

**Wiltshire Council**

**Cabinet**

**22 January 2013**

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**Subject: Adoption Agency Annual Report**

**Cabinet member: Councillor Jane Scott – Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Children’s Services**

**Key Decision: No**

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### **Executive Summary**

The Adoption Statutory Guidance requires adoption agencies to monitor their performance and provide reports to the executive of the local authority every six months about children who are in the care of their local authority and who are waiting to be placed with adoptive families. Wiltshire Council is a registered Adoption Agency, approved by the Department for Education (DfE) to provide services.

The Adoption Agency Annual Report and accompanying appendices provide detail on the performance of the Adoption Agency from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2011 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2012 and an update report covering 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 to the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2012.

There have been a number of national developments during this time period alongside the publication of the adoption scorecard. Wiltshire’s performance in the 2008/11 period raised concerns about delays for children in achieving adoption, particularly when set alongside the length of time care proceedings were taking in the local court. Some of the data used for the scorecard was related to a time before Wiltshire had a specialist adoption service.

It is this authority’s view that adoption will be considered for all children where it has been assessed as the appropriate plan irrespective of age or disability. The current scorecard demonstrates improvements across all 4 Key performance indicators; however this data will fluctuate due to the lack nationally of adopters who will take large sibling groups or where the child’s complex health or challenging behaviour has made finding suitable placements difficult.

In May 2012, Wiltshire agreed to be a pilot authority for an Adoption Diagnostic Assessment developed to support local authorities to explore how delay can be minimised for children who need permanence through adoption.

A robust Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan is in place to improve the performance of the Adoption Agency. There is clear project management and there is evidence of improvement being made.

The Adoption Agency Annual Report was scrutinised by Children's Select Committee on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2012.

**Proposal:**

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

**Reasons for the proposal:**

To ensure that the Executive of the Council is satisfied that the Adoption Agency is effective and achieving good outcomes for children, young people and service users, as required by the 2011 Statutory Adoption Guidance and the 2011 Adoption National Minimum Standards.

**Carolyn Godfrey**  
**Corporate Director, Children's Services**

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### **Purpose of Report**

1. The purpose of the report is to ensure that the Executive of the Council is satisfied that the Adoption Agency is effective and achieving good outcomes for children, young people and service users, as required by the 2011 Statutory Adoption Guidance and the 2011 Adoption National Minimum Standards.
2. It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and accepted.

### **Background**

3. Wiltshire Council is a registered Adoption Agency, approved by the Department for Education (DfE) to provide services, which include:
  - deciding whether a child should be placed for adoption
  - approving people as prospective adoptive parents
  - ‘matching’ children with suitable adoptive parents
  - arranging the adoption of children
  - supporting adoptive placements before and after the making of an Adoption Order
  - assisting adopted adults to find out information about their adoption
  - assisting birth families wishing to seek information about an adopted relative
4. The work of the Adoption Agency is underpinned by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the 2005 regulations informed by this Act. The aim of this Act is to improve outcomes for children needing adoption. It brought adoption legislation in line with the Children Act 1989 and placed adoption support provision onto the statute for the first time.
5. The Adoption Agency Annual Report was scrutinised by Children’s Select Committee on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 2012 and the Committee’s draft resolutions were as follows:

- To note the Adoption Agency Annual Report 2011-12 provided, a revised version of which will be considered by Cabinet on 22 January 2013.
- To request that future reports on the adoption service include adoption statistics broken down into bands of time for adoptions to be completed, and for this to include historic comparisons and benchmarking against other local authorities.
- To request that future reports on the adoption service breaks adopters down into the following distinct categories: Single, Married, Co-habiting, Civil Partnership.
- To ask the Safeguarding Children and Young People Task Group to add future scrutiny of adoptions to its work programme and to include recommendations on this in its final report to the Committee.
- To ask the Corporate Director to forward the Committee's thanks to all officers in the Children and Families team for their continued hard work and dedication to the service.
- To endorse an approach where adoptions are completed in a timely way, but not at the expense of placement permanency.

### **National developments**

6. The National Minimum Standards and Regulations for Adoption were revised at the end of 2010 following consultation with Adoption Agencies. The new guidance issued in April 2011 promotes child-centred outcomes and higher quality care. The changes required by the new guidance were in place in Wiltshire by September 2011.
7. The Care Planning Regulations (2010) were introduced from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 to promote more effective and timely planning for children and young people. The regulations stress the importance of assessment, care planning, intervention and review processes in improving the experience of care for children and in ensuring child centred practice at all times. The regulations also stress that permanence options should be identified as soon as possible after a child becomes looked after and that there is a need to reduce delays in decisions about long term placements for children.
8. The final report of the Munro review of child protection was published in May 2011. The key recommendations are to:
  - Promote a system that values professional expertise
  - Promote a shared responsibility for the provision of early help.
  - Develop social work expertise
  - Improve the organisational context to support effective social work practice.
  - Clarify accountabilities and create a learning system/environment.
9. The Family Justice Review was published in November 2011. The purpose of the review was to evaluate the family justice system. The recommendations

focus on strengthening parenting, reducing the time taken to progress cases through the courts and simplifying the family justice system, whilst continuing to protect children and vulnerable adults from risk of harm. A number of practice developments related to adoption and permanency have been made to improve practice and timeliness around court work and processes for children and families. Since the publication of the review, court reports have been simplified, new guidance written and meetings between the adoption agency, CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) and the judiciary have been established.

10. In March 2012, the DfE published “An action plan for adoption: tackling delay”. This sets out a plan for implementing incremental change and improvement between 2012 and 2014. In particular the DfE adoption plan seeks to address the following concerns:
  - A decline in the number of adoption orders granted in England and Wales in recent years.
  - A decline in the number of children placed for adoption nationally.
  - Delays for children in the adoption process; Family Justice System delays, home-finding, matching, recruitment of adopters, delays in assessment processes for children and for adopters.
11. New legislation and regulation is expected late in 2013. The DfE are currently consulting on a range of adoption and fostering proposals. For adoption, these are the new, shorter two-stage approval process for prospective adopters and fast-track procedure for approved foster carers and previous adopters. On fostering there is a package of changes to the foster carer assessment and approval process to make the process clearer, more proportionate and responsive to the needs of children coming into the care system. Consultation closes in December 2012.

### **Adoption Scorecards May 2012**

12. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2011, the Government published the first Adoption scorecard. This measured the progress to adoption for children, providing new indicators of performance as follows:
  - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with his/her adoptive family (for children who have been adopted in the year).
  - 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.
  - Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %).
  - Adoptions from care (number adopted and % leaving care who are adopted in the year).
  - Number and % of children for whom the permanence decision has changed from adoption.
  - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. (Where times for children who are adopted by their

foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family).

- Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (number adopted and % of Black and Asian Minority Ethnic children leaving care who are adopted).
- Adoptions of children aged five or over (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted).
- Average length of care proceedings locally (in weeks). Number of children awaiting adoption (as at 31<sup>st</sup> March).
- Number of approved prospective adopters (as at 31 March 2013) data not yet collected.

13. Wiltshire's performance in the 2008/11 scorecard was below the national average for the number of days between a child first coming into care and moving in with their adoptive family. The scorecard raised concerns about delays for children in achieving adoption, particularly when set alongside the length of time care proceedings were taking in the local court.
14. The data used for the scorecard was related to a time before Wiltshire had a specialist adoption service. An analysis was completed of the 25 cases of the 2008/11 that were not placed within 625 days (England 3 year average). A number of themes were identified that caused delay and immediate changes were made to practice to improve the pace of adoption applications.

### **Outcomes UK Diagnostic Assessment**

15. In May 2012, Wiltshire Council adoption services were offered and agreed to be a pilot authority for a Diagnostic Assessment developed to support local authorities to explore how delay can be minimised for children who need permanence through adoption.
16. The diagnostic team reported a number of examples of good and innovative practice: the Adoption Panel receives a summary of the Looked After Child review for each child whose plan is adoption; the Panel also uses a spreadsheet to track the progress of children whose plan is adoption, prospective adopters and approved adopters; adopters spoke of assessments, once started, taking place in a timely way.
17. Immediately, an Improvement Plan was put in place – this is now known as the Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan and is part of the report to the children's Safeguarding Improvement Board. The improvement plan reflects the main findings of the diagnostic assessment which was the need to ensure timely permanence planning that is embedded in the care planning process.

## **Main Considerations for the Council**

### Adoption Agency Annual Report 2011/12

18. The Adoption Statutory Guidance requires adoption agencies to monitor their performance and provide reports to the Executive of the local authority every six months about children who are in the care of their local authority and who are waiting to be placed with new families. These reports should include:
- the number, type and age of the children waiting for an adoptive placement and length of time they have been waiting
  - the agency's performance against the timescales
  - progress in the recruitment of suitable adoptive families
  - the number of children placed for adoption and adopted since the last report
  - the number of children whose placement has disrupted or where there has been a change of plan and the child is no longer to be placed for adoption.
19. The detail to meet these requirements is included as appendix 1: Adoption Agency Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012. The Adoption Service Statement of Purpose is included as appendix 2.

### Adoption Service performance at 31st March 2012

20. Children:
- By the end of March 2012, there had been 63 children in the adoption process throughout the year.
  - Of the 63:
    - 17 had adoption orders in 2011/12
    - 2 are placed in adoptive placements in the USA
    - 14 are matched and placed with adopters
    - 1 was matched but not formally placed with Wiltshire adopters
    - 5 children had their adoption plans rescinded in 2011/12.
    - 2 are on hold in terms of placement/home-finding due to legal delay/further assessment required /may have a change of plan.
    - 1 child has become the subject of a Special Guardianship Order to foster carers.
    - 8 children have a placement identified but are not yet formally matched.
    - 13 children are waiting for a placement to be identified and the adoption team is actively home finding for them.
  - Of the 63:
    - 3 children were under 12 months of age
    - 9 were 12-24 months
    - 33 were aged 2-4 years
    - 15 were aged 5-10 years
    - 3 were aged 11-15 years
    - There were 8 sibling groups of 2 and 2 sibling groups of 3.

21. Adopters:

- By the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2012, there had been 52 adopters in the whole adoption process for the year. Of the 52:
  - Adopters adopted 17 children from Wiltshire in 2011/12.
  - 19 are matched with child/children.
  - 4 have adopted 5 children from outside Wiltshire in 2011/12.
  - 3 adopters have resigned.
  - 9 are available for adoption placements.
- 3 sets of foster carers have been approved in this financial year to adopt the children they are currently fostering.
- It has been a busy year for the Adoption Agency in relation to the increase in numbers of children with adoption as their permanency plan and also in relation to enquiries from prospective adopters. There have been 82 enquiries in relation to adoption so far this year – a higher number of enquiries than at this point in the previous year.

22. Please see appendix 3 for the Adoption Panel statistics for 2011/12.  
Please see appendix 4 for the full Adoption Agency Update Report covering 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012.

Adoption Service – budget information

23. Please find the budget information for the 2011/ financial year below:

<b>2011/12 Financial Year</b>	Budget	Actual
Salaries & team running costs	415,660	433,617
Carer recruitment & training	17,000	117
Adoption Allowances (all types)	642,308	638,299
Adoption Income	0	-48,517
	<b>1,074,968</b>	<b>1,023,516</b>
Central Recharges *		143,259
	<b>2,149,936</b>	<b>2,190,291</b>

*\*Overheads including : ICT, HR, SST, Premises,*

Department for Education Improvement Notice September 2012

24. In September 2012, the DfE issued the Council with an Improvement Notice. The Improvement Notice addresses issues raised in the April 2012 Ofsted report on the inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children in Wiltshire and the recommendations made as a result of the Adoption Scorecard and Diagnostic Assessment.
25. In terms of adoption the Improvement Notice requires the Local Authority to work with their partners to take action as follows:



### Adoption Services

*Within one month of the date of this Improvement Notice, the Council must agree a plan with the Improvement Board which will improve the performance of the adoption service and which addresses the concerns set out in the Outcomes UK Diagnostic Report and the Council's Adoption Scorecard. The plan must set out milestone and performance indicators which will improve the performance of the adoption service and reduce delay. Progress against the performance indicator standards, targets and timescales must be reported at each meeting of the Improvement Board and action taken to address performance concerns and where standards, targets and timescales are not being met.*

*The Council should reduce the time taken to place a child for adoption from the point that the child comes into the care of the local authority. In doing so the council should work towards meeting the timescales set out in The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations and Statutory Adoption Guidance revised in February 2011.*

26. The Local Authority and its partner agencies are now working to make the improvements noted in the Safeguarding and Adoption Improvement Plan. The Safeguarding Improvement Board is co-ordinating and driving improvements.
27. There is also a more detailed and separate Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan which has been agreed with the Safeguarding Improvement Board to improve the performance of the Adoption Agency. Progress against the performance indicators, targets and timescales at reported at each meeting of the Safeguarding Improvement Board.
28. The Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan is organised around 4 strategic improvement goals:
  - Ensure timely and decisive permanency planning including long term placement stability.
  - Ensure robust systems and quality assurance processes are in place to monitor progress.
  - Ensure we have an adoption team with the right culture and skills and appropriate support.
  - Secure a customer focused adoption service by valuing adopters and prospective adopters.

### **The Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan – progress to date**

29. There has been evidence of continued progress in implementing the improvement plan; ensuring Adoption and Permanency planning is embedded in practice; raising awareness through training; and focussed workshops.
30. There is closer collaboration with the Independent Safeguarding Unit (ISU), quality assurance systems are in place and monthly reports on compliance

with the Permanency Policy are being produced by the Independent Safeguarding Unit (ISU) Manager reported to SMT. Cases where drift had been identified have been audited and actions taken. Home finder meetings are held and attended by the ISU Manager. This promotes clearer communication and provides an opportunity for any concerns of 'drift' which are acted upon promptly.

31. Progress to date under each strategic improvement goal is noted below.

**Ensure timely and decisive permanency planning including long-term placement stability**

32. Both Ofsted and the Diagnostic Assessment identified the need to ensure more proactive intervention and clearer case management decisions at an earlier stage in order to reduce delay. In response to the recommendations, Children's Services have responded by taking a whole service approach. The permanency policy is now embedded into practice, with mechanisms for implementation and quality assurance systems now established. This can be evidenced through the implementation of the Permanency Policy Notification 1 (PPN1) form which is completed at every 2<sup>nd</sup> review (spreadsheet available). This document is monitored by the IRO and the ISU Manager; and scrutinised by Heads of Service for Safeguarding and Children in Care.
33. A dedicated Home Finder is now in post. The Home Finder attends all second reviews where adoption is considered as part of the permanency plan. The Home Finder has capacity to assist case holders through the adoption process, should this be required.
34. The duty officer for Family Placement attends all reviews where long term fostering is the permanency plan.
35. Both Concurrent Planning and "Fostering for Adoption" processes have been developed. Concurrent carers are being recruited. 5 carers have already been identified and are being assessed. The Service Manager for Family Placement is due to visit Devon Children's Social Care in November 2012 to discuss their concurrent planning policy and guidance.
36. The specification for a post to provide dedicated therapeutic support for family placements (fostering and adoption) has been agreed. This post will be delivered in partnership with Oxford Health and will work closely with concurrent carers and prospective adopters particularly developing support and training on understanding and caring for children with attachment disorders and improving carer's and adopter's resilience.
37. There has been significant improvement in the timely transfer of cases into Children in Care (CiC) teams through the review of the case transfer protocol. This is an important development in improving case management for those children where it has been identified that the care plan will be adoption or long term fostering.

### **Ensure robust systems and Quality Assurance processes are in place to monitor progress**

38. Performance information regarding adoption is now collated on a monthly basis. The Independent Safeguarding Unit (ISU) Manager has specific responsibility for monitoring compliance with the Permanency Policy and report findings to the Social Care and Integrated Youth Senior Management Team (SMT). Home Finder meetings have been expanded to include the ISU Manager as a standing member. This collaboration with ISU serves both to monitor activity in accordance with the permanency policy and an opportunity to discuss any drift identified by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).
39. The ISU Manager now notifies Heads of Service for Safeguarding and Children in Care of any cases where drift in permanency planning has occurred. Heads of Service have audited 7 such cases (involving 11 children) since the last Safeguarding Improvement Board (SIB) and actions undertaken to address issues identified.
40. In order to evidence improved performance, we now need to develop and implement an Adoption Service Specification. This will be finalised by the end of January 2013.

### **Ensure we are an Adoption Agency with the right culture and skills and appropriate support**

41. Work continues within the Adoption Team to improve the performance of the service through individual appraisal, team and service training opportunities and individual supervision.
42. The Adoption Team continues to deliver workshops and consultation opportunities on permanence and adoption related issues. These will remain. In addition, Outcomes UK (OUK)/British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) have been commissioned to deliver training programmes and 'Master Classes' to all social care staff. The terms of reference for training and awareness-raising have been agreed and the first session will take place in December 2012.

### **Secure a customer focused Adoption Service by valuing adopters and prospective adopters**

43. Feedback forms for use by adopters and others attending Adoption Panel have been developed and are in use. The Assistant Team Manager (ATM) for Adoption has been given the responsibility of collating and analysing information to further develop the team approach to recruitment and training.
44. A process for fast tracking second time adopters has been developed. This will reduce delay.

45. The first meeting of the Adopter's Reference Group took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2012. Their ongoing feedback will be used to improve customer service and to improve the performance of the Adoption Service.
46. Wiltshire has also been granted a Central Government Adoption Improvement Grant. The spending plan below demonstrates the importance placed on developing initiatives that will improve both customer involvement and provide a platform for future service development:

### **Environmental and climate change considerations**

47. Environmental and climate change issues have been considered, with no potential impact identified.

### **Equalities Impact of the Proposal**

48. The proposal is that the contents of this report be noted and accepted.
49. The Adoption Agency sets out to achieve better outcomes for looked after children and young people to maximize their life chances. The Service contributes towards the Council's commitment to tackle inequalities and promote equality through its service. The Adoption Service aims to:
  - Provide a range of safe, secure and enduring adoptive placements to meet the assessed needs of children needing adoptive placements in order to promote and safeguard their welfare.
  - Ensure that adoptive placements promote stability and positive outcomes for children by working in partnership with adopted children, adoptive parents, birth families and other professionals in the adoption and adoption support processes.
  - Fully develop the role of corporate parenting in achieving positive outcomes for children needing permanent placements in line with the council's objectives.

### **Risk Assessment**

50. A number of actions are currently in place to mitigate against the risk that services will fail to safeguard children to a satisfactory standard. This risk is part of the Children's Services Risk Register and a Risk Action Plan has been written.
51. The ability to deliver timely and quality adoptions is a risk. A Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan is in place under the Safeguarding Improvement Board to address the risk. There is an Improvement Plan Risk Action Plan.
52. There are risks associated with ability to meet in-year budgets. The Children in Care Commissioning Strategy is in place which includes financial mapping and monitoring. Service Specifications are currently being written to monitor the level of this risk.

## **Financial Implications**

53. The financial implications for the Council for managing effectiveness, outcomes for children and young people and Adoption Agency services are considered during the annual budget setting process and are in line with the financial plan and operating model for Children's Services.
54. Additional investment was agreed in the 2012-13 budget to increase the total funding available for adoption allowances to ensure that the higher numbers of adoptions and payments of Special Guardianship Orders could be supported. The additional fees with specialist agencies due to increased requests for financial support to Adopters and Special Guardians have caused pressures on the adoption support budget in the current financial year.

## **Legal Implications**

55. The report satisfies the requirement under Standard 25(6) of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011.
56. The significant rise in numbers of children and young people in care proceedings will inevitably impact upon the number of adoptions and special guardianship orders. This will put additional pressure on resources for adoptive placements; adoption applications, assessment and support; and special guardianship assessment and support. This will increase demand upon Legal Services for legal advice and representation.

## **Conclusions**

57. Following the publication of the adoption scorecard and the adoption diagnostic, there is a comprehensive improvement plan in place. There is robust project management and there is evidence of improvement being made.

**Carolyn Godfrey**  
**Corporate Director, Children's Services**

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Date of report: 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012

## **Background Papers**

Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Adoption Agency Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012

Appendix 2: Adoption Service Statement of Purpose

Appendix 3: Adoption Panel statistics 2011 – 2012

Appendix 4: Adoption Agency Update Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012

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## **Appendix 1: Adoption Agency Annual Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012**

### **Introduction**

1. The 2011 Statutory Adoption Guidance and the 2011 Adoption Minimum Standards place a requirement on local authority adoption services to ensure that the executive side of the Council receives a written report on the management, outcomes and financial state of the adoption agency to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users. They must also satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration (Minimum Standard 25.6; Statutory Adoption Guidance 3.3, and 5.39).

2. The 2011 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Adoption-NMS.pdf>

The 2011 Statutory Adoption Guidance can be accessed at <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/a/statutory%20guidance.pdf>

3. Further information on the organisation and delivery of adoption services in Wiltshire can also be obtained from the Adoption Service Statement of Purpose, which is reviewed annually, and is attached as Appendix 2.

### **Background**

4. Wiltshire Council is a registered adoption agency, approved by the Department for Education (DfE) to provide services, which include:
  - deciding whether a child should be placed for adoption
  - approving people as prospective adoptive parents
  - 'matching' children with suitable adoptive parents
  - arranging the adoption of children
  - supporting adoptive placements before and after the making of an adoption order
  - assisting adopted adults to find out information about their adoption
  - assisting birth families wishing to seek information about an adopted relative
5. The work of the Adoption Agency is underpinned by the Adoption & Children Act 2002 and the 2005 regulations made under this Act 2005. The aim of this Act was to improve outcomes for children needing adoption, it brought adoption legislation into line with the Children Act 1989 and placed adoption support provision onto the statute for the first time. The work of the adoption agency therefore spans the whole of children's social care services.
6. Currently the majority of children assessed as needing adoptive families are between the ages of 12 months and 10 years, who are already being 'looked after' because they cannot be cared for safely within their birth families. This

is primarily because of their parents' serious misuse of drugs and/or alcohol, mental illness or learning disability, leading to severe abuse and/or neglect. Many Children who cannot live with their birth families and require adoption live with the repeated impact of their early life experiences, which can have far reaching effect on their emotional and physical development. Meeting this diversity of need requires a diversity of adoptive parents and families who have the skills and commitment to support children and offer them a stable, loving, permanent home within which they can recover from their early life experiences and thrive.

## **National Developments**

7. The National Minimum Standards (NMS) and regulations for adoption were revised following consultation with adoption agencies at the end of 2010. The new guidance arrived in April 2011. Local authorities, independent providers and national organisations such as BAAF welcomed the proposed new standards which promote child-centered outcomes and higher quality care. The new guidance has changed the way in which adoption panels are constructed and managed to improve the timeliness of decision making. It has also increased the focus on the contribution of birth parents to the adoption process and for the first time placed timescales on the completion of life story and later life work for children.
8. The required changes to the adoption panel and to adoption practice and procedure in relation to the new guidance 2011 were in place in Wiltshire by September 2011. Staff and panel members have received training on the relevant issues and changes. Information sessions and preparation training for adopters have been revised and adoption support further strengthened. The adoption service has regularly offered workshops on related issues for adopters, foster carers and social care staff for example on life-story work and the completion of later life letters.
9. In late 2010 the DfE issued a consultation paper on CRB disclosures for safeguarding purposes on workers with vulnerable groups who are registered with the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA). The government made fostering and adoption panel membership a 'regulated activity' under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (SVG) Act 2006 and extend the eligibility for enhanced CRB checks to them and also required panel members to have their ISA registration verified. Wiltshire already carried out enhanced CRB checks on panel members and so there was no additional burden for the service when 'regulated activities' were extended to include adoption panels.
10. The Public Law Outline (which set out how care cases would be managed through the courts; to ensure timetabling is focused on the needs of the child, to enable early resolutions of cases, achieving better outcomes for children) is now well embedded into social work practice. The avoidance of delay in courts making decisions about children has been beneficial in some cases. Other delays have continued to be created by a lack of court time, difficulties in appointing expert witnesses and the inability, on occasions, to appoint a Children's Guardian to represent the child's wishes in court. These are issues



which it was hoped would be addressed in the Family Justice Review late 2011.

11. The Care Planning Regulations (2010) were introduced from 1.4.11 to promote more effective and timely planning for children and relate to all regulations & guidance including the children act 1989 and Adoption and Adoption support legislation. The regulations stress the importance of:
  - Assessment, care planning, intervention and review processes so as to improve the experience of care for children and its outcomes
  - Maintaining the centrality of the child at all times
  - Increasing levels of scrutiny and oversight of the care plan by the Independent Reviewing Officers
  - Mechanisms for the Careful management of tricky issues :for example, Contact planning and facilitation
12. The regulations also stress that Permanence options should be identified as soon as possible after child becomes looked after and that there is a need to reduce delays in decisions and long term placement of children. It is emphasised that high quality care plans help judges to make timely, informed decisions and that additional support to prevent placement breakdown is essential.
13. The regulations also emphasise the enhanced participation of children, young people and their families in these processes e.g. children in care councils, personal advisers, review meetings, advocacy and suggests that a plan developed under the new regulations must be capable of satisfying 3 requirements:
  - Would this be good enough for my own child?
  - If things do not go as expected, is there a backup plan?
  - Is the plan really tailored to all 7 elements of this child's individual identified needs, particularly if these are complex and require multiple agencies?
14. These principles were pre-empted and have been continuously incorporated into adoption team practice, developments and planning for the future, they constantly underpin the work of the team. The objectives have been written into the adoption service and team plans since 2010. There were clear implications for the practice of the whole of children's social care services, particularly in terms of permanency planning and tracking.
15. The Munro review of child protection: final report, *a child centred system* was published in May 2011. The report details significant developments and improvement for Social work service delivery which are as equally important for adoption social work as any other dimension of children's social care. The key recommendations are to promote:
  - A system that values professional expertise
  - A shared responsibility for the provision of early help.

- The development of social work expertise
  - Improvement to the organisational context to support effective social work practice.
  - To clarify accountabilities and create a learning system/environment.
16. On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2011 the Government published the first adoption score card. This measured the progression to adoption for children, providing new indicators of performance for the whole children's social care agency. The indicators are:
- Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted in the year.
  - 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.
  - Children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family (number and %).
  - Adoptions from care (number adopted and % leaving cares who are adopted in the year).
  - Number and % of children for whom the permanence decision has changed away from adoption.
  - Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family. Where times for children who are adopted by their foster family are stopped at the date the child moved in with the foster family.
  - Adoptions of children from ethnic minority backgrounds (number adopted and % of BME children leaving care who are adopted).
  - Adoptions of children aged five or over (number adopted and % of children aged 5 or over leaving care who are adopted).
  - Average length of care proceedings locally (in weeks). Number of children awaiting adoption (as at 31<sup>st</sup>March).
  - Number of approved prospective adopters (as at 31 March 2013) data not yet collected. Publication of the scorecard was criticised by many for over simplifying the complexities involved in achieving successful adoption placements for many children from the care system.
  - The data used to construct the scorecard related to 01.04.08-31.03.11(pre a specialist adoption focus in Wiltshire).
17. The score card has given adoption agencies new indicators for collecting management information regarding performance which need to be built into the data collection systems. The score card was published again in December 2011 with refined data.
18. There were delays identified in the permanence planning and legal processes for some children in Wiltshire and some delays in finding adoptive families for children with complex needs. This information has been evaluated, is understood by the agency and improvement is underway.

19. The Family Justice Review was published in November 2011. The purpose of the review was to evaluate the family justice system which was seen to be in crisis; the recommendations were to strengthen parenting, reduce time taken to progress cases through the courts and simplify the family justice system, whilst continuing to protect children and vulnerable adults from risk of harm. The review made several proposals which will impact on adoption and permanence practice. These proposals connect with the Government's action plan for adoption, promoting dovetailing of agency and court processes to improve timeliness and outcomes for families.
20. Several practice developments around adoption and permanence have been made in order to improve practice and timeliness around court work and processes for children and families. Since the publication of the family justice review; court report formats have been simplified, new guidance written and meetings between the adoption agency, CAFCASS and the judiciary have been established.
21. In March 2012 the Department for Education published "An action plan for adoption: tackling delay". This sets out a plan for implementing incremental change and improvement between 2012 and 2014. This action plan is in response to government concerns regarding:
  - A decline in the number of adoption orders granted in England and Wales in recent years.
  - A decline in the number of children placed for adoption nationally.
  - Delays for children in the adoption process; Family Justice System delays, home-finding, matching, recruitment of adopters, delays in assessment processes for children and for adopters.
22. The action plan details many proposed incremental changes to adoption procedure and practice. New Legislation and regulation is expected late 2013, consultation on the proposals for adoption and fostering is expected October 2012. The action plan proposes:
  - New preparation and assessment framework/agreements for prospective adopters
  - New regulatory requirements
  - New Ofsted inspection framework; with an emphasis on timeliness for children and adopters.
  - Review of local authority commissioning arrangements
  - Creation of a National Gateway for Adoption.
  - The creation of a national currency, "adoption Passport" to promote access to adoption (including therapeutic services and CAMHS) for all adopters.
  - National awareness raising campaigns about adoption: marketing tools and recruitment forum.
  - The development of the *Adopters Charter* in all adoption agencies.
  - That more children should be adopted by their foster carers: the promotion of concurrent caring (fostering and adopting) and fostering for adoption.

23. In Wiltshire the adoption team have been working to improve timeliness in adoption assessments, tackle delays and promote a sense of urgency in adoption practice in anticipation of the changes ahead, the details of these efforts are given below. There is regular discussion at team meetings and the practice development forum about changes/developments required and those anticipated.

### **Adoption Agency Developments**

24. Wiltshire has had a specialist, county wide adoption service since April 2010. The team is centrally located in Trowbridge. The team has grown since originally created. The adoption team contains a team manager (who also takes the role of the adoption agency adviser), an assistant team manager, 2 adoption support co-ordinators, 5 full time equivalent (FTE) assessing adoption social work posts and 2 FTE unqualified support worker posts. All Adoption team posts were filled by experienced social work practitioners, who had a particular interest in adoption work and a desire to develop the service. The work of the team is to undertake adoption work for the county; assessments of prospective adoptive applicants, home-finding for children who need adoptive placements, information sessions, recruitment, preparation, training, post adoption counselling and adoption support. The rationale for creating a specialist adoption service in Wiltshire was as previously reported to develop a skilled and specialist service to focus on Adoption, thus improving outcomes for children. The team also provides training and consultation for adopters and other social care staff as requested or identified to further enable the best outcomes for children.
25. In 2011 the adoption team manger undertook some work with the Children in Care Council around adolescent perception of adoption. Some of the young people in the group had siblings who had been adopted; some had children themselves placed for adoption. All wanted to know more about adoption and ensure that young people like them had access to adoption support services, to discuss contact arrangements for example. This piece of work fitted with the requirements of the amended guidance 2011 and also raised the issue of the importance of consistency around contact arrangements. Until this point direct contact arrangements (supervision and facilitation) post adoption had remained the responsibility of the social care teams and this had not guaranteed consistency.
26. In October 2011 the management of direct contact post adoption came into the adoption team. An extra FTE Adoption Social Worker post was created to create and maintain a process for direct contact post adoption. Alongside the adoption support co-ordinators this worker can also be a contact for individuals requiring specific help with understanding contact issues. This work was reposted to the Corporate Parenting Panel during the Ofsted inspection in May 2012. The adoption social worker with half time responsibility for direct contact post adoption currently manages and reviews 25 direct contact cases some of these refer to sibling groups and relate to several children.

27. The specialist centralised service has required the collation of files, records and statistical information. Managers, social work staff and admin have together developed spreadsheets and other systems for gathering comprehensive data and performance information which had previously been unavailable. The majority of Adoption team work is not held on care-first and this means that the collection of management information is largely manual. In the future there will need to be comprehensive data collected regarding permanence planning and tracking for children and the new adoption scorecard indicators.
28. An enquiry rota for the adoption team is established to deal directly and sensitively with all enquiries from people interested in adopting. All enquirers speak to an experienced adoption worker and the response is immediate. In the last year there have been 115 enquiries from prospective adopters in Wiltshire this is a decrease on 2010/11. Although there has been a reduction, which is in keeping with the national picture, Wiltshire is still receiving a good level of enquiry when compared to comparator agencies.
29. The two Children in Care and four community safeguarding teams undertake the work of planning for permanence for children. The impact of national developments have provided tighter time scales and deadlines for decision making, adoption panel and care planning at a time when the type of cases where children require adoption have become more complex and challenging. Having a specialist adoption service has enabled closer working between the teams regarding timely planning for permanence and placement requirements. This has continued to develop. In September 2012 in response to the government action plan Wiltshire created a specialist home finding post for adoption to promote family finding for all children needing adoption placements and to work alongside Children's social care staff in planning for permanence. This post was created from within existing adoption team resources and although showing improvement in matching and linking children both within the county and with external agencies, the development has created a reduction in capacity to undertake assessments of prospective adopters in-house.
30. The adoption team continues to have many challenges to face alongside the challenge of continuously improving timescales for adoption practice at the same time as not compromising on the quality of assessment. Other challenges include a continued increase in the number of LAC and the number of children needing adoption placements that have complex health and/or developmental needs. Both numbers have risen considerably and steadily since 2008. This has required a strategy to recruit adopters with the skills to meet the complex needs of these children. A recruitment strategy is in place and the specialist service has had the capacity and stamina to actively pursue specific adopters with specific skills for children and to fast track assessments when required. In the last year the team have successfully found, assessed, matched and supported a number of complex placements. Significantly some of these have been for children who have waited for some time to be placed for adoption. The service believes it is imperative that we

ensure all relevant children have the opportunity for permanence and stability through adoption, however complex their needs

31. The adoption team will need to respond to the adoption action plan and meet new timescales for adoption assessments. There is a strong commitment and willingness to continually improve adoption practice within the team.
32. The broad Adoption service plan for 2011/12 was again linked closely to the Agency plan;
  - To increase the number of adopters available to meet the diverse needs of children needing placement
  - To improve the permanency planning process for children to enable early home-finding and specific recruitment if required.
  - To continue to raise the profile of adoption and adoption support- through recruitment, literature, consultation and training workshops.
  - To implement the revised National standards in terms of adoption agency practice and panels and learn from the scorecard requirements and reflection on past practice.
33. The adoption team has at times in 2011/12 been short staffed. 2 experienced members of staff resigned at the end of 2011, the posts were advertised and filled but there were 3 and 4 month gaps respectively in adoption service provision. One member of the team has been on adoption leave (until 1.4.12). One adoption support co-ordinator was on sick leave for 5 months which significantly affected service delivery. In May 2012 the Assistant Team Manager resigned and could not be replaced until October 2012. This has had a significant impact on the workload of the Team Manager particularly in terms of capacity for development work.

### **Adoption Service Performance March 31st 2012**

34. The adoption service continues to be pro-active, child and outcome focussed.
35. Children: by the end of March 2012 there had been 63 children the adoption process throughout the year. Of the 63:
  - 3 children were under 12 months, 9 were 12-24 months, 33 were aged 2-4, 15 were aged 5-10, 3 were aged 11-15 and 0 were over 15. There are 8 sibling groups of 2 and 2 sibling groups of 3, 33 boys and 30 girls.
  - 2 are Black/Kenyan, 1 is Black/Ghanaian and 1 is White/Polish, 2 are White British/Black Caribbean and one is White British /Tai. One is White/British and "Romany Catholic" (described by birth family). The remaining are White/British.
  - 17 had adoption orders granted in 2011/12.
  - 2 are placed in adoption placement in USA and no longer LAC (considered adopted for statistical purposes).
  - 14 had been matched and placed with adopters (of which 8 had applications lodged with the court for adoption orders).

- 1 was matched but not formally placed with Wiltshire adopters.
- 5 children had their adoption plans rescinded in 2011/12.
- 2 are on hold in terms of placement/home-finding due to legal delay/further assessment required /may have a change of plan.
- 1 has become the subject of a special Guardianship Order to foster carers.
- 8 have a placement identified but are not yet formally matched.
- 13 children are waiting for a placement to be identified and the adoption team is actively home finding for them. Within this number there are 2 sibling groups of 2. The group included:
  - 2 children with extremely complex health needs/unknown prognoses
  - 1 child with severe emotional difficulties/unknown diagnosis
  - 2 children with unknown developmental/health prognoses.
  - 6 children with a varying range of identified attachment difficulties/disorders
  - 1 child with Down's syndrome and other complex matching criteria.

36. Adopters: by the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012 there had been 52 adopters in the whole adoption process for the year. Of the 52:

- Adopted 17 children from Wiltshire in 2011/12.
- 19 are matched with child/children.
- 16 are awaiting an adoption order.
- 4 have adopted 5 children from outside Wiltshire in 2011/12.
- 4 Wiltshire children have been matched with adopters from outside Wiltshire (1 child is now adopted, 2 are in a kinship placement for adoption in the USA and no longer LAC).
- 14 have 15 Wiltshire children matched and placed
- 3 have 3 Wiltshire children linked but not yet formally matched.
- 3 have resigned.
- 2 are on hold following breakdown of placements made by another agencies and both are expected to resign. 1 is intending to resign due to changes in personal circumstances.
- 9 are available for adoption placements. All are offering placements for either single children or sibling groups of 2 aged 0-6 years with a level of complexity of need.
- 3 sets of foster carers have been approved in this year to adopt the children they are currently fostering.
- The majority of children placed for adoption are placed in Wiltshire with Wiltshire adopters.

37. The Adoption Team set an ambitious target of 25 sets of newly approved adopters in the year and we achieved 17: 3 withdrew late on in the process after a considerable amount of assessment had taken place. Our target for 2012/13 is 25. Some of the work carried out in 2011/12 is as follows:

- 17 assessments of adopters were completed during the year and at 31.3.12 there were 16 further assessments of adopters underway. Some of these were specialist assessments for particular children.

- We continue to feature children and adopters at SWAC and through the National register as soon as possible.
  - The adoption team is proactive in planning the placement of children for adoption, the ATM in the team chairs all transition planning meetings and relates planning to timescale, tasks and individual children's needs.
  - We continue to want to work with colleagues in the children's social care teams to further increase the numbers of children offered permanency through Special Guardianship Orders in 2012/13.
  - We have set ourselves an ambitious target for 2012/13 of achieving adoption for 7% of the available LAC population.
  - As well as the training mentioned elsewhere in this report, there have been 6 information sessions, 3 preparation training courses and 2 safer caring courses in the year presented by the adoption team.
  - There have been 28 initial assessment visits resulting in 18 formal adoption applications.
  - Of the children placed for adoption in 2011/12 the majority were placed with Wiltshire adopters, links between children and adopters are being made in a timely way and adoption team staff take a role in challenging any delays in processes for children they encounter.
  - The team has completed post adoption counseling with 33 adopted adults.
  - The Adoption support co-coordinators have written 16 new adoption support plans and 10 special guardianship support plans for children about to be placed. The adoption support co-coordinators have in addition written 70 support plans for those returning to the agency for support post adoption.
  - All team members regularly consult on adoption and permanence issues as required.
  - All 17 adoptive placements approved in the year were assessed and approved within the 8 months timescale.
  - All reporting to Panel for suitability to adopt (approval of adopters) has been within 6 weeks of the completion of prospective adopter's reports.
  - Significantly Wiltshire had no unplanned endings of adoption placements in 2011/12.
38. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, there were a total of 418 Looked after Children. 29 (6.9%) were subject to placement orders (could be placed for adoption). The number of LAC minus those children in care for 6 months or less (and therefore not available for permanence) was 340. Of these 16 children (4.7%) were placed for adoption. 25 (7.3%) achieved permanence through either special guardianship or adoption in the year. Of the 17 children achieving adoption during the year, 13 (76.4%) were placed within 12 months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption. The four not placed within this timescale had complex matching and placement requirements. 2 children placed but not adopted in the year had a legally complex, inter-country kinship adoption placement to the USA, are no longer LAC and are considered adopted for statistical purposes.
39. This compares with the picture on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011 when there were 384 Looked after Children, of whom 28 (7.2%) were subject to placement orders.



The number of LAC minus those children in care for 6 months or less (and therefore not available for permanence) was 314 of these 22 children achieved permanence (7%). Of the 15 children achieving adoption during the year, 12 (80%) were placed, within 12 months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption. The four not placed within this timescale had complex matching requirements.

40. In the last year there has been a significant increase in the looked after children population of which it should be noted there is a significant cohort of adolescents where adoption is not the agreed permanence plan. The outcomes of the adoption service response to this increase in LAC in terms of a percentage increase in the number of children placed for adoption will show more accurately in 2012/13 as the result of the time taken to achieve placement for adoption.
41. There were 8 Special Guardianship Orders made in 2011/12 which is an increase on the previous year.

#### **Adoption periodical payments and Special Guardianship Financial support**

42. There has been a general increase in requests for financial support to Adopters and Special Guardians over the year. The agency is committed to enabling placements and supporting permanence in this way as required and in particular creating bespoke packages of support for children with complex needs or disabilities. There are currently 31 adoptive families receiving adoption periodical payments, 20 receiving adoption allowances and 40 families receiving Special Guardianship allowances. The assessments for financial support are made by the adoption support co-ordinators and each arrangement is reviewed a minimum of annually. Financial support is often closely linked to support plans including other services.
43. There are funds in the adoption budget for decisions to be made quickly to buy placements outside of Wiltshire through the consortium (SWAC) and other agencies as required. Wiltshire provides placements for other agencies and achieves income from this which boosts this funding. Accessing funding for the placements required is not an issue that has not been recorded as a delaying factor. It is a fact that specialist placements with private and voluntary sector agencies (VAA'S) are costly and a challenge for the local authority to fund. Costs in this sector are rising and variable. One agency offering specialist fostering for adoption placements recently quoted a Wiltshire home-finder £65K for placement for a single child with complex needs. This was an option to be considered because of the needs of the child and the length of time she has been waiting for a placement. Unfortunately the private agency had no approved carers available. Local authorities are "capped" in what they can charge for their own placements if selling to another agency, the fees have not increased since 2010 and are frozen at £13K, for a single placement outside London, VAA's can currently charge £24K. If it were a direct exchange of funds a local authority would need to sell 5 placements to fund one at £65k. There have always been budgetary commitments to funding placements outside of the authority but these are

likely to increase in the future with the focus on timely adoption, increase use of external provision and the competition for placements. Wiltshire will need to prepare financially for this commitment.

### **The Adoption Support Service**

44. This part of the service continues to grow and develop and there has been a continuing increase in demand with 157 new referrals in the year. There are two Adoption Support Co-ordinators in post, each covering half of the county. They are responsible for ensuring that every child being placed for adoption has an Adoption Support Plan in place and for ensuring that any of the parties to adoption are provided with an assessment for adoption support services, if requested. They each line-manage an Adoption Support Worker, whose role is to provide practical support to adopters.
45. The adoption support co-ordinators are the single point of contact for adopters, adopted children, birth parents and birth families for support. They work closely with all involved in an adoption situation to help the different parties through the challenges they may face.
46. The Adoption Support Co-ordinators also provide support groups and activities for adoptive families. The Adoption support workers organise family days and events. They also produce an adoption support newsletter 3 times per year which is an important source of support for Wiltshire adopters post adoption.
47. The adoption support service also provides support plans and services including contact arrangements for Special Guardians. A support plan is required for court proceedings. This area of work has increased significantly in the last year and the assessments of need are often complex and difficult to negotiate. The co-ordinators have completed 17 assessments for support plans for special guardianship arrangements in the last year. Given the agency's commitment to promoting SGO as a permanence option for children it is anticipated that this area of work will continue to grow and will raise further resource implications. It is unlikely that it will continue to be manageable within existing resources in the adoption team.
48. Wiltshire adoption support includes groups for adopters on attachment issues and dealing with difficulties arising for adopted children. These groups are available to adopters' county wide, are very well attended and valued by adopters. The groups meet monthly.
49. The work undertaken by adoption support is significant in helping adoption placements to sustain when they encounter sometimes significant difficulties. It is important that the workers are responsive and creative in their approach. It is also important that adoptive families in difficulty have access through the co-ordinators to mainstream support services provided for children and families in distress, including CAMHS and the crisis intervention service.

50. The Adoption Post-Box service is managed by the Adoption Support Co-ordinators and continues to grow; almost every adopted child has some form of ongoing contact (direct or indirect) with birth relatives. The Post-Box service acts as the channel through which communications flow between the adoptive family and the birth family.
51. There are currently 208 active post-box arrangements across the county and 25 direct contact arrangements this number is increasing. All indirect contact arrangements are reviewed annually by the Adoption Support staff.
52. The adoption support co-ordinator's arranged the seventh Wiltshire annual adoption conference in March 2012, the title of which was "Who do we think we are? - Issues around identity and contact". The conference was attended by 120 people, including adopters, adopted people, IRO'S, Special Guardians, CAMHS workers, teachers, social workers and adoption panel members. The day was led by Richard Rose from SACCS, who was joined by presenters from partner agency PACT, Dr Vicky Sutton Clinical psychologist and members of the Wiltshire adoption team. The feedback was very positive and the day provided information to inform service development going forward.

### **The Adoption team development group**

53. This group attached to the adoption team meetings has met since early 2011 and is comprised of Adoption and Adoption Support practitioners. It provides an opportunity for the sharing and discussion of good practice in adoption and considers where and how improvements to practice can be made. The group also has responsibility for planning the information sessions, training/preparation courses for people applying to become adoptive parents and for planning adoption support service developments.
54. There is an adoption team development plan; team members take responsibility for leading on particular areas of the plan. Issues covered in the last year have been:
  - Contact post adoption-all aspects of this and the support required ensure plans work for the children involved- now embedded in practice.
  - Incorporating and listening to the child's voice-information required collection of views -now embedded in practice.
  - E-safety -family safety policies work with the South West Grid-now embedded in practice
  - Permanency planning processes-in process
  - A Concurrent planning scheme (placement of children for adoption with carers who foster them initially)-in process
  - Child appreciation days process (life story work and days celebrating the child's identity)-work completed
  - Work with birth families, including siblings of children placed for adoption-in process.
55. Recently the plan has been reviewed to include developments required around the adoption action plan.

- Development of the Adopters Charter-in process
- Development of the enquiry and initial assessment processes-in process

## **Adoption Training**

56. Adoption Training is an important component of the overall Training Plan for children's social care. The Adoption Team Manager plans the priority training needs of staff and Adoption Panel members, to ensure that they are properly equipped to carry out their responsibilities under the adoption legislation. Team members take particular responsibility for specific areas of practice and service development and attend courses enabling them to do this. In the last year adoption team members have been supported by the agency to attend specialist Attachment training, training on play therapy techniques, on assessment techniques and on contact issues. The specialist home finder is about to embark on training relating to finding placements for children with complex needs and family exchange days.
57. Practice development, regulation changes and learning from major reviews such as the Munro report is fed into the team alongside formal training.
58. All of the adoption team are up-to-date in their safeguarding training have completed the Inclusion and diversity training. Those members of the team who line manage others have attended or have plans to attend elements of the management matters training.
59. The adoption team has regular team meetings which have regular agenda items for home-finding, complex assessment discussion and reflection on practice, applications and children coming through available for placements/matching, adoption support updates/events.
60. The adoption team co-ordinates a "Talk Adoption" forum every three months for all staff within the agency. This is an informal, lunchtime gathering where staff can meet and bring items regarding adoption practice for discussion. The sessions can be used for consultation, to discuss individual case progression, process or general adoption practice issues.
61. The adoption team provide training for staff and adopters to ensure best practice in the placement of children and to support adoptive placements. Some of the training events planned for this year include:
  - Life-story Work with Children
  - Preparing Later life letters/indirect contact
  - Transition planning
  - Preparing Child Permanence Reports (repeated twice a year)
  - Preparing Prospective Adopters Reports (repeated annually)
  - Contact and Attachment in Permanent placements.
  - E-safety

- Safer caring

### **The Home-finder Management Group**

62. This group meets quarterly with the aim of monitoring and tracking the progress of every child and adopter in the adoption and long-term fostering processes. Where there appears to be a delay in identifying a suitable placement, the Group considers what action is needed to move things forward. For example, with a particularly difficult to place child, recommending that she/he is featured in the BAAF publication 'Be My Parent'. Every child needing a permanent placement has a nominated home-finder pro-actively searching for a placement for them. Responsibility for the home-finder publication has been with the ATM adoption and monitoring the progress of children to adoption is part of the team role.

### **Contracts with PACT**

63. The Agency has three main service contracts with PACT (Parents and Children Together) a voluntary adoption agency which specialises in assessing people as suitable for adopting a child from overseas (inter-country adoption) and in providing adoption support and intermediary services to adopted adults and the birth families of adopted people. This latter service is provided when an adopted adult wishes to trace her/his birth relatives or when the birth relatives of an adopted person wish to try and trace that person. As part of this adoption support contract with PACT an independent support service is offered to birth parents whose children are being placed for adoption. There is also a framework contract of which PACT are a part, through this they complete step parent adoption assessments for Wiltshire and can offer to complete mainstream adoption assessments as required. There is a further contract with PACT commissioned by the agency for support for a specific placement.
64. The contracts with PACT are regularly monitored and reviewed, in order to ensure that the services it provides on our behalf are meeting the needs of the public and are cost-effective. The volume of work being taken on by PACT under all three main contracts continues to increase. The PACT adoption support workers meet regularly with the Wiltshire adoption support co-ordinator's to ensure regular dialogue and coordination of services. The adoption support contract is deliberately flexible to enable response to varying need.
65. The Agency no longer has a contract with Adoption UK as the service offered could be supplied by in-house services. The Agency retains a corporate membership and provides all newly approved adoptive parent's free membership of Adoption UK for the first year as a support. The service they provide is unusual, in that all their workers are themselves adoptive parents and adopters find this very supportive. The option is still there to access Adoption UK training provision, literature and to spot purchase individual services if required.

## **SWAC Membership**

66. The Agency continues to be a member of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) to which all the local authorities and large, national voluntary adoption agencies in the region belong. It is a large consortium now with 18 members. The purpose of SWAC is to share resources, where it has not been possible to achieve a local placement match for a child, to increase the range of options available, thus minimising delays. There are regular SWAC meetings where practice and service development, national developments and training are discussed and shared.
67. The Adoption Team Manager is a member of this peer group and attends regular meetings. There are also SWAC group meetings for adoption support workers, agency advisers, legal advisers and medical advisers as well as adoption panel chairs.
68. There is a SWAC exchange register for finding South West placements and there are 4 SWAC exchange meetings per year, usually held in Taunton where children and adopters are presented. A Wiltshire home-finder, children's social workers and an adoption support co-coordinator attend these meetings in the effort to find families for specific children.

## **The Adoption Panel**

### Panel's Work

69. The year of 2011/12 saw a further increase in the Panel's workload, there were 22 pre arranged panels and 1 extra one arranged as required. There are 23 panels planned for 2012. Increase in work load has been in response to the increasing number of children requiring adoption placements, there has also been an increase in the number of 'matches' recommended and an increase in the number of adopters approved.
70. Both the independent and professional Panel members have showed great commitment and flexibility in rising to this challenge and ensuring that the Panels were always quorate and happen as required.

### Panel central list Membership

71. The revised guidance for 2011 brought changes to panel composition and tenure over the last year. Panel membership has changed over the year with 3 independent members resigning, for personal reasons. 2 new members were recruited and a third is underway. 2012 will bring further changes and the likely need for a more vice chairs and new social work representatives to respond to the increased need for panels to be more flexible.
72. The current Department for Education consultation paper on the adoption and fostering proposals contains further proposed changes to adoption and

fostering panel function, tenure and quoracy which will require implementation during 2012/13.

### Panel Training

73. The panel had a half day training workshop July 2011 linked to the regulatory changes in the revised guidance 2011 this updated panel members on the proposed changes to panel processes and adoption agency functioning. Each panel meeting is completed with a process review which reflects on the business of the day and enables learning and development.
74. The annual Adoption Panel Training Day for 2011 was held on December 2<sup>nd</sup>. This was facilitated by the panel chair. The morning session looked at panel functioning and process.
75. Once again, the afternoon session was shared with Agency staff and adoptive parents; the panel chair facilitated an "open space" session entitled "discovering best practice in adoption services what are the opportunities right now". Panel feedback was very positive as was that from the Agency staff. The panel training day for 2012 is booked for December 14<sup>th</sup>. The afternoon open space forum is entitled "How can we best achieve permanence for children" the title connects directly to the action plan for adoption and the improvement plan and will be an important opportunity for multidisciplinary discussion.
76. There have been further changes to panel functioning, since 1.9.12 and the family justice review recommendation that should be placed for adoption decisions for children in proceedings are removed from panel business.
77. All panel central list members have had annual performance reviews

### Summary of the Panel's Work

78. See Appendix 3 for statistics detailing the work of the Panel in 2011/12. In brief, the Panel recommended that:
  - 27 children should be placed for adoption
  - 17 sets of adopters should be approved
  - 19 matches should be made
  - 5 changes of plan were recommended
  - Panel work also included consideration of:
    - 59 reviews of plans for children (feedback to IRO's and social workers)
    - 1 deferred application of adopters (needing to come back to panel at a later stage).
79. In all cases considered by the panel prospective adopters, children and birth parents have been notified within the timescale of the panel recommendations and of the agency decisions. Notification of the Agency Decision Makers decision to parents, guardian and prospective adopters has been given orally

within 2 days and in writing within 5 days again in line with regulatory timescales.

80. All ADM decisions have been within 7 working days of receipt of reports/panel recommendation and final minutes.
81. There have been no referrals to the independent review mechanism (IRM) for adoption cases.



## **Appendix 2:**

### **Adoption Service Statement of Purpose July 2012**

#### **Introduction: Why Does Wiltshire Provide A Statement of Purpose?**

1. The National Minimum Standards for Adoption set out the requirement for adoption agencies to compile a statement detailing what services are provided, the governing principles and who manages and provides the services. The statement of purpose is for:
  - children and young people
  - birth relatives
  - prospective and approved adoptive families
  - social workers working within Wiltshire and in other authorities
  - councillors
  - adoption and permanence panel members
  - Office for Standards in Children's Services,
  - Education and Skills (Ofsted)
  - Members of the public.
2. The Statement of Purpose fulfils the requirement of Standard 18 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011, Regulation 2 of the Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003, Adoption support agencies (England) and adoption agencies regulations 2005 and the Adoption & Children Act 2002.
3. Wiltshire Adoption Service statement of purpose is reviewed annually.
4. The statement of purpose is endorsed by the Children's Services Senior Management Team.
5. Copies of the statement of purpose are given to those working in the adoption service, childcare team managers and social workers involved with the adoption process. A copy is given to all prospective adopters and adopters in Wiltshire and all birth parents, guardians and of children placed for adoption.
6. It is available on the Wiltshire Council website.

#### **Mission Statement**

7. Wiltshire's Adoption Service is committed to providing high quality standards of care to looked after and adopted children in order to maximise their life chances and ensure that they have the opportunity to achieve each of the Every Child Matters five outcomes.
8. The Adoption Service aims to:

- Provide a range of safe, secure and enduring adoptive placements to meet the assessed needs of children needing adoptive placements in order to promote and safeguard their welfare.
- Ensure that adoptive placements promote stability and positive outcomes for children by working in partnership with adopted children, adoptive parents, birth families and other professionals in the adoption and adoption support processes.
- Fully develop the role of corporate parenting in achieving positive outcomes for children needing permanent placements in line with the council's objectives.

### **Aims of the Adoption Service**

9. Our overall aim is to help children and young people who are adopted to attain the highest possible standards of health, development and educational attainment.
  - To ensure that the Safety needs, wishes and welfare of the child are at all times kept at the centre of the adoption process.
  - To ensure that where it is not possible for children to live safely with their birth families they are provided with a permanent, stable, alternative family through adoption or special guardianship.
  - To ensure that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents, including those wishing to adopt a child from overseas, couples whether married or not, gay or lesbian and single people, from any ethnic background are welcomed without prejudice. They will be responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, assessment, and approval and support services.
  - To ensure that birth families are treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process and have access to independent counselling and adoption support services.
  - To ensure that the timescales set out in Regulations are met, wherever possible and where it is not possible the reasons must be clearly recorded.
  - Our performance against the achievement of these timescales is monitored.
10. Objectives of the Adoption Service:
  - To increase the number of children adopted from the care system, in line with government targets.
  - To recruit a sufficient pool of prospective adopters to offer placement choice in order to meet the assessed needs of the children needing adoptive families.
  - To develop a range of adoption support services, including practical, financial and therapeutic services, in partnership with other relevant agencies, in order to support adoptive placements and avoid placement breakdowns.
  - To ensure that the adoption agency employs staff with appropriate and sufficient skills, knowledge and experience to deliver the adoption service.

- To ensure that applicants for inter-country adoption are provided with an appropriate service from skilled and experienced workers.
- The adoption team works in close partnership with colleagues across Children's Social Care to ensure that delays in achieving permanence are avoided.
- To ensure that the lifelong implications of adoption are recognised and it is acknowledged that they may require a range of services to meet the needs of individuals at different stages of the process
- To ensure that adoptive parents will be supported and valued through the process of recruitment, matching, placement and beyond, based on assessed need.
- To ensure that birth families wishing to seek information about an adopted relative are provided with an appropriate service from skilled and experienced workers.

### **Policies & Procedures**

11. Wiltshire Council Adoption Agency joined together with a number of other local authorities, through the South West Adoption Consortium, SWAC, to produce procedures for the provision of adoption and adoption support services. These are used by staff via Wiltshire's intranet. The procedures cover all of the agency's activities for children, adopters, birth relatives, step-parent adopters and inter-country adopters and their children and are updated annually to reflect developments in practice.

### **Safeguarding & Promoting Welfare**

12. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board provide the procedural framework for safeguarding children in Wiltshire and the adoption agency ensures that staff and managers attend child protection training and comply with good practice and guidance. Safeguarding issues are also part of the training programme for Adoption panel members.

### **Principles of the Service**

13. The Child
  - The child's welfare is paramount in all decisions about her/his future.
  - The child's wishes and feelings should be ascertained and taken into consideration, according to their age and understanding.
  - Every child is entitled to a permanent family throughout their childhood, which should meet all the needs of the child in terms of religion, ethnicity, language, physical, social and emotional development and that promotes a supportive lifelong relationship.
  - Children and young people should not be in public care throughout their childhood.
  - A child's birth heritage, religious, cultural and linguistic background are all important factors to consider in finding a new family. The adoptive family should reflect this, if this can be found without unnecessary delay. No child

should be denied loving adoptive parents solely on the grounds that the child and parents do not share the same racial or cultural background.

- All children who have adoption as their plan receive a copy of the children's guide to adoption.
- All children placed for adoption receive a copy of the children's guide to adoption support "growing up in your adopted family".

#### 14. The Birth Family

- The local authority will work in partnership with birth families to ensure that effective plans are made and implemented for their child.
- Every child is entitled to information about her/his birth family in order to promote her/his sense of identity.
- There will be arrangements for ongoing contact, direct or indirect, between the child and birth family unless this would not be in the child's best interests.
- The birth family's wishes and feelings should be ascertained and taken into consideration at all stages in the process.

#### 15. The Adopters

- All adoptive applicants will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process.
- Priority for undertaking assessments will be given to those with the skills and experience to meet the needs of the children requiring adoption.
- Every effort will be made to find adoptive homes where brothers and sisters can live together, unless this will not meet their individually assessed needs. Where this is not possible, the reasons for the decision to separate them will be clearly recorded on the child's file.
- Adoptive parents and prospective adopters should be consulted with, provided with information, their views sought and taken into account throughout the process.
- Adoption support services should be provided, as appropriate, to promote the stability of placements and ensure good outcomes for children.

#### 16. General

- The local authority will work in partnership with other agencies to ensure that the needs of all parties in the adoption process are met.
- All the parties to the adoption process are entitled to an assessment of their need for adoption support services, including financial support.
- All the parties to the adoption process will have access to the Department's Complaints procedure.

### **Management Structure in Wiltshire**

17. All the managers in the adoption service are suitably qualified and experienced in line with the requirements of the Adoption & Children Act

2002. All have completed or are in the process of completing management training courses.

18. The Service Director of the Children & Families Branch has overall responsibility for the adoption service in Wiltshire. The Service Director is one of the Adoption Agency Decision Makers and the Adoption Support Services Adviser (delegated to the Adoption Team Manger).
19. The adoption service is located within the Department for Children and Education. The Head of Children in Care has management responsibility for the adoption service.
20. The Adoption Team Manager has line-management responsibility for the Adoption Assistant Team Manager, Adoption Support Co-ordinators, Adoption Social Workers and responsibility for the operational development of the adoption service.
21. The Adoption Support Co-ordinators have line-management responsibility for the Adoption Support Workers.

Name	Designation
Carolyn Godfrey	Corporate Director
	Service Director, Children's Social Care
Lin Hitchman	Head of Children in Care
Andrea Viner	Adoption Team Manager
Jackie Hatschek	Assistant Team Manager Adoption
	Qualified Social Workers
Marion Hunt Sally Hughes	Adoption Support Co-ordinator Adoption Support Co-ordinator
Denise O'Connor Alison Lewis Julie Pearce Fiona brown Charlotte Gilbertson Leonie McKenna Jill Vincent	Adoption Social Workers
Ann Mazzotta	Unqualified Adoption Support Worker
Sharron Smith	Unqualified Adoption Support Worker

22. All the Managers, Adoption Social Workers and Adoption Support Co-ordinators hold the minimum social work qualification have had a minimum of 2 years' experience in children & families social work or closely related field.
23. The Adoption Team Manager holds an MASW in social work and has extensive experience in childcare social work practice, family placement and permanence / adoption work. She also holds management qualification to

level 6 and has been the manager of the specialist adoption service since it was set up in 2010.

24. There are three agency decision makers in Wiltshire: the service director for children's social care and the two heads of service for community safeguarding services.

### **Operational Functions**

25. The centrally based countywide Adoption Team delivers all of the adoption services for Wiltshire.
26. Within the team there is a dedicated Adoption Support Service that is responsible for providing and developing adoption support services in Wiltshire, including for Special Guardianship.
27. The Independent Reviewing Service has responsibility for monitoring the implementation of children's adoption plans, conducting the LAC reviews until the Adoption Order is made, ensuring the timescales are adhered to.
28. A Home finder Management Group meets every three months to oversee the home finding process, track the progress of individual children and adopters in order to expedite placements and to review the effectiveness of the Home finding process. The group is chaired by the Adoption Team Manager and membership includes representatives from the two fostering teams.
29. The Home finder booklet is produced every two months with stop press releases in between to avoid delay in matching and placement.
30. Wiltshire provides a comprehensive set of adoption procedures for staff to assist them in their adoption work. The procedures are available on the intranet, which means they can be easily and regularly updated in line with changes in legislation and practice.
31. The Adoption Agency has contracts with Voluntary Adoption Support Agencies to provide complementary services to those provided in-house. PACT (Parents and Children Together) provides adoption support services to birth families, adopted adults and adoptive families.
32. The Agency is a member of Adoption UK and purchases targeted services at specific needs identified, such as training for social workers and adopters. The Agency pays for membership to Adoption UK for the first year for adopters as support.
33. The Agency has a contract with PACT to provide inter-country adoption services, including assessment, training, reviewing and adoption support.
34. All staff are provided with a thorough induction and support from experienced and skilled managers to promote these values and to work within the Council's equal opportunities policies.

35. Staff are also provided with the Council's whistle blowing policy as part of their induction and this makes clear the responsibility for all staff to report areas of poor practice.

### **Strategic and Developmental Function**

36. Wiltshire is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC), which is a consortium of local authorities and Voluntary Adoption Support Agencies (VASAs) and is used to share resources to increase the range of placement possibilities for children and adopters, and for the sharing of good practice. They produce the 'e-Link book', which features children needing adoption placements. The Adoption Team Manager is the link person with the Consortium and attends quarterly and other regional meetings.
37. SWAC also has regular regional group meetings for Panel Chairs, Panel Advisers and Adoption Support staff. Wiltshire has representation on all of these groups, to share issues, good practice and disseminate relevant information.
38. Wiltshire is a member of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). It provides a quarterly information pack, including details of training events, publications and practice notes. It provides licences for the printing and use of nationally recognised adoption forms. It publishes a bi-monthly newspaper 'Be My Parent' and has a Be My Parent Online Service, which feature the more difficult to place children needing adoptive placements. There are local Trainer/Consultants who are available to provide training, advice and guidance on specific issues. The Adoption Team Manager is the link person with BAAF and attends quarterly and other regional meetings.
39. Wiltshire subscribes to Adoption UK and receives quarterly journals and a 'Children Who Wait' magazine featuring children needing placements for adoption.
40. Wiltshire joins all newly approved gay and lesbian adopters to New Family Social as part of the support package.

### **The Adoption Panel and Central list**

41. The current central list of potential Adoption Panel members is made up of:-
- an Independent Chair
  - Two vice chairs
  - Three social workers with at least 3 years relevant experience in child care social work, including direct experience in adoption work.
  - Two elected members of the authority, from the corporate parenting group.
  - The Agency's Medical Advisers
  - 1 agency members from specialist field
  - 5 independent members (all with personal experience of adoption).

42. Panel member's annual reviews ensure that the diversity, flexibility and knowledge base of the panel is promoted and developed.
43. The Independent Chair is independent from the day to day management of the adoption service.
44. The Agency has a Legal Adviser to the Adoption Panel who provides written legal advice and may attend if requested to do so but is not a member of the Panel.
45. There is also an Agency Adviser to the Panel who is not a Panel member but should attend Panel meetings as its adviser. He or she should be able to contribute to Panel meetings by raising issues and providing advice, for example about the Agency's procedures and practices.
46. The Adoption Panel Administrator is responsible for taking the minutes of the meetings and undertaking the other administrative aspects of the Panel's work.
47. The Agency provides an annual training day for Panel members and Adoption Agency staff. Panel members are also offered opportunities to attend other relevant internal and external training events.

### **Adoption Panel Function**

48. The adoption panel in Wiltshire currently meets twice per month these meetings are book in a year in advance, extra panel meetings are arranged as required.
49. The Panel's main function is to make recommendations to one of the Agency's Decision-Makers (the Service Director, Children's Social Care or the Head of Service Community Safeguarding), who makes the Agency decision on the following matters:-
  - whether a child should be placed for adoption
  - whether a prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child
  - Whether a child should be placed for adoption with a particular prospective adopter.
50. The Panel must also consider and may give advice to the Agency on:
  - the Agency's proposals for the provision of adoption support services to the adoptive family
  - the arrangement the Agency proposes to make for allowing any person contact with the child
  - whether an application should be made by the Agency for a Placement Order
  - Whether the parental responsibility of any parent or guardian or the prospective adopter should be restricted and if so the extent of the restriction.



51. In considering the recommendation to make, the Panel must bear in mind that the **welfare of the child is the paramount consideration** and:-
- shall take into account and give consideration to all reports and information passed to the Panel
  - shall request any further information that the Panel considers necessary
  - shall obtain legal and medical advice on each case presented to Panel
  - Should consider whether all other possible options for care of the child have been explored and discounted.
52. The Panel is required to keep minutes of its meetings and a written record of any recommendations it makes and the reasons for them. The Panel receives regular update reports on children and adopters who have been to Panel, in order to track their progress.
53. As part of its monitoring function, the Panel considers, at quarterly intervals, a spreadsheet and brief report detailing the position of all the children and adopters currently in the adoption process.
54. The adoption panel chair and agency adviser feedback to the agency at 6 monthly intervals regarding the quality of adoption practice seen by the panel.

### **The Agency Decision**

55. In line with regulations prospective adopters, birth parents and the child must be notified of the agency decision verbally within 2 days and in writing within 7 working days of the agency decision maker receiving a copy of the final minutes.

### **Adoption Panel**

56. There is an annual training day for the Adoption Panel, which helps to ensure Panel members are kept up-to-date with current issues in adoption. In meeting the requirements of the National Minimum Adoption Standards, part of this day involves a session with the Agency's adoption managers and staff.
57. The Agency Decision Maker/s meets with the Adoption Panel twice per year and will pick up on any issues of concern raised by Panel members. A spreadsheet showing the current position and progress of all the children and adopters in the process is shared and discussed with the panel and the Agency Decision Maker/s.
58. All Panel members are required to undergo an annual review of their performance.
59. The Agency Decision-Maker meets every six months with the Panel Chair and Agency Adviser to discuss issues connected with Panel business, including developmental, quality control and any other issues of concern.

60. The agency adviser meets every six months with the agency medical advisers and the legal adviser to discuss issues arising from panel business and shared processes.
61. The Adoption Panel has a system for receiving feedback from applicants who attend Panel, children's social workers and Adoption social workers, which are discussed at subsequent Panels and suggestions for improvements to Panel's practice are considered.

### **Services Provided**

62. As an Adoption Agency, Wiltshire provides a range of adoption services to children needing adoption, prospective adopters, adoptive parents, birth parents, birth families, adopted adults and the general public. These services are provided by:
  - The Adoption Team recruit, train, assess and provide support to prospective adoptive parents.
  - The Adoption Team provides a counselling service for adopted adults who wish to find out information about their adoption.
  - The Adoption Team, through the contract with a Voluntary Adoption Support Agency (VASA), provides an intermediary service for birth relatives and adopted adults who wish to trace each other.
  - The Adoption Team allocates an Adoption Social Worker to act as the 'nominated home-finder' for children needing adoptive placements.
  - The Adoption Team provides a consultation service to the childcare teams on matters relating to adoption placements.
  - The Adoption Team, through a contract with an external provider offers a full range of services to step-parents who wish to adopt, including the preparation of a report for court.
  - The Adoption Team, through a contract with PACT offers a full range of services to inter-country adopters including adoption support.
  - Childcare teams are responsible for ensuring that the child's Life-story Work and Later Life Letter are completed by the time of the Adoption Order.
  - Childcare teams are responsible for managing direct contact arrangements between children and their birth families, pre and post Adoption Order.

## **Adoption Website**

63. Wiltshire Council has an adoption website [www.wiltshireadoption.org.uk](http://www.wiltshireadoption.org.uk) to provide information on the adoption service, including:

- Services for children who need adoption
- Becoming an adoptive parent (including an online enquiry form)
- The Adoption Support Service
- Accessing your adoption records (adopted adults)
- Tracing an adopted person (intermediary service for birth relatives)
- Tracing your birth relatives (intermediary service for adopted adults)
- Special Guardianship
- Inter-country adoption
- Step-parent Adoption

## **Adoption Support Service**

64. The Adoption Support service has a range of services in place to support adoptive families and their children including counselling, advice and information, workshops/support groups, family days and events, an annual conference, a newsletter, financial support and links with Wiltshire's Educational team and CAMHS.

65. The service also has links with various independent adoption support agencies and is in the process of developing a parenting course for Wiltshire adopters and special guardians.

66. Wiltshire have a partnership contract for adoption support with PACT (Parents and Children Together) this compliments in-house adoption support services and is a flexible contract to allow the agency to respond to complex and varied support needs appropriately and effectively.

67. Contact is promoted as a positive experience for the child and as maintaining an important connection with the child's past for their future identity. An allocated adoption social worker provides support to birth relatives and adoption support provides this for adopters. An independent social worker specialising in birth relative support is offered to birth parents or other relatives who are losing a child/ren to adoption. This worker is provided through PACT and supported through adoption support partnership working with the Wiltshire adoption support co-ordinators. Birth parents, siblings and grandparents are offered individual and occasionally group work.

68. Wiltshire Council supports ongoing contact arrangements as required. There is a designated worker within the adoption team who manages direct contact arrangements post-adoption. The adoption support co-ordinators manage indirect contact arrangements.

69. The Adoption Support Service facilitates both direct and indirect contact (through the post-box service) between birth families, children and significant others.

70. The adoption service provides post adoption counselling and support for adopted people living in Wiltshire. Learning from this informs current practice development.
71. PACT provide an intermediary service for adopted Wiltshire residents, and an intermediary service for birth relatives who are care leavers and have an adopted sibling. Individual and some group work are offered for young people touched by adoption.
72. The Adoption Support service has developed Life Story work practice and provided workshops for staff, adopters and birth family to ensure that all adopters have a high quality life story book for their child and all adopted children have their life history recorded in an accessible, high quality and flexible format.
73. The Adoption Support Service undertakes assessments of need for adoption support, including financial support. The Adoption Support Service also undertakes assessments of need for Special Guardianship support services.
74. The Adoption Support Service is also responsible for:
  - developing a range of adoption support services to meet the needs of adopted children and adoptive families e.g. support groups, newsletters and training for adopters and staff
  - preparing Adoption Support Plans for children and reviewing the plans at regular intervals, including financial support, as required
  - accessing specialist therapeutic help for children
  - accessing counselling and advice for adoptive parents
  - managing the post-box service (to enable adopted children to maintain indirect contact with their birth families)
  - reviewing direct contact arrangements
  - enabling the access to universal services and benefits for those involved in adoption.
  - organising training events and conferences for adopters and staff
  - providing practical help and support to adoptive families
  - Preparing Special guardianship support plans and reviewing them as required.
  - Providing support to birth relatives acting as a single point of contact to provide information and advice to adopters, adopted young people, birth relatives and special guardians.

## **Systems for monitoring and evaluating adoption services**

75. An annual report and a 6 monthly interim report are presented to the senior management group and Elected Members, detailing the performance of the Adoption Agency.
76. The supervision and annual appraisal system for all staff assures the monitoring of individual performance and identification of training needs to compensate for any gaps in knowledge.
77. A File Audit system is in place for managers to regularly check on the quality of children's adoption records, adopters' files, adoption support modules and home finding files, to ensure that all departmental policies and procedures are being followed.
78. Training on adoption issues is part of the 'training pathway' for staff involved in adoption work and staff complete post-training evaluation forms, which feed into reports produced by the Staff Development Team.
79. The Senior Independent Reviewing Officer produces 6 monthly reports on the work of the Service, including the progress on permanence plans being achieved.
80. An Adoption Recruitment Strategy is in place to identify and inform recruitment needs for adoptive parents, based on the profile of the children needing adoption. This is reviewed and updated annually and is being used to inform our prioritisation principles for assessing applicants.
81. The Adoption Team routinely review and evaluate the quality of the Adoption and Permanence training courses for adoptive applicants, including seeking and collating feedback from applicants.
82. Contracts with VASAs are reviewed 6 monthly and statistics provided quarterly to monitor performance, quality of service and ensure value for money. Feedback system is in place for adopters attending training sessions including information sessions and permanence training.
83. The Home-finder Management Group meets quarterly to track and monitor the children and adopters currently in the adoption process, with particular focus on suggesting ways forward those without an identified placement.
84. Adoption service targets are reviewed annually.

## **The Service to Prospective Adopters**

85. The procedures for recruiting, preparing, assessing, approving and supporting prospective adopters are set out in detail in our Adoption Agency procedures, which are available on the intranet. In brief the process is as follows:

- All enquiries regarding adoption are welcome; the adoption team operate an open and inclusive enquiry process. All enquirers speak with a specialist adoption worker. There is access to information about adoption and to the adoption team via an enquiry line, via the website or via direct office number.
  - Within 5 working days of their enquiry, all enquirers are sent an information pack about adoption, including:
    - a letter of invitation to attend an Information Session
    - our information leaflet for prospective adopters
    - our policy with regard to smoking
    - the leaflet on adoption
    - our criteria for prioritising assessments
    - Information about the complaints procedure
    - The statement of purpose
    - Information about the Independent Reviewing Mechanism
  
- Enquirers are invited to attend an Information Session about adoption, to meet adopters and Adoption Social Workers. The session provides the opportunity to learn more about adoption and about the necessity for us to prioritise applications, to meet the needs of the type of children requiring adoption (i.e. older children with challenging behaviour, sibling groups and children with special needs). Information sessions are held at least every 2 months.
  
- All applicants have to meet the standard requirements set out in the regulations, there are no automatic exclusions. Our own prioritisation principles based upon the needs of the children needing adoptive placements may include giving priority to applicants who:
  - Are prepared to consider a child up to five years of age or more
  - Wish to be considered for a sibling group of two or more children.
  - Are open to contact with birth families
  - Might consider a child with complex needs or disability
  
- Those interested in knowing more are invited to complete an Adoption Enquiry Form and, if they meet the current prioritisation requirements, an Initial Assessment will be offered.
  
- Those wishing to proceed to the next stage and assessed as suitable to proceed through the initial assessment process, are asked to complete a formal application form and are allocated an Adoption Social Worker to work with them throughout the assessment process, which involves a number of home visits, CRB and other checks, references and a full medical. The adoption social worker will keep applicants updated at all times regarding their approval process.
  
- Applicants are invited to attend a Preparation Course during their assessment process, which provides more detailed information and helps

people decide whether adoption is for them. The preparation training includes other adopters, the views of adopted children and birth parents perspectives.

- The assessment must be completed and presented to the Adoption Panel within a maximum of 8 months of the receipt of the formal application form.
- Applicants receive a copy of their completed assessment report and are invited to comment on it, within 10 working days of the panel meeting.
- Applicants are invited to attend Adoption Panel when their approval is being considered. Their Adoption Social Worker will help to prepare them for attendance and will provide them with a leaflet about the Adoption Panel.
- The Panel will make a recommendation as to whether the applicants are suitable to be approved as adopters. The Panel must consider and may give matching advice to the Agency about the number of children, age range, gender, likely needs and background that the prospective adopters may be suitable to adopt.
- After the Agency Decision-Maker has made the decision on their approval, based on the Panel's recommendation the prospective adopters must be notified of the decision verbally within 2 days and in writing within 7 working days of the agency decision maker receiving a final copy of the panel minutes.
- If the applicants are not deemed suitable, they will be able to have the decision reviewed by the Independent Reviewing Mechanism. A detailed letter setting out the reasons for the decision will be sent to the applicants.
- Following their approval, the prospective adopters' Adoption social worker keeps in touch with them and ensures they have access to information about the children needing placements (through the "*Home-finder*" newsletter ).
- If no child has been placed with them within a year, there must be a review of their approval as suitable to adopt. After the review the prospective adopters must be informed whether they remain suitable to adopt.
- When a 'link' with a child is identified, the Adoption Support Co-ordinator will make an assessment of the adoption support needs of the placement, together with the child's social worker, the adopters and their social worker.
- This information is incorporated into the Adoption Support Plan which, together with the Adoption Placement Report, is presented to Adoption Panel when the formal 'match' is being considered.

- Adopters may also request an assessment for adoption support services at any future point, following the making of an Adoption Order. The assessment will be conducted by an Adoption Support Co-ordinator and the Department has the discretion to decide whether to provide adoption support services.

86. Wiltshire adoption service fully subscribes to the Adopters Charter which was published by the children's minister Tim Loughton 2011.

### **The Complaints Procedure**

87. In seeking to constantly improve the quality of the adoption service, the Department for Children and Education welcomes and encourages feedback from service users, providers and partners.

88. The Department recognises that children, their, birth parents, adoptive parents and prospective adopters are best placed to identify the strengths and deficiencies of the adoption service and, therefore, to inform the changes and developments needed to ensure continuing improvement.

89. There is a clear, robust framework in place for responding to and ensuring that the views of the parties to the adoption process are heard and the Children's Guide provides information to children about how to make a complaint.

90. In most adoption situations, areas of potential tension or conflict can be minimised through careful planning, open communication and early discussion/negotiation involving the child's social worker, the adopters' Social Worker, the Adoption Support Co-ordinator, as appropriate.

91. Any of the parties to the adoption process can use the Children Act Complaints Procedure if they have a dissatisfaction or concern with the service provided. This includes a complaint by:

- any child who has been placed for adoption by Wiltshire Council (including adults who were formerly adopted)
- a birth parent of a child who has been or is being adopted
- adoptive parents
- prospective adoptive parents during the preparation/assessment process and after approval whilst awaiting a placement
- one person on behalf of another e.g. an adoptive parent on behalf of an adopted child.

92. Advice on making a complaint can be sought from the Customer Complaints Manager at Wiltshire Council who can be contacted on Tel: 01225 718446 / 713020.

93. There is a leaflet available for children and young people, which explains the complaints process and how to make a complaint. Information regarding



complaints, comments and seeking advice is contained in the children's guide to adoption and the children's guide to adoption support.

### **The Registration Authority**

94. Ofsted is an independent non-governmental public body responsible for monitoring, regulating and inspecting adoption services, under the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000. Their aim is to “inspect and regulate to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people and in education and skills for learners of all ages”.
95. The address of the local Ofsted area office is:

Ofsted South Regional Centre  
Freshford House  
Redcliffe Way  
Bristol BS1 6NL

The national Ofsted address is:  
Ofsted  
Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester M2 7LA

Email: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)

Tel: 08456 404045 about education, adult skills, or local authority children's services

Tel: 08456 404040 about anything else

Minicom /TTD: 0161 618 8524

**Appendix 3:  
Adoption Panel statistics 2011 - 2012**

**Children:**

		2010/2011	2011/2012
<b>Should be Placed for Adoption</b>			
<b>Legal Status at That Time</b>			
	Section 20	1	4
	Interim Care Order	11	22
	Care Order	3	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>27</b>

		2010/2011	2011/2012
<b>Should be Placed for Adoption</b>			
<b>Ethnic Origin</b>			
	White British	15	24
	Mixed/Other	6	3

		2010/2011	2011/2012
<b>Should be Placed for Adoption</b>			
<b>Age</b>			
	0-12 Months	6	5
	12-24 Months	6	4
	2-4 Years	2	15
	5-10 Years	1	3
	11 Years and Over	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>27</b>

		2010/2011	2011/2012
<b>Children Matched</b>			
<b>Age</b>			
	0-12 Months	4	2
	12-24 Months	3	5
	2-4 Years	6	10
	5-10 Years	7	2
	11 Years and Over	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>19</b>

		2010/2011	2011/2012
<b>Children Matched</b>			
<b>Ethnic Origin</b>			
	White British	18	17
	Mixed / Other Ethnicity	4	2

		2010/2011	2011/2012
SWAC Matches			
		0	1

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Nat. Adoption Register Matches			
		0	0

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Children Matched Out Of County			
		3	0

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Children for Whom Adoption Achieved by Age at Adoption Order			
<b>Aged</b>			
	0-12 Months	0	1
	12-24 Months	2	2
	2-4 Years	6	12
	5-10 Years	6	2
	11 Years and Over	1	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Adoption Order by Ethnic Origin of Child			
<b>Ethnic Origin</b>			
	White British	14	15
	Mixed / Other Ethnicity	0	2

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Rescission of Decision to Place for Adoption			
		5	5

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Formally Placed for Adoption within 12 Months of Decision that they Should be Placed for Adoption			
		12	13

**Adopters:**

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Adopters Approved			
		20	17

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Adopters Approved; Ethnic Origin			
Ethnic Origin of Individuals			
	White British	38	29
	Mixed/Other Ethnicity	2	2

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Approved Adopters; Relationships of Adopters			
	Single	0	2
	Married/Co-Habiting	19	15
	Civil Partnership	1	0

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Approved Adopters that Have Withdrawn			
		1	0

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Rescission of Approval by Panel			
			3

		2010/2011	2011/2012
Brief Assessments			
		1	0

## **Appendix 4: Adoption Agency Update Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012**

### **Introduction**

1. The 2011 Statutory Adoption Guidance and the 2011 Adoption Minimum Standards place a requirement on local authority adoption services to ensure that the executive side of the Council receives a written report on the management, outcomes and financial state of the adoption agency to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users. They must also satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration (Minimum Standard 25.6; Statutory Adoption Guidance 3.3, and 5.39). This report has been prepared to enable them to do so and update them on the activity within the adoption agency so far for the year 2012/13.
2. The 2011 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/Adoption-NMS.pdf>
3. The 2011 Statutory Adoption Guidance can be accessed at <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/a/statutory%20guidance.pdf>
4. So far this year has been a very busy year for the adoption agency in relation to the increase numbers of children with adoption as their permanency plan and also in relation to enquiries from prospective adopters. In relation to the latter, it appears that a combination of 'drip drip' marketing and publicity as a result of the Government's agenda in relation to adoption has meant that we have had a higher number of enquiries than at this point in the previous year, 82 so far. To enable the assessment of a larger more diverse pool of adopters to meet the growing needs of the children requiring placement we are contemplating commissioning out some assessments of prospective adopters to independent social workers in order to respond to increasing demand and to ensure assessments are completed in a timely manner and we are confident that we will exceed 2011/12 approvals in 2012/13, with 20 sets of adopters approved so far this year and 23 assessments in process.
5. This does raise a potential resource issue for the adoption service regarding training and supporting adopters and adoptive families. Assessment and approval is only part of the process, other parts of the service remain in-house and require increased resources, particularly adoption support resources.
6. Work is under way and needs to be continued regarding priorities for assessment.
7. It has also been a busy year for national development and local scrutiny / inspection. Both have been continuous throughout the last 6 months.
8. As previously reported the government published the Children in Care and Adoption performance tables for England in late 2011 and included 3 key

performance indicators on for adoption; the % of adoptions from care; % of special guardianship orders from care; and, % of adopted children placed within 12 months of decision that a child should be adopted.

9. The scorecard publication was set against the backdrop of the Government adoption action plan: tackling delay, and the drive for a sense of urgency in the placement of children for adoption.
10. In March 2012 Ofsted carried out an inspection of Wiltshire Council Safeguarding and Looked After Children's services. The inspection looked at the contribution made by relevant services to ensure that children and young people are properly safeguarded and the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The adoption team was involved in this inspection regarding edge of care provision. The report highlighted areas where the service was found to be inadequate as well as areas where the service is both adequate and outstanding. A number of recommendations were made and the council and all the public sector partners involved in the safeguarding and the looked after children service continue to work together to make improvements. Action was taken immediately and the Council committed resources to ensure children and young people in Wiltshire receive the best possible care and support.
11. The Government published the revised Adoption Scorecards in May 2012 which allow authorities to measure their performance and compare against others. These include key indicators measuring how swiftly children are placed for adoption, with government thresholds set for 2 indicators measuring the time it takes for a child from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family and the time it takes to match a child to a family following the court decision regarding a placement order.
12. Wiltshire's performance in the 2008/11 scorecard was below the national average for the number of days between a child first coming into care and moving in with their adoptive family (placement for adoption) the threshold was met for the time between the LA receiving a placement order or consent to place a child for adoption and the child moving in with their adoptive family. The scorecard raised concerns about delays for children in achieving adoption particularly when set alongside the length of time care proceedings were taking in the local court.
13. The data used in the scorecard was historical and it was noted related to a time before Wiltshire had a specialist adoption service. There were 4 cases in particular where delayed progression was impacting on adoption performance scores in 2012. The analysis of individual cases was very useful and highlighted areas of potential delay to tackle and monitor. Out of 50 in the cohort (2008/11), 25 were not placed within 625 days (England 3 year average). Each of the 25 cases has been considered on a case-by-case basis, to see if there are any recurring themes. Within the 25 there were a number of themes identified that had caused delay:

- Sibling groups, some of whom needed to be placed together and some of whom didn't. This needed to be assessed and a clear decision made regarding how the children were to be placed and therefore the adoption placement required.
  - Complex needs of individual children and young people causing delays with finding appropriate adopters, linking and matching (e.g. complex health needs, challenging behavior and oppositional behavior).
  - Legal complexities where parents absent themselves from proceedings and/or where family members come forward to offer to care for a child at a late stage in the process thus delaying legal progression.
  - Legal delays caused by lack of court time and/or legal availability.
  - Repeated expert assessments ordered by courts regarding parenting skills/slow appointment of experts causing delays in legal progression.
  - Large number of assessments which haven't been carried out by Social Workers in a timely way and to the quality/standard expected by the Courts. This can mean that at the point of a child being placed for adoption, a Social Worker needs to go back and do more work. Better management oversight of Social Workers has already been identified as a priority following the Ofsted inspection and forms part of the Social Care Improvement Plan. Better IRO oversight of the child's plan is also a priority.
14. Some of the children in these cases were affected by several of these delay factors.
15. Wiltshire's 3 year average between 2008-2011 of days between entering care and moving in with adoptive family is 803. This is above the England average of 625 and above the Department for Education (DfE) threshold for 2010/13 of 639. Provisional Data for 2009/12 shows an improving picture. There are a number of reasons for our performance 2008/11. The first is to do with complexities in individual cases. The second reason is to do with delays happening at identifiable stages within the process between the date a child becomes LAC and the date of moving in with their adoptive family. The 2009/12 cohort includes 3 young people where delays are known: 1 due largely to complex health needs/life limiting illness; and 2 due to complex legalities due to kinship inter-country adoption. If these 3 young people are taken out of the cohort, the provisional 3 year average drops further to 627 days (above the England average by only 2 days but below the threshold). It is important to that note that many, if not all, Local Authorities will have similar cases which will affect their timeliness and are not a reflection of poor practice but rather reflective of the complexity of some cases.
16. In response to the scorecard information immediate changes and additions were made to adoption team practice to improve the pace of adoption applications. The team also immediately began to offer increased consultation to colleagues involved in placing children for adoption and regarding adoption support.
17. In May 2012 Wiltshire Council adoption services were offered and agreed to be the pilot authority for the diagnostic assessment developed to support local

authorities to explore how delay can be minimised for children who need permanence through adoption.

18. The diagnostic team was in Wiltshire for 5 days and met with the adoption service, members of the safeguarding teams, the County Solicitor, the fostering service manager, Independent Reviewing Officers, the Adoption Panel Chair and two groups of adopters. They considered a small number of case files and spoke to other adopters and birth mothers by telephone. They also had the benefit of the recent Ofsted inspection report on safeguarding and looked after children services, the Safeguarding Improvement Plan, a review of the Independent Safeguarding Unit, the Children in Care Commissioning Plan, and a briefing on the 2012 Wiltshire Adoption Scorecard together with a draft Improvement Plan.
19. Over the course of the week the diagnostic team reported having met with positive and engaged staff, who told us that they were aware that there had been a lack of clear and purposeful planning for children in need and/or care in Wiltshire but that things had been improving since a restructure into specialist teams in 2010, and that there had been additional acceleration to the change agenda since the Ofsted Inspection in March 2012.
20. The assessors were impressed by the high morale of the Adoption Team and their enthusiastic and creative approach to the recruitment, assessment, training and support of carers, and their openness to ideas for improvement. They noted that staff were able to offer individualised support packages for adoptive placements as well as a wide range of group support, and that some of this activity is part of the team development plan (Child Appreciation Days for example). They commented that adoption team staff are informed about and keen to be involved in parallel planning for adoption at an early stage and that this sometimes worked well but is currently sporadic within the agency.
21. They came upon a number of examples of what they described as good and innovative practice: the Adoption Panel receives a summary of the LAC review for each child whose plan is adoption; the Panel also uses a spreadsheet to track the progress of children whose plan is adoption, prospective adopters and approved adopters; adopters spoke of assessments, once started, taking place in a timely way.
22. The feedback from the diagnostic assessment highlighted the following areas for improvement
  - More rigorous and timely care planning with a focus on planning for permanency with clear outcomes for children
  - Reduced use of Section 20 CCA 1989 (voluntary accommodation)
  - Greater use of family group conferencing
  - Ensuring that parents are aware of what they need to do to change in order to protect their children and by when and not being over optimistic in relation to parenting capacity



- Wiltshire has had a culture of family support and reunification that was embedded. This sometimes meant that there were too many Initial Assessments followed by brief interventions and case closure.
- Case planning needed more rigor, focusing on clear outcomes. Staff were inclined to be over-optimistic about the capacity of some parents to make the changes necessary to parent their children adequately.
- They were insufficiently focused on the cumulative impact of adverse care giving environments on the children experiencing them.
- There was over-use of Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 as a route into care and pre-proceedings were often later than they should have been.
- Reunification was seen as the best route to permanency even when it had been previously tried and failed.
- Family Group Conferences they were not used often enough or early enough. This lack of rigorous planning for children described in the Ofsted report and confirmed to the diagnostic team by staff means that children often wait far too long while attempts are made to support their parents to care for them, thereby missing the chance to be placed at an earlier stage with adopters and reducing the positive outcomes for them.
- The impression was that the cultural change was less rapid than the intellectual acknowledgement of the need for the change.

### 23. **Outcomes for birth families**

- Generally, parents do want the best for their children and an early discussion about adoption as a serious option for the child may help birth parents to recognise their limitations.

### 24. **Outcomes for adopters**

- Many adopters described very positive and supportive relationships with the Adoption Team, and had experienced high levels of adoption support after placement.
- Some adopters spoke about delays, poor communication, an excessively complicated system even second time around.

**25. Vision, leadership and strategy**

- The diagnostic team was impressed by the clear vision of senior managers within the authority, and the support and commitment of elected members.

**26. Working together, within the authority, partners and other systems**

- It was felt that some front line workers did not think about permanence at an early enough stage. There is room for significant systemic improvement in how different teams within Children's Social Care Services work together. The Adoption Service already works closely at an early stage with some teams and some workers. This good practice needs to be rolled out across the operational teams.
- The Independent Reviewing Officers welcome their move into Performance and Commissioning, believing that this will give them more authority to challenge and drive plans for children. Their position in the structure would benefit from more clarity and influence.
- The Adoption Service described good relationships with PACT (Parents and Children Together), the voluntary organisation commissioned to work with birth families. Their work was praised by a birth parent.
- Legal and medical advice to panel was thought to be of a high standard and flexible in approach.
- There was seen to be a significant gap in the availability of CAMHS support specifically focused on adopted children and their parents. The local authority needs to outline clearly the type and level of support it considers is needed and consider how this should be funded.

**27. Managing resources**

- The diagnostic team was aware that the number of children becoming looked after has more than doubled since 2008 with consequent pressure on resources at all levels.
- Adoption is a cost effective resource for local authorities. It is also extremely effective in terms of positive outcomes for children, especially when children are placed with adopters at an early stage. If plans can be made for children in a timely and effective way, with due regard to the rights and support needs of birth families, and there is sufficient choice of skilled and supported adopters so that a suitable match can be made, then adoption is a very good use of resources.
- We heard from the Adoption Team of staff going long distances to do a focused assessment of possible adopters but there is evidence from adopters that the process for recruitment, assessment and training could be improved.

**28. Service delivery, workforce development and effective practice**

- There is a need for more robust and focused care planning for children at all stages in their career through the system. Plans are already underway to achieve this, including an investment in training and development.

- As with many authorities, specialist teams such as adoption, fostering, family support, away from the front-line, have experienced staff. Front-line operational teams are more likely to have newly qualified and less experienced staff.
- The diagnostic team identified some cultural, systemic and structural areas for improvement.

29. **Wiltshire Council responded to the diagnostic assessment report and proposed an action plan:**

- The permanency policy and guidance -would be signed off promptly at the Safeguarding Operational Improvement Group. There will be staff briefings on the policy and a robust plan for speedy implementation. There will be an emphasis on pace and high expectations.
- Training event-there will be a training event by the end of June 2012 focusing on clear expectations on assessment, care planning and permanency.
- A dedicated Home-finder will be appointed within the Adoption team and focus on finding families for individual children. Work on this had already begun.
- As part of the review of the Independent Scrutiny Unit the level of Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Chairs will be reviewed. IROs will take a pro-active role in the 2nd Review, track children in a systematic way and be expected to challenge and support operational staff.
- The balance of staff in different teams will be reviewed.
- There will be a workforce and training analysis to ensure a mix of staff with skill and expertise in planning for permanence especially at the front door. As part of the Referral and Assessment Improvement Plan additional capacity and experience has been recruited.
- An adopter's Reference Group will be set up, with representatives of the local authority, partner agencies and adopters. Use their ongoing feedback and good ideas to improve services.

30. Immediately following the diagnostic assessment an improvement plan was put in place, in September the social care improvement notice was amended to include improvement in adoption practice stating that on the basis of evidence contained in:

- The adoption scorecard published by the Department of Education in May 2012.
- The Outcomes UK diagnostic assessment of Wiltshire's adoption service dated May 2012.

31. The notice put in place the following measures required for the Council to comply with the further Improvement Notice 25.10.12.

32. The Council must work with their partners to take action to:

- Address the areas for consideration identified in the Outcomes UK diagnostic assessment to tackle delays in children being adopted, and
  - Put in place arrangements to sustain and build on the improvements secured.
33. As the result of all of the above national development and local scrutiny there is an improvement plan in place which is monitored on a monthly basis by the agency and by the Safeguarding Improvement Board (SIB), the plan is wholly reflective of all of the recommendations made.
34. Within one month of the date of the Improvement Notice, the Council had to agree a plan with the Improvement Board which would improve the performance of the adoption service and which addressed the concerns set out in the Outcomes UK Diagnostic Report and the Council's Adoption Scorecard. The plan set out milestone and performance indicators aimed at improving the performance of the adoption service and reducing delay. Progress against the performance indicator standards, targets and timescales must be reported at each meeting of the SIB and action taken to address performance concerns and where standards, targets and timescales are not being met.
35. The noticed stressed that the Council should reduce the time taken to place a child for adoption from the point that the child comes into the care of the local authority. In doing so the Council should work towards meeting the timescales set out in The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations and Statutory Adoption Guidance revised in February 2011.
36. The draft Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan is organised around 4 strategic improvement goals which are as follows:
- Ensure timely and decisive permanency planning including long term placement stability.
  - Ensure robust systems and quality assurance processes are in place to monitor progress.
  - Ensure we have an adoption team with the right culture and skills and appropriate support.
  - Secure a customer focused adoption service by valuing adopters and prospective adopters.
37. In June 2012 the adoption team plan was further updated to include actions required identified in the adoption improvement plan and work began immediately on the developments required:
- Continued development of the adopters charter- in process
  - Setting up of an adopters reference group-completed and meeting
  - Increased gathering and use of stakeholder feedback-in process
  - Review of recruitment and enquiry processes (linked to adoption action plan)-in development

- Creating a specialist home finder post and procedure around this – completed and progressing
  - Setting up concurrent planning processes opportunities /fostering for adoption-in process
  - Improve recruitment/website/media support for adopters-in process
  - Embedding new practice regulations and guidance as they emerge over 2013/14
38. Over the last 3 months we have been developing 3 specialist posts to improve the services provided to children and carers:
- Psychological hours to support foster carers and adopters, improve placement stability and adoption support
  - A specialist training post to embed training further for foster carers and adopters
  - A concurrency worker post - to develop placement services in line with the adoption action plan and improvement plan recommendations. It was noted at this stage that the recruitment, assessment, support and training of concurrent carers will place additional strain on staffing resources across fostering and adoption teams. It is hoped that this post will provide a seamless support service across both teams.
39. The job descriptions are written for these posts and they are currently being evaluated.
40. Work on the enquiry and recruitment processes has begun, the assistant team managers in the fostering and adoption teams are reviewing processes and developing practice. The document currently out for consultation regarding proposals for fostering and adoption presents some challenges to existing models regarding the front door of placement services for enquirers and is quite prescriptive about how the enquiry (stage one) should be dealt with and the time scales for this. The model that seems to fit best with these proposals is a shared front door for fostering and adoption and concurrency, staffed by those who can answer questions about all of the caring options and can begin the initial assessment of applicants.
41. The adoption team manager and fostering services manager have undertaken developmental work regarding concurrency and dual approvals: looking at recruitment, models of practice, assessment and training tools. This will inform the future development of these areas of practice, increase the availability of this type of placement for children needing permanence and improve timeliness of placement for these children.
42. The adoption team has been working to further identify support services accessible to adoptive parents particularly those struggling with the complex behaviours of their (often early adolescent) children. Parenting programme and safe handling training have been identified and are being explored as options.

43. Although children's decisions have largely been removed from the panel function this has not reduced the amount of panel meetings to date. The adoption panel continues to meet twice per month with full agendas, considering approvals of prospective adopters and matching of children to adoptive families, the panel will continue to consider the adoption plans for children relinquished for adoption.
44. The adoption team has continued to have periods of being short staffed 2 further members of the team have resigned and an assistant team manager could not be recruited until 1.10.12. Latterly the adoption team manger has been recruited to a post outside Wiltshire Council and will be leaving in early December 2012.
45. There is currently a DfE document out for consultation regarding fostering and adoption practice. The document proposes several major changes to the preparation and assessment process for adoptive parents including to timescales and to adoption panel function, quoracy and QA role. The proposals in this document will bring with them major development work for adoption agencies going forward including the implementation of several new and scrutinised processes. The adoption team, fostering team and the adoption panel have been considering the consultation document and responding accordingly to the proposals.
46. The report to the safeguarding improvement board 2.10.12 outlined the progress made in implementing the Permanency and Adoption Improvement Plan. There had been a significant amount of activity across children's services since the previous (SIB) meeting and this has continued. Emphasis has been placed on developing a clear understanding of permanency and providing clarity across the whole service to ensure commitment to the changes required. There has been a specific focus on developing a range of monitoring and quality assurance systems. Findings from audits and regular management monitoring will be available for subsequent SIB meetings. Work has also continued on developing a customer care culture.

<b>Improvements noted in the report</b>	<b>Evidence to support improvements</b>	<b>Were actions taken to the timescale outlined in the plan</b>
Implementation and monitoring of compliance with the permanency policy	Meeting held in September with senior managers from Independent Safeguarding Unit (ISU), Operations and Placement services where processes for implementing the permanency policy and the improvement of timeliness and quality of permanency plans was agreed.	Yes
Development of quality assurance and monitoring systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality assurance and monitoring role of ISU clarified including regular reporting arrangements.</li> <li>• The Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are taking ownership of tracking children and questioning permanence planning at the 2<sup>nd</sup> LAC review in line with requirements.</li> </ul>	Yes
Developing an Adoption service with the right culture and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Adoption Team has delivered 3 workshops for social care staff covering life story, later life letter writing and indirect contact.</li> <li>• 3 staff sessions have been held about attachment.</li> <li>• Tutorials on adoption and permanence matters have been commissioned via BAAF and Outcomes UK. Delivery will commence in October 2012.</li> <li>• Basic training attended by 181 social care staff in July covered permanency planning.</li> </ul>	Yes
Developing a customer focused Adoption Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback forms for use with adopters/others attending Adoption Panel developed are in use.</li> <li>• Adoption Panel has begun to more closely scrutinize the timeliness of decisions for children and prospective adopters.</li> </ul>	Yes

## **Permanency Planning**

47. There has been a significant amount of activity across children's services in order to drive forward improvements in the permanency planning process. A meeting was held with both senior and team/resource managers across children's services in early September to agree the process for implementation of the permanency policy and to develop processes for quality assurance and monitoring policy compliance.
48. Progress will be monitored by the Independent Reviewing Officer manager and respective team managers. Reports will be provided for Social Care and Integrated Youth Senior Management Team Performance Meetings which take place each month.
49. A dedicated Home Finder for adoption has been in post since 1.9.12. As previously reported the post was created within existing adoption team resources. The Home Finder is invited to attend all second reviews where adoption may be considered as part of the permanency plan for a child. The Home Finder will also assist case holders through the adoption placement finding process as required. The Home Finder post has responsibility for engaging with teams across the authority and for improving permanence planning practice. The Home Finder will assist case holders with managing complex family finding and identifying placements for more complex children where placement options may be limited due to health, disability or high level challenging or risk taking behaviour may be a factor. The home finder is the contact and liaison for SWAC, voluntary adoption agency and national adoption register family finding.
50. The duty officer for Fostering services now attends all reviews where long term fostering is the permanency plan this role continues to be developed.
51. Both Concurrent Planning and "Fostering for Adoption" processes have been developed. Concurrent carers are being recruited.
52. Further work is taking place on transfer points for cases between teams a number of children in care have been identified to transfer from the safeguarding teams to the Children in Care (CiC) teams. This should ensure a better service for all CiC, including permanence planning.

## **Quality Assurance**

53. Performance information regarding adoption is already collated on a monthly basis. The Safeguarding Improvement Board key data set includes the three DfE scorecard measures around timeliness and an indicator on permanency planning.
54. Information is also presented on how long it takes prospective adopters to be approved. In addition information is monitored by the Adoption Panel and Social Care and IYS performance management meeting on whether children are adopted within 12 months of the "best interest" decision being made and the number of special guardianships that are agreed.
55. The Adoption Panel currently receive data reports quarterly. These reports provide information on children where the recommendation is that they should be placed for adoption. The Adoption Panel chair will now report to the agency decision maker cases where drift is occurring.
56. The following quality assurance and monitoring systems have been developed:



- The quality assurance and monitoring role of the ISU has been clarified. Timetable for audits and reporting of findings has been agreed. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are taking ownership of tracking children and questioning permanence planning at the 2<sup>nd</sup> LAC review.
- Quality assurance processes have been reviewed and revised. Audit formats and processes have been agreed and timescales for completing regular audits have been established.
- The Adoption Panel is now taking a more active role in monitoring timescales for matching children and approving adopters.
- Cases where drift has occurred have now been identified. An audit of all 11 cases was undertaken by the Head of Service for Children in Care and Head of Service for Community Safeguarding on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012. In all cases the current case holder attended to discuss the reason for drift and present their plan for permanence for each child. Resources and support were discussed. The findings from the audit and case presentations will be presented to the next Social Care and Integrated Youth Management Team meeting. Similar audits will take place each month.

### **Getting the right culture and skills**

57. The Head of Service has attended Adoption Team meetings. Within the team and the service the importance of and need for improvement is constantly reinforced and owned. Throughout the team has been involved in developing and implementing the Improvement Plan. The Director of Children's services is due to visit the team in before the end of the year.
58. The Adoption Team are delivering workshops and consultation on permanence and adoption related issues. These are featured on the training pathway and dates are set for 2012/13.
59. The Adoption Team, including adoption support workers, are providing consultation opportunities, workshops and training for all social care teams on later life letters, adoption support planning, attachment theory, e-safety and life-story work. Dates are set for 2012/13.
60. The Adoption Support co-ordinators and Wiltshire PACT partners are to attend social care team meetings with PACT Wiltshire workers to promote services for birth parents. Dates are set for visits during 2012/13.
61. All workers in the adoption team fully appreciate and understand the need for improvements and the team share the responsibility with colleagues across children's social care services for this.
62. Tutorials on adoption and permanence matters have been commissioned via BAAF and Outcomes UK. Delivery of the training programme will commence in October 2012.

### **Customer focused Adoption Service**

63. Feedback forms for use by adopters and others attending Adoption Panel has been further developed and is in use.
64. The adoption panel chair, agency adviser and agency decision maker meet 6 monthly to scrutinise the feedback from those attending panel meetings and to QA the paperwork being presented to the panel. This directly feeds back into panel and social work practice.

65. Improvements have been made to the initial enquiry process regarding timeliness, criteria for adoption enquiries and information.
66. An Adopter's Reference Group has been established the first meeting took place 26th September 2012.
67. Discussions are underway to improve the website and access to online support for adopters. A consultation/feedback package for adopters is being researched and will be set up.

### **Other developments**

68. Over the next few months the focus across children's social care services will continue to be on addressing the culture, leadership, service delivery design and practice issues which have been identified.
69. The Manager of the IRO service and Service Manager for Family Placement Service were tasked with identifying cases where there appeared to be no realistic permanency plan or where the plan for permanency appeared to drift significantly. 7 families (11 children) were initially identified.
70. Permanency plan audits by Heads of Service will be carried out each month.
71. Strengthened quality assurance, including performance data and practice audit oversight will be in place to closely monitor progress and take additional actions if and when required.
72. A data set is due to be presented by the Head of Service for Children in Care at the monthly Senior Management Team performance meeting.
73. A further scorecard is expected to be published in October 2012. When received, the Indicators will be actively interrogated.
74. For the future there is continued improvement required, the adoption service is rising to this challenge and is committed to it.