence planning to be timely and responsive to a child's needs. The second review (held four months after a child becomes looked after) must identify an appropriate plan where the decision is that permanence is the preferred option. To ensure timely planning and decision making, the role of the Reviewing Officer, working alongside the child's Social Worker, provides challenge and oversight to a case. This is checked through audit. The 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 24.6 weeks at the end of June 2015 to 23.6 weeks in March 2016 to 21.9 weeks (provisional) in March 2017.
39. In relation to the previous annual report, Cabinet will have been concerned about the number of adopters (13) recommended for approval in 2015-16. Prior to this, 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 several children with specific needs (“harder to place”) waiting and a few 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 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 “active” adopters was dwindling without replacement. To rectify this, the Recruitment Strategy was reinvigorated, leading to 26 adopters being approved in the year 2016/17.

40. The impact of Link Maker, a national on-line resource that is adopter-led and provides information about children needing adoptive families to adopters, is significant and has produced quicker matching for some children. Alongside this, 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.
41. The Adoption Service continues to approve 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 and for children where there is concurrent planning for a potential return home: such placements fall under the umbrella of Early Permanence. There is some uncertainty associated with such placements and so adopters need to be able to manage this. 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 outcomes for children, timeliness and, therefore, Scorecard performance.
42. The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) process is designed to meet statutory requirements and not bring undue delay into the system. It has recently been reviewed to ensure it is effective, by ensuring that home finding and matching work can begin at the earliest opportunity, the time is reduced that children wait to be matched. 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. This activity will support improvement of **A2**.
43. 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 continue to drive timeliness and permanence planning. The emphasis placed on effective planning means that several 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.
44. The Adoption Service has previously considered performance against statistical neighbours. Comparative Score Cards are not available for this

report and so comparison can only be made with the England average. As previously reported, the local authority began its significant improvement from a “lower base” of performance, therefore the overall gap has narrowed, continues to do so and the trajectory of improvement is on course to reach the national targets.

45. As indicated, Adoption West is increasingly an area of priority involvement for the local authority. Wiltshire staff are involved at all levels of planning and active in not only the Governance Group and the service manager “lead” groups but also in the work groups that are considering specific areas of adoption practice. There is an impact on the Service as staff are called away from the local authority and it is important that this does not damage overall performance. As the pace of development increases, it is likely that demand on staff time will increase with Adoption West becoming operational in April 2018.

Next Steps and Recommendations

46. To continue to improve the effectiveness of the Adoption Service, within the Looked After Children Improvement Plan, the Local Authority will:
- Maintain a high level of involvement in the development and implementation of Adoption West, considering the needs of children and adopters in Wiltshire, staff currently working in the local authority and other stakeholders.
 - Through specific discussion and regular liaison meetings, continue to work with the local judiciary to further improve the way that the courts deal with care cases in a timely manner, recognising the potential delays for children where additional family members (sometimes multiple) may be considered as carers late in proceedings or where additional assessments are indicated.
 - Further develop Early Permanence practice, linked to Adoption West
 - Use positive Home Finding practice to ensure the effectiveness of the process to bring about timely identification of potential adoptive matches for children who require adoption
 - Until the implementation of Adoption West, continue to ensure a sufficiency of adopters who can 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. Approved adopters will move to Adoption West in time, if they are still waiting to be matched with a child
 - 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)
 - Continue to ensure that formal Disruption Meetings take place where adoption placements breakdown before Adoption Orders are made to consider key learning in to inform whole service improvement.

Background

47. 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.

48. 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. This 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.
49. 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.
50. 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. From April 2018, Adoption West will be the local adoption agency and Wiltshire will no longer carry out this function.
51. 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.
52. 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 can 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. The authority subscribes to Link Maker, an online adopter-lead resource.
53. 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. 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. It is anticipated that all functions will be delivered by the new agency and no longer remain with the local authority.

Safeguarding Implications

54. 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.

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

Public Health Implications

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

Corporate Procurement Implications

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

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

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

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

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

Risk Assessment

60. 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 met 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

61. 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

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

Financial Implications

63. 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 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. Cabinet has received information relating to the financial implications of Adoption West and the contribution that the Council will make to the new organisation. The detail of this will be developed over time. This annual report relates to the work of the Wiltshire Adoption Service and *not* Adoption West, the implementation of which does have financial implications.

Legal Implications

64. It is a statutory requirement that the Adoption Service provides six monthly written reports to the Council to monitor and evaluate the provision of its services to ensure that the services provided are effective and the quality of those services is of an appropriate standard.

The Council is required:

- To consider the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency,
- To monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy itself that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and other service users
- To satisfy itself that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration,
- To monitor its performance against the timescales prescribed within the Adoption Guidance, and
- To identify trends in the adoption work.

Relevant Legal provisions:

Schedule 1, paragraph 7 of the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003
2013 Statutory Guidance (3.93 and 5.39), and
2014 Adoption Minimum Standards (25.6).

Options Considered

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

Conclusion

66. 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. Adoption West will bring further significant change and improvement in coming years. The Council will be an Adoption West partner, working collaboratively and regionally to ensure a whole service approach to prevent delay in securing appropriate adoptive placements for children in a timely and safe way.

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May 2016

Background Papers

The following documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:
None

Appendices

None