

Report of the Assistant Director (Children's Specialist Services) to the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel to be held on 14th January 2015

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Subject:

Adoption & Fostering of Sibling Groups

Summary statement:

This report outlines the current situation regarding the Adoption and Fostering of sibling groups who are in the care of the Local Authority.

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1. SUMMARY

This report outlines the current situation regarding the Adoption and Fostering of sibling groups who are in the care of the Local Authority.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 This report regarding siblings and sibling placements is timely as the landscape of fostering, adoption and family placements is changing. The Courts are now requesting sibling assessments and this in itself together with a review of placement stability is making the Department consider current practice. A high proportion of children waiting for permanent placements are part of a sibling group.
- 2.2 As a general principle the Local Authority would want to place children in a sibling group together in recognition of the fact that sibling relationships are likely to be the most enduring of family relationships. However we are currently seeing more very large sibling groups, also children with highly complex needs. Work is underway to understand in more depth the population of children in order to build in appropriate planning and decision making to achieve the best possible outcome for them.
- 2.3 There are many factors which can effect the final decision to place sibling groups together or not including the individual pathway into care, their ages and individual additional needs, the attitude of social workers, foster carers. Magistrates, Judges and Guardians.

3. REPORT ISSUES

3.1 Data/Statistics

- 3.1.1 As at 18 June 2014 there were 196 sibling groups in the Looked After Children population. Of those:
- 89 sibling groups were all placed together
 - 36 sibling groups had some of the siblings placed together
 - 71 sibling groups were not placed together
- 3.1.2 Groups of 2 siblings are most prevalent; however, larger sibling groups are not uncommon, particularly, though not exclusively, among Asian and Eastern/Central European families.

Size of sibling groups

2 siblings	3 siblings	4 siblings	5 siblings	6 siblings	7 siblings
120	48	18	7	2	1

Type of setting

Family & Friends	41
Foster Care – In-house	58
Foster Care – Purchased	3
Placed for Adoption	7
Placed with Parents	13
Residential – In-house	3

3.1.3 In the first 2 quarters of this year there have been 17 referrals to Placement Co-ordination for sibling groups. Of those:

- 7 sibling groups were all placed together
- 5 sibling groups had some of the siblings placed together
- 3 sibling groups were not placed together
- 2 sibling groups had only 1 sibling who came into care while the others remained at home

Size of sibling groups

2 siblings	3 siblings	4 siblings	5 siblings	6 siblings	7 siblings
9	2	2	3	0	1

3.2 Adoption

3.2.1 In the period 01/04/14 – 01/12/14, there were 10 sibling groups matched to adopters. This involved 20 children out of a total of 59 children matched in the same time period. In the same period of time 5 children making up two sibling groups were matched and placed separately. We currently have 42 children with adoption as a plan, 20 of those children are part of a sibling group and all are being given due consideration as to whether to place together.

3.3 Fostering

3.3.1 35 placements for sibling groups started in the period April 2013 – March 2014. Of those:

- 27 sibling groups (=61 children) were assessed to be placed together and were placed together
- 6 sibling groups (=12 children) were assessed to be placed together but were placed separately
- 2 sibling groups (5=children) were assessed to be placed separately and were placed separately

3.3.2 In the first 2 quarters of this year, of the 7 sibling groups who were placed together, 5 were placed with in-house foster carers, 1 with an Independent Fostering Agency and 1 with family and friends. Most children (40 children), whether placed together with, or separately from their siblings, were placed with in-house foster carers.

3.3.3 It is worthy of note that the Fostering Regulations sets the usual fostering limit at 3 looked after children in a fostering household. The usual fostering limit does not apply to sibling groups, although the number of children in the household, the foster carers' ability to safeguard all of them and to meet their individual needs, and the physical space available must be considered when placing siblings. In such cases, the decision is made on the basis of a risk assessment starting from the principle that we aim to place sibling groups together unless there are clear reasons not to do so.

3.4 Improving Practice on the Placement of Siblings

- 3.4.1 The National Recruitment Forum (NRF) is working to support local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies in addressing the overall shortfall in adopters and the need to recruit adopters for specific groups of children. In this context, the NRF has provided advice on improving the placement of siblings for adoption, although the advice is relevant to both adoption and fostering services.
- 3.4.2 The NRF has developed a checklist which poses questions to identify any areas of policy and practice where changes could be made to improve the opportunities for placing siblings. In the Adoption and Fostering Unit, we have found this a helpful exercise to understand what we are doing well and to provide a focus on areas for development.

3.5 What we are doing well

- The recent development of the Adoption and Fostering website, as well as marketing material, is geared to attracting adopters and foster carers who can accommodate sibling groups and children with additional needs. The assessment and preparation is developed to help people consider siblings where possible and appropriate.
- When siblings come into care they generally have the same social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), and where there is a larger sibling group which necessitates more than one worker, clear communication plans are put in place.
- If siblings are placed in separate foster care placements plans are routinely made for informal contact which is arranged by the foster carers and monitored by social workers; and foster carers are given relevant information about the child's siblings and their carers to support this.
- Given the recent reduction in children with a plan for adoption, the Adoption Service is focusing on children who are "hard to place". As a consequence, recruitment activity and training materials focus on the benefits and rewards of adopting siblings, both for the children and the adopters, and the availability of support packages.

3.6 Areas for Development

- A policy is to be developed a policy on placing siblings.
- The management information system needs to better analyse performance in meeting the assessed needs of siblings, particularly in relation to those children who are initially placed separately but are placed together at a later date.
- A great deal of skill and knowledge already exists within the fostering and adoption unit relating to sibling assessments and the use of toolkits to help build an understanding of individual children's needs. This understanding needs to start at the point of placement with foster carers with efforts being made to place children together in their sibling groups in order to understand their attachments and relationships so that long term plans are based on good assessments where possible.

- There are good examples of foster carers using the support and resources available to promote healthy sibling relationships before an assessment is completed, but this needs to be developed through training and embedded into practice.

3.7 Action Plan

3.7.1 Placing Siblings Policy

Work is now underway to develop a clear policy about Placing Sibling Groups based on the BAAF (British Agency for Adoption & Fostering) Guidance. This will have an impact throughout the whole service. There is good practice already in terms of children's placements, ongoing assessments and planning. However there are structures, practice tools and training that can be developed and put in place to embed good practice throughout the whole department.

3.7.2 Training for Social Workers

In considering sibling groups it is always important to consider the relationship of each child to the primary care giver and how these arrangements will meet the individual needs of the children over time. Children in the same sibling group can be placed at different times if this adds to the long term stability of the situation. This is an area of focus for training for social workers across Children's Specialist Services so that we are all working with a shared understanding of how we will meet the needs of children in sibling groups.

3.8 Training of Foster Carers

3.8.1 As the population of children coming into the Looked After system is more complicated because of their individual complex additional needs, their age or because they are part of a sibling group. The appropriate training of foster carers becomes critical and this will be linked to foster carer progression.

3.8.2 Foster carers including friends and family carers and future long term carers need skills in therapeutic parenting, together with a clear understanding of the impact of early trauma and neglect on the development and behaviour of children individually and within sibling groups. The role of foster carers is fundamental in moving children on to permanent placements.

4. OPTIONS

4.1 To endorse the proposed work to write a policy and use performance information to improve outcomes for sibling groups.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The service contributes to one of the strategic priorities, supporting vulnerable children.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 That the Assistant Director (Children's Specialist Services) be requested to develop and promote a clear policy on the Adoption and Fostering of sibling groups.

7. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.