



AGENDA ITEM 7

**Annual Report of the
Adoption Panel 2013 – 2014
and Targets for 2014 – 2015**

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1. Introduction

North Somerset Council was originally established as an Adoption Agency within the meaning of the Adoption Act 1976 on 01 April 1996, when North Somerset became a Unitary Authority.

All Adoption Agencies have been required to have Adoption Panels since the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 came into force in 1984. From 30 December 2005, when the Adoption and Children Act 2002 was implemented in full, new regulations replaced these. The recent revision of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 has proposed changes to Adoption Panels, which can now include a larger membership, no tenure of office, nor a requirement to have an Elected Member of the Local Authority on the Panel. This provides an opportunity to develop a Panel with greater breadth of experience with a range of members who can be called upon to offer specific expertise and knowledge as relevant. These members will be on a 'central list' and will be subject to the usual checks and references as other Panel members.

The purpose of this report is to advise Members of the work of the Panel from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014, and to provide information on adoption activity within North Somerset over the same period.

2. Panel Membership and Meetings

The Panel meets three weekly and held 18 meetings between April 2013 and the end of March 2014. The Panel workload has remained high and the Panel has been willing to arrange additional meetings to meet new timescales for prospective adopters' approval and matchings.

According to the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 and updated Guidance 2011, the Panel is considered as quorate providing there are five members present, including the Chair or Vice Chair, the Adoption Social Worker and one Independent Member.

As at 31 March 2014, the Panel comprised the following members:

- Pat Richards Independent Chair
- Jeannie Osmond Independent Member / Vice Chair
- Jean Cartmell Adoption Social Worker
- Debbie Havill Adoption Social Worker
- Tim Maddison Adoption Social Worker
- Dr Sara Carter Medical Adviser
- Cllr Ann Harley Elected Member
- Jane Cosnett Independent Member
- Nasareen Ahmed Independent Member
- Maggie Pitts Independent Member and Voluntary Agency
- Adrian Male Independent Member

The Legal Adviser to the Panel is Lorraine Sherman, with support from Bridget Nicholls and Trish Wood in Lorraine's absence, or if the Adviser is providing legal advice to a case during Court proceedings.

The Social Work adviser to the Panel is Kirsty Howie, Service Leader for the Resource Service.

The Panel Administrator is the Personal Assistant to the Assistant Director (Strategy, Commissioning & Performance). The Panel Administrator liaises closely with the Adoption Team Leader to ensure that all matching of children and prospective adopters is added to the Adoption Panel agenda as soon as they are ready to proceed.

The communication between the Adoption Team Leader, the Adoption Panel Administrator and the Adoption and Childcare Teams is vital to ensure that there are no delays in progressing any plans for adoption.

One of the Panel members has personal experience of adoption and she is given the opportunity to draw on her own experience during Panel discussion. There is one member of the Panel who has both experience of Social Work and educational needs of children, which adds another dimension to Panel deliberations. We also have two members of the Panel, one working for a voluntary Adoption Agency and one working for an Independent Fostering Agency, who bring an independent, professional viewpoint.

The Panel is aware of its 'quality assurance' role in relation to practice in order to inform continuous service development and improvement. Issues raised by the Panel are followed up with individual staff by the social work adviser or are raised at relevant fora where policies and procedures can be updated and improved.

The Social Work Adviser to the Panel oversees the quality of reports presented to Panel in order to ensure they reach the required standard. Over the last reporting period, the Panel has recognised that discussions at meetings have become significantly more involved, and a number of particularly complex cases have been presented. The Panel has considered how best to manage this and has agreed that a maximum of four cases will be presented at any one Panel. This would not preclude the Panel from extending this if the need arose. The Panel will continue to seek feedback from Social Workers and prospective adopters who attend meetings and will use their comments to enhance professional development and ensure that the Panel functions at the highest possible level.

Prospective adopters are invited to attend both the approval Panel meeting and the matching Panel meeting. Prospective adopters are encouraged and welcomed by the Panel and their contribution valued. Prior to the Panel meeting, prospective adopters are briefed by their Adoption Social Worker, and the Panel Administrator provides them with written information in the form of a booklet about the Panel. This is updated as and when required.

3. Functions of the Panel

This covers two main areas: approval of prospective adopters and matching children to adoptive families.

3.1 The Suitability of Prospective Adopters

Qualified Social Workers are employed in the Adoption Team within the People & Communities Directorate as the Agency to recruit, train and assess adoptive parents. Prospective Adopters' Reports are completed by them and brought to Panel for consideration. Adopters are recruited according to the Adoption Recruitment Strategy.

In North Somerset, there has been an increasing need to place children outside the Authority due to the substantial risk that birth parents may pose to the long term stability of a future placement.

All prospective adopters are invited to attend Panel in order to meet members, comment on the adoption approval process and listen to Panel discussion, although they are not present for the Panel recommendation. Their attendance is not part of the decision-making process and it is not detrimental to their application if they elect not to attend.

3.2 Whether a Relinquished Child Should be Placed for Adoption

Where a child has been relinquished for adoption, the Child Permanence Report and supporting documents are presented to Panel for a "should be placed for adoption" recommendation.

3.3 Whether a Child Should be Matched with a Specific Prospective Adopter

The Panel makes a recommendation as to whether a child should be placed for adoption with particular prospective adopters. Panel may also give advice to the Agency on agency proposals for contact, application for a Placement Order, the Adoption Support Plan and Parental Responsibility.

The Adoption Team Leader and her staff provide advice and training to Social Workers undertaking these reports.

An Adoption Co-ordination Meeting is held for every single child being considered for adoption in North Somerset. At the meeting, a link worker from the Adoption Team is allocated and a Clinical Psychologist provides advice on the emotional and psychological needs of the child.

In addition, the Panel can give advice to the Agency (but is not required to do so) on:

- contact arrangements
- the number of children the prospective adopter may be suitable to adopt, their age range, gender, likely needs and background
- the provision of Adoption Support

4. Adopters

4.1 Information on the Number of Adopters Considered by the Panel During This Reporting Period

ADOPTERS	LOCATION	CRITERIA	AGE RANGE	DATE APPROVED	LINKED
A	O	2 male or female	0 - 7 years	23.04.2013	√
B	O	2 male or female	0 – 4 years	04.06.2013	√
C	O	1 male or female	0 - 3 years	08.06.2013	
D	O	2 male or female	0 - 8 years	08.06.2013	
E	O	1 female	18 mths – 2 ½ years	25.06.2013	
F	O	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	01.07.2013	√
G	O	specific		16.07.2013	√
H	O	1 male or female	0 - 3 years	27.08.2013	√
I	O	2 children	0 - 5 years	27.08.2013	√
J	O	Specific		27.08.2013	√
K	O	1 or 2 children	1 child 0 - 2 years or 2 children 0 - 4 years	08.10.2013	
L	O	1 male or female	0 - 3 years	29.10.2013	√
M	O	2 male or female	0 - 4 years	10.12.2013	
N	O	specific		17.12.2013	√
O	O	2 male or female	0 - 7 years	21.12.2013	
P	O	1 or 2 children male or female	0 - 3 years 11 mths	07.01.2014	
Q	O	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	07.01.2014	
R	O	1 or 2 male or female	0 - 6 years	28.01.2014	
S	O	2 male or female	0 - 4 years	31.01.2014	
T	O	1 or 2 male or female	0 - 7 years	18.02.2014	
U	O	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	18.02.2014	
V	N	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	24.02.2014	
W	O	1 or 2 male or female	0 - 5 years	11.03.2014	
X	N	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	14.03.2014	
Y	O	2 male or female	0 - 5 years	14.03.2014	

All adopters are White UK, British or European

Location Code: N = North Somerset area
O = Outside of North Somerset

For the period April 2013 to the end of March 2014, a total of 25 adoptive couples were approved, all of whom were domestic adopters. Applicants are encouraged to broaden the age range and complexity of the children they are able to consider as this reflects the needs of children to be placed for adoption.

For additional information on approved adopters, please refer to the table in 4.2.

4.2 Adopters Awaiting a Link and Approved at 31 March 2014

ADOPTERS	LOCATION	CRITERIA	AGE RANGE	DATE APPROVED
A	O	2 male or female	18 mths – 4 years	19.12.2012
B	O	1 male or female	18 mths – 3 ½ yrs	29.01.2013
C	O	1 male or female	0 - 3 years	08.06.2013
D	O	2 male or female	0 - 8 years	08.06.2013
E	O	1 female	18 mths – 2 ½ years	25.06.2013
K	O	2 male or female	0 - 4 years	08.10.2013
M	O	2 male or female	0 - 4 years	10.12.2013
O	O	2 male or female	0 - 7 years	21.12.2013
P	O	2 male or female	0 - 3 years 11 mths	07.01.2014
Q	O	2 male or female	0 - 4 years	07.01.2014
R	O	2 male or female	0 - 6 years	28.01.2014
S	O	2 male or female	0 - 4 years	31.01.2014
T	O	2 male or female	0 - 7 years	18.02.2014
U	O	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	18.02.2014
V	N	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	24.02.2014
W	O	2 male or female	0 - 5 years	11.03.2014
X	N	1 male or female	0 - 4 years	14.03.2014
Y	O	2 male or female	0 - 5 years	14.03.2014

All adopters are White UK, British, or European

4.3 Key Points

- These adopters live within and beyond the borders of North Somerset. It is generally the case that children who have had a recommendation that they should be placed for adoption require placements outside of North Somerset to protect their identities and those of their adoptive families.
- All prospective adopters looking to adopt from the UK agreed to indirect contact through the Adoption Letterbox Contact Service. This is a system that enables children to maintain contact with their birth families through a third party, i.e. the Local Authority. Contact is between the adoptive parents and birth relatives and is usually indirect through letters and cards exchanged at agreed points in the year.
- All domestic adopters are referred to the Consortium and the National Register, and they respond independently to national requests for adopters in 'Be My Parent', unless they have been linked via North Somerset after approval.
- Inter-country adoption can vary in time and complexity depending on the country for which the adopters are approved. The Adoption Team has provided advice and support to inter-country adopters negotiating visas and arrangements to bring a child into the UK.
- All prospective adopters attend a three-day preparation course in addition to undergoing a full and thorough assessment, and extensive follow-up of references and Disclosure and Barring Scheme checks. Reports recommending approval are required to be evidence-based and prospective adopters are encouraged to gain experience of childcare and to visit experienced adopters.

5. Enquiries to Adopt

The Adoption Team received a total of 106 enquiries from individuals or couples expressing an interest to adopt during the twelve month period, which compares with 83 for the same period last year. All of these enquiries were expressions of interest for domestic adoptions; none related to inter-country adoption.

Domestic adoptions handled at initial enquiry stage:

- Number of enquiries progressed to assessment stage: 21
- Number of enquiries as at 1st April 2013 in assessment process: 13
- Number of new adopters approved in period 25

6. Children

The following tables provide information on the number of children considered by the Panel from April 2013 to March 2014.

6.1 Activity 2013 – 2014:

Children with a decision that they should be placed for adoption:

- Total children = 23
- Total linked within same year = 5

23 children have been presented to the ADM (Agency Decision Maker) for a decision that their care plan should be adoption. This is a similar figure to last year which was 24 children.

All the children considered by the ADM were subject to a Care Order.

6.2 Panel Activity 2013 – 2014: Children Linked with Adoptive Parents

	AGE	GENDER	ETHNICITY	DATE CHILD BECAME LOOKED AFTER BY NORTH SOMERSET	DATE MATCHED TO ADOPTERS
A	2	Male	White British	06.08.12	23.04.13
B	2	Female	White British	23.01.12	04.06.13
C	7	Male	White British	25.03.11	16.07.13
D	2	Male	White British	13.04.12	16.07.13
E	1	Female	White British	03.01.13	27.08.13
F	6	Female	White British	23.08.12	17.09.13
G	1	Female	White British	23.11.12	17.09.13
H	2	Male	White British	31.10.12	24.09.13
I	1	Female	White British	19.09.12	24.09.13
J	3	Male	White British	16.12.11	08.10.13
K	5	Female	White British	24.04.12	29.10.13
L	3	Male	White British	24.04.12	29.10.13
M	7	Male	White British	19.10.10	10.12.13
N	3	Female	White British	24.02.11	10.12.13
O	2	Female	White British	02.03.12	10.12.13
P	1	Male	White British	01.03.13	10.12.13
Q	5	Female	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	15.05.12	10.12.13
R	1	Female	White British	12.06.13	07.01.14
S	4	Male	White British	04.01.12	25.03.14
T	3	Male	White British	16.12.11	25.03.14
U	8	Female	White British	17.01.11	25.03.14

During 2013/14, 21 children were linked with prospective adopters, including 3 sibling groups and one child of dual heritage, White/Black Nigerian, who was placed with a White British family.

6.3 Children Still Awaiting a Link at 31 March 2014

	AGE	GENDER	ETHNICITY	DATE CHILD BECAME LOOKED AFTER BY NORTH SOMERSET	DATE ADM* APPROVED PLAN FOR ADOPTION
A	4	M	White UK	09.08.2012	18.04.2013
B	2	M	White UK	09.08.2012	18.04.2013
C	6	M	White Uk	09.08.2012	18.04.2013
D	5	F	White UK	09.08.2012	18.04.2013
E	<1	M	White Uk	21.12.2012	18.04.2013
F	4	F	White UK	11.01.2012	31.01.2013
G	2	M	White UK	11.01.2012	31.01.2013
H	5	M	White UK	06.08.2012	20.12.2012
I	3	F	White UK	06.08.2012	20.12.2012
J	5	F	White UK	14.5.2012	17.01.2013
K	4	M	White/ Black Nigerian	14.5.2012	17.01.2013
L	<1	M	White UK	30.07.2013	08.11.2013
M	2	F	White UK	06.06.2013	02.10.2013
N	4	M	White UK	26.06.2009	12.10.2009
O	5	F	White UK	23.08.2012	27.02.2013
P	7	M	White UK	06.05.2018	23.02.2010

*ADM = Agency Decision-maker

6.4 Adoption Orders Granted

The number of children for whom an Adoption Order has been made over the twelve month period is twenty three, (in addition there were fifteen Special Guardianship Orders) which is a higher figure than last year's. As a percentage of children looked after by the Authority for six months or more, this equates to 22.1% (which includes fifteen Special Guardianship orders).

The number of children placed for adoption but where the order hadn't yet been made on 31 March 2014 was eleven.

6.5 Disruptions

In this reporting period two children were placed with prospective adopters but unfortunately were moved after a very short period of time. In one instance this was due to the ill health of the adoptive mother and in the other case the adoptive parents felt they were not in a position to adopt this child. Both children continue to have a plan for adoption and we are actively family finding for them.

7. Children Placed for Adoption Within 12 Months of the Panel Decision that Adoption is the Plan

During 2013/14, six children were placed for adoption and fifteen were made the subject of a Special Guardianship Order. The average number of months from the date the Agency Decision Maker agreed the plan for adoption to the date the child was placed with their adoptive family was 14.6 months; the previous year's average was 9 months. There were a number of children who had been in the adoption system for a while who were adopted, which brought this average up.

The time that a child is looked after before presentation to the Agency Decision Maker is subject to review through the Looked After Children Review process and monitored by senior managers through the Adoption Tracking meeting.

The Family Justice Review has addressed the delays in care proceedings and there has been a noticeable reduction in the length of court hearings.

8. Diversity

8.1 Ethnicity

All the children presented to the Agency Decision Maker in this period were White UK.

All domestic adopters presented and approved were White UK.

8.2 Same Sex Adopters

North Somerset Council is a member of New Family Social, which is an organisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adopters. They offer support through a number of avenues and also offer a register of available prospective adopters.

North Somerset Council took part in a recruitment event with Bristol to raise awareness of the need for same sex people to come forward to adopt to increase the pool of adopters.

North Somerset Council's Adoption Panel approved four same sex couples within the 2013/14 time period.

9. Training

Panel members are financially supported to attend various training events and conferences and to feed back to the Panel.

During the period covered by this report, Panel members attended a training day on the 14 January 2014 provided by an independent trainer. Training focussed on developing the way in which the Panel members work together, ensuring that members' skills, abilities and experience are used to best effect.

Social Workers within the Adoption Team and Community Family Teams are encouraged and supported to attend training events in order to maintain practice standards and prepare for legislative changes.

Courses attended by Social Workers over the past year include:

The following courses have been attended by the adoption team

- Life story Work
- 'Thrive' conference
- Building Family Bonds
- Attachment training
- Developments in public children law – changing law of child care and placement
- Adoption Reform
- Concurrency Planning
- Family and Friends Training
- Adoption – new procedures
- Adoption Activity Days
- Internet Safety
- Birth fathers and Adoption
- PQ
- DDP (Dyadic Dynamic Psychotherapy)
- Placing siblings
- Legal changes when 18
- Therapeutic parenting
- Safeguarding
- Neuro-science of adoption
- Sensory integration
- Moving children on
- Assessing prospective adopters
- Family Links

- Signs of safety

The Adoption Team delivered two workshops for child care staff on 'Life Story Work', and 'Moving Children on for Adoption' training for foster carers and Social Workers.

Workshops were provided to update Social Workers in the Adoption Team and Childcare Social Workers on the changes resulting from new guidance and regulations.

10. Additional Adoption Activity

Recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of North Somerset children is crucial and is a core task of the Adoption Team. Although many of the children in the North Somerset area need to be placed out of the Authority, we have been able to match local prospective adopters with children from other parts of the South West through the South West Adoption Consortium.

There has been a high level of Family Finding for children who need to be placed outside the North Somerset area during 2013/2014, and 21 children have been linked with new families. This can be a time-consuming process as families around the country are visited and assessed as to whether they are suitable or not for the child concerned.

The number of children discussed through the Adoption Co-ordination Meeting process has remained high with an average of 47 children being reviewed.

11. Letterbox Scheme

The North Somerset Letterbox Scheme has now been functioning for 14 years and is well established. The scheme is an administrative system that facilitates correspondence between children's birth families and their adoptive parents, and it ensures that contact arrangements post-adoption are subject to agreements that are reviewed and maintained effectively, and it offers protection to both adopters and birth parents. There are currently 172 agreements maintained through the Letterbox Scheme. These are in respect of 98 children.

There are 3 children waiting to be added to the Letterbox Scheme.
As at 31 March 2013:

- | | |
|---|-----|
| • Number of children with Letterbox Agreements | 98 |
| • Total number of Letterbox Agreements | 172 |
| • Number of Agreements waiting to be added to Letterbox | 3 |

12. Inter-country Adoption

There have been no inter-country adopter approvals within the timeframe of this report. One inter-country adopter who was approved in 2012/13 was matched with a child from Russia in 2013/2014.

Given the specialist nature of inter-country adoption work, the department continues to use an independent assessor for all applications presented to Panel. This incurs no cost at this stage as these home studies are paid for by the prospective adopters.

There may however be future costs in terms of pre-placement reports and adoption support which cannot be charged for.

13. Step-parent Adoption

Step-parent adoptions are dealt with by the Adoption Team. Whilst there are a significant number of referrals received, the number which proceed to an Order is generally a much lower figure as indicated below:

• Number of referrals received 01.04.13 – 31.03.14	11
• Referrals awaiting closure, no further contact	6
• Referrals awaiting confirmation of application to Court	0
• Assessments underway	5
• Total Step-parent Adoption Orders made and granted this year	4
• Non-agency Step-parent Adoption Orders granted for referrals made in previous years	1

14. Adoption Support

The Adoption and Children Act 2002, guidance and National Minimum Standards identify adoption support as a key element of permanency planning for children.

The Adoption Support Services (Local Authorities) (England) Regulations (2005) require Local Authorities to make arrangements for the provision of a range of adoption support services. The Adoption Support Adviser is Jenny Slee (Adoption Team Leader)

They place a duty on Local Authorities to carry out assessments of need for adoption support services. If a need for adoption support has been identified by an assessment, the Local Authority is required to provide a service to meet that need.

North Somerset provides a comprehensive range of adoption support services, including support for groups and individual families. The ABCs group offers a monthly drop-in session where adopters can seek advice on a variety of issues, and the SAFINS Group (Supporting Adoptive Families in North Somerset) arranges coffee mornings and social events. A service is also commissioned from After Adoption, which provides individual counselling and group counselling etc., to adults affected by adoption either as a birth parent, adopter or an adult adopted as a child. There is a Service Level Agreement which monitors the effectiveness of this service. Adopters are also able to gain support from voluntary organisations such as 'The Centre for Adoption and Education' and Adoption UK. A 'sitting' service is commissioned from Crossroads, which aims to help adoptive parents have some time out of the home by providing a trained worker who will understand the needs of the adopted child. North Somerset Council runs a Summer Scheme and a Youth Scheme for a week during the school summer holidays for adopted children. The Youth Scheme also runs in half term and other holidays.

Referrals for individual support and advice on a wide range of issues can be made to the CONSULT Service, which is a multi-agency team consisting of a Clinical

Psychologist, and a Social Work professional, who are specialised in understanding the needs of looked after and adopted children.

The Adoption Consultation and Assessment Service offers emotional and psychological assessment of children both pre-and post-adoption, including direct work with children and families during the transition period when a child moves to an adoptive placement.

Adopters are consulted with regard to North Somerset Council policy and practice issues.

As at 1 April 2013 the Adoption team were supporting 33 families.

During the period covered by this report, the Adoption team received 14 new referrals for Adoption Support.

15. Adoption Consortium

North Somerset has been a member of the South West Adoption Consortium since April 1999. The Consortium operates to match prospective adopters with children across the South West adoption agencies. Approved adopters' and children's details are referred to the Consortium if a North Somerset placement is not possible.

During 2013/14, we have had four children matched with families through SWAC, and a total of five children from agencies within SWAC have been placed with North Somerset families.

North Somerset takes part in the Adoption Exchange Days which are organised by the South West Adoption Consortium. These events are held at least three times year and they raise the profile of children who are awaiting adoptive placements.

16. Adoption Allowances

From 30 December 2005 when the Adoption and Children Act was implemented, financial support started to be considered as part of Adoption Support Plans. In making any such payments, an established formula is used which takes into account identified household expenditure and the income of adopters. The allowance is reviewed annually.

The Service Leader, Adoption Team Leader and Finance staff meet quarterly to review Adoption Allowances.

As at the end of March 2014, adoption allowances were paid in respect of 33 children

As at the end of March 2013, adoption allowances were paid in respect of 32 children.

17. Financial Report 2013/2014

17.1 Allowances Paid by North Somerset Council

	2012/13	2013/14
Number of children as at end of March	32	33
Total cost of Adoption Allowances paid	£164,090.16	£147,929.66

7.2 Breakdown of Agency Fees – Including Inter-Agency and Inter-Country Fees

2012 - 2013	Other Local Authorities	Voluntary Organisations	Inter-country Adoption Fees	Independent Assessors' Fees	Other Costs Incurred	Totals
Expenditure	£26,277	£104,895.81	£0	£4,458.50	£0	£135,631.31
Income Earned	-£63,503	£0	-£6,020	£0	£0	-£69,523
Subtotals	-£37,226	£104,895.81	-£6,020	£4,458.50	£0	£66,108.31
Outturn Position for 2012/2013 = Overspend						

2013 - 2014	Other Local Authorities	Voluntary Organisations	Inter-country Adoption Fees	Independent Assessors' Fees	Other Costs Incurred	Totals
Expenditure	£39,896	£84,820	£4,905	£17,542	£0	£147,163
Income Earned	-£273,655	£0	£0	£0	£0	-£273,655
Subtotals	-£233,759	£84,820	£4,905	£17,542	£0	-£126,492
Outturn Position for 2013/2014 = Underspend						

17.3 Independent Panel Members

Independent Panel Members receive expenses to attend Panel and, like the majority other of adoption agencies, North Somerset also pays an allowance for the time commitment for reading papers.

17.4 Adoption Placements Purchased

	2012/2013	2013/2014
Individual cases	2	5
Sibling groups of two	2	1
Sibling groups of three or more	-	-

17.5 Adoption Placements Sold

	2012/2013	2013/14
Individual cases	3	5
Sibling groups of two	4	5
Sibling groups of three or more	-	-

18. Care Standards Act 2000

National Minimum Standards for Adoption and Local Authority Adoption Services Regulations

The Care Standards Act introduced a requirement for the registration and inspection of adoption services. With effect from December 2012, all adoption agency professionals have been registered with the HCPC (Health and Professions Council) and need to re-register on a two yearly basis.

The scope of the Standards and Regulations covers:

- Statement of purpose and guide to services
- Securing and promoting children's welfare
- Services to prospective and approved adopters
- Services to birth parents and relatives
- Adoption Panels and decision-making
- Fitness of managers
- Provision and management of the agency
- Employment and management of staff
- Records
- Fitness of premises

The Adoption Service was inspected by OfSTED in May 2011 and was rated as 'outstanding', which means the overall service is of exceptionally high quality.

19. Independent Review Mechanism

During 2013/2014, no prospective adopters were notified by the North Somerset Adoption Panel that they were not considered suitable as adoptive parents. No referrals were made to the Independent Review Mechanism.

20. Adoption Manual

The Adoption Team has an Adoption Manual which is available for all staff working in adoption, and can be found on the North Somerset Council Intranet.

21. Scorecards

The Government is concerned about the delays for children in the care system and have introduced scorecards, based on figures from 2010 – 2013, to indicate where the delays are in the process.

The scorecards highlight three key indicators showing how quickly each Local Authority places children in need of adoption:

- 1 . Average time taken for a child entering care to moving in with their adoptive family. Target is 608 days, and in North Somerset we average 722 days.
- 2 . A high proportion of children in each Local Authority are waiting longer for adoption than the 20 month threshold. In North Somerset children who wait less than 20 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family is 47%, and the national average is 55%.
- 3 . Average time to match children with a family after the Courts have agreed a placement order. The target is 182 days and North Somerset average 203 days.

The service is making every effort to meet these targets set by Government as a speedy adoption is in the interests of children.

A significant part of the reason for not meeting targets set by Government is because we place more older children, children with special needs and children who are in sibling groups. In North Somerset we place 9% of our children in care for adoption which is lower than the national average of 13% in 2012/2013.

22. Adoption Reform Programme

The government has again allocated an Adoption Reform grant to each Local Authority to continue to implement the Adoption Reform Agenda which continues to charge Local Authorities with the responsibility of ensuring that adoption is available for all children where this is in their best interests and more adopters being recruited.

Figures relating to the 12 months to the end of March 2013 indicate that a total of 3,980 'looked after' children were adopted from care in England in the year, compared to 3,470 children adopted year ending 31 March 2012, an increase of 1,590 from the previous year and an increase of 2070 from 2009.

As of 13 June 2013 the National Adoption Register figures indicate that there were 2,227 children waiting for an adoptive placement and 365 adoptive placements. It is estimated that 600 additional adopters are needed each year with an additional 2000-3000 adopters needed to address the backlog.

The 'First 4 Adoption' website was launched in this reporting period (January 2013) which is a dedicated adoption information service for people interested in adopting a child in England.

The Children and Families Bill received Royal Assent on 13th March 2014 to become the Children and Families Act 2014 covering both public and private law proceedings. The Act includes a number of new measures to reform the systems for adoption, looked after children, family justice and special educational needs.

From 1 April 2013 as recommended by the Department for Education, the Local Government Association, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Association of Directors of Children's Services the inter-agency fee has been levelled out across the voluntary adoption agencies and local authorities and currently stands at £27,000 per child (the fee is reduced for siblings).

The Statutory Adoption Guidance and the 2011 Adoption Minimum Standards place a requirement on the local authority adoption services to ensure that the executive element of the council receive a written report on the management, outcomes and financial state of the adoption agency every six months to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes and complying with the conditions of registration (Minimum Standard 25.6; Statutory Adoption Guidance 3.3 and 5.39)

Compliance is also required of Minimum Standard 17.2 that 'Adoption Panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restriction on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service is the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement.

The 2011 Adoption Minimum Standards can be accessed at http://www.minimumstandards.org/contents_adop.html

The Statutory Adoption Guidance can be accepted at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publication/adoption-strategy-guidance2013>

Further information on how North Somerset Adoption Agency organises its adoption service can be found in the 'Statement of Purpose'. This outlines the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and what services and facilities it provides. It is available online on the council website, and a copy can be obtained by contacting the Adoption Team on 01275 888236 or by emailing adoption@n-somerset.gov.uk

A Children's Guide to Adoption and a Children's guide to Adoption Support Services are also produced in line with the Minimum Standards and can be obtained using the above links.

23. Service Development in North Somerset

The Adoption Reform Grant in North Somerset has been used to increase staffing capacity in the following areas:

- Social Work
- Business Support
- Training
- Social work assistant
- Clinical Psychologist

It has also funded the developments below:

- **Concurrency Project Worker** – a collaboration with other Local Authorities who employed (October 2013) a worker to implement a concurrency project.
- **Adoption Activity Day** – the 1st March 2014 saw North Somerset host (along with BAAF and five other Local Authorities) the area’s first Adoption Activity Day, an event that finds families for harder to place children, bringing adopters and children together for a party. They have proved successful in linking children and widening the matching consideration of adopters.
- **Adoption West** – a number of Local Authorities are working together in order to form a federation called ‘Adoption West’. This alliance aims to deliver adoption services more effectively and efficiently across the South West.
- **Marketing** – DVDs are to be completed for each child to aid the family finding process.
- **Training** – in collaboration with other Local Authorities, a training officer has been appointed to deliver Stages 1 and 2 and Family and Friends training.

24. Targets for 2014/15

- To identify sufficient adopters to meet the needs of all North Somerset children needing an adoptive placement.
- To ensure 10% of children looked after are placed for adoption at 31.03.15.
- To recruit 18 adoptive families for approval by 30.03.15 and for at least four of those families to be approved for sibling groups or older children.
- To increase the number of adopters from an ethnic minority background.
- To ensure at least 80% of Adoption Order applications are made within 26 weeks of a child being placed for adoption.
- To ensure 100% of those children under the age of six months whose parents have requested their child should be placed for adoption are placed within three months of the parents’ request.
- To develop an individual recruitment plan for each child at the Adoption Co-ordination Meeting following the review that agrees the Care Plan is adoption.
- To maintain a high quality Adoption Letterbox Contact system.
- To ensure all requests for Adoption Support are responded to by the Adoption Support Services Adviser within ten working days.
- To comply with new Government targets to address delay in adoption
- To increase the return of evaluations from prospective adopters and professionals in relation to their experience of the Adoption Panel.

Signed:

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Sheila Smith, Director, People & Communities

Signed:

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Councillor Jeremy Blatchford, Executive Member for Children & Young People

