

Individual Decision

The attached reports will be taken as
Individual Portfolio Member Decisions on:

Monday, 5 August, 2013

Ref:	Title	Portfolio Member	Page No.
ID2697 ID2698	Annual Report and Statement of Purpose of the West Berkshire Adoption Service	Councillor Irene Neill	1 - 40
ID2699 ID2700	Annual Report and Statement of Purpose of the West Berkshire Fostering Service	Councillor Irene Neill	41 - 64



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Individual Executive Member Decision

Title of Report:	Annual Report and Statement of Purpose of the West Berkshire Adoption Service
Report to be considered by:	Individual Executive Member Decision
Date on which Decision is to be taken:	5 August 2013
Forward Plan Ref:	ID2697 and ID2698

Purpose of Report: To report on the work of the adoption team and to enable Members to scrutinise the operation of the Adoption Service

Recommended Action: To agree report

Reason for decision to be taken: To comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services 2003
The department has a statutory responsibility to report toon the work of the adoption service to Elected Members on a six monthly basis and also to agree the Staement of Purpose for this service

Other options considered: N/A

Key background documentation: N/A

Portfolio Member Details	
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Contact Officer Details	
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Implications

Policy:	The report is in line with the Council's policies regarding Looked After Children
Financial:	None arising from the report
Personnel:	N/A
Legal/Procurement:	The report complies with the legal requirements of the Care Standards Act
Property:	N/A
Risk Management:	N/A

Is this item relevant to equality?	Please tick relevant boxes	Yes	No
Does the policy affect service users, employees or the wider community and:			
• Is it likely to affect people with particular protected characteristics differently?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Is it a major policy, significantly affecting how functions are delivered?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Will the policy have a significant impact on how other organisations operate in terms of equality?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Does the policy relate to functions that engagement has identified as being important to people with particular protected characteristics?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Does the policy relate to an area with known inequalities?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Outcome (Where one or more 'Yes' boxes are ticked, the item is relevant to equality)			
Relevant to equality - Complete an EIA available at www.westberks.gov.uk/eia		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Not relevant to equality		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Consultation Responses

Members:

Leader of Council:	Councillor Gordon Lundie
Overview & Scrutiny Management Commission Chairman:	Councillor Brian Bedwell
Ward Members:	All Members
Opposition Spokesperson:	Councillor David Allen

Local Stakeholders:

Officers Consulted:

Trade Union:

Is this item subject to call-in?	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No: <input type="checkbox"/>
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Supporting Information

1. Background

- 1.1 This report has been produced in line with the Adoption Services Regulations 2011.
- 1.2 This is circulated on an annual basis to inform the Council of the team's activities regarding the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. It also covers post adoption support services.

2. Equalities Impact Assessment Outcomes

- 2.1 There is no decision to be made therefore an Equality Impact Assessment has not been undertaken.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 As this report meets the exception criteria set out in the Individual Decision making protocol this decision can be made by the Portfolio Holder under delegated authority.

Appendices

Appendix A – West Berkshire Adoption Service Annual Report 2012-13

Appendix B – Adoption Statement of Purpose 2013-14

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WEST BERKSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT 2012-13

Introduction

West Berkshire Council seeks to promote the upbringing of children within their birth families in accordance with the spirit and provisions of the Children Act 1989. If it has been decided following a thorough assessment and intervention by the court that the child(ren) are unable to remain in the birth family then adoption is considered as one of a range of ways of achieving permanence for the child(ren).

The Adoption Service recruits adoptive families for children and works to appropriately match children needing adoptive placements with approved adopters. The needs of the children are the agency's paramount consideration.

The priorities of the Adoption Service are:

- To achieve the placement of children being looked after by West Berkshire Council, for whom adoption is part of their care plan, with appropriate approved adopters (whether approved by West Berkshire or another Adoption Agency), matched according to the children's specific needs and circumstances and within appropriate timescales.
- To recruit prospective adopters and prepare and assess adoptive applicants applying to the Service who will meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally and nationally.
- To provide a Post Adoption Support service where appropriate. This will include the counselling of adopted adults and support where appropriate to birth parents and others affected by adoption. (Adoption and Children Act 2002)

All members of the Family Placement Team work across both the Adoption and the Fostering Services. The full establishment of the Family Placement Team is:

1	Team Manager
2	Assistant Team Managers
1	Post-adoption Support Specialist Social Worker
8.5 FTE	Family Placement Social Workers
3.62 FTE	Family Support Workers
1	Publicity and Recruitment Worker
4.09 FTE	Support Services Staff

The Family Placement Team remained stable until 31st August when Assistant Team Manager Fiona Crute left the team and Council to progress her career. June Kemp continues in the role of Team Manager and Keith Langley as Assistant Team Manager. We successfully recruited a new Assistant Team Manager and appointed Amanada Cornwall having been promoted from a social worker post within the team. Mary Heslin continues in the role of Post Adoption Support Worker and Ananda Bodenstien in the role of Family Finder for children for whom the care plan is adoption. We currently have one social worker on maternity leave and one on adoption leave. Two social workers have been seconded, one from the Referral and Assessment Team and one from the West and Central Locality Team. We also had

two social workers off work for a significant period due to health issues one of whom has now returned to work.

All social work staff within the Family Placement Team who undertake adoption work hold a professional social work qualification, are registered with the GSCC, have a good understanding of adoption issues and regularly attend additional training events to maintain and extend their knowledge base.

The service was inspected in February 2011 when it was rated as “outstanding”.

A copy of the inspection report is available on the West Berkshire website as well as the OFSTED website. As a result the adoption service has been granted permission to use the “outstanding” logo on its literature, advertising etc.

Summary of West Berkshire Activity between 01/04/2011 and 31/03/2012

This has again been a busy year in terms of all aspects of adoption and we exceeded out target in relation to the approval of adopters by 2.

Over the last year:

- Seven children have been to Adoption Panel or the Agency Decision Maker for best interests. Of these seven children six permanency plans were made at the point of the fourth review with the exception of one which was a month over due. The adoption panel received all the permanency reports within six weeks of being completed. The average time between the decision for permanence and the adoption panel’s recommendation on whether the child should be placed for adoption was 3.8 months with the exception of a sibling pair. These children were part of a large sibling group who had several extended family members being assessment but were subsequently rules out.
- Five children have been matched with adopters
- Eight adopters have been approved
- Six West Berkshire children were placed with other local authorities adopters and one child was placed with West Berkshire Adopters
- Seven adoption orders were granted in respect of West Berkshire Children
- Five adoption orders have been granted on children placed from other local authorities with Berkshire adopters
- Three children who were placed with West Berkshire adopters suffered an adoption broken down/disrupted. Two of these children were a sibling pair.
- Four in-family adoption assessments were completed with two waiting for their applications to be submitted to court.
- Five SGO orders have been granted with eight cases still in proceedings

In total 49 children have been referred to Family Placement team for permanence. 10 children had a care plan for adoption considered as part of their care planning, (some have been concurrent planning as part of the court care process) but not all of these children have or will be placed for adoption. Half of the children (five) had a parallel plan with regards to an SGO. In total 12 children were considered for SGOs with seven cases still in proceeding. 20 children have remained in long-term placements. In most of these cases these children have been seven years and over, however, two children were under seven years and remained in long-term fostering placements as part of their sibling group.

As part of the Berkshire Consortium rolling programme we completed 2 adoption information day and 1 adoption preparation group in the year.

We are currently assessing 5 families for adoption who will be presented to adoption panel for approval over the next eight months. There are a further 14 families who are at different stages of the enquiry and recruitment process.

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service

The West Berkshire Adoption Service is part of a consortium arrangement between the six Berkshire unitary authorities who jointly fund the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS). This was established in 1998 and operates from offices in Windsor.

The BAAS performs the following tasks on behalf of the six Berkshire authorities:-

- Manages and administers the Berkshire adoption panel – that includes West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Slough, Bracknell, Windsor and Maidenhead
- Recruits and trains adoption panel members
- Provides professional and administrative support for the adoption panels
- Manages the Berkshire Letter Box service between adoptive families and birth families
- Manages direct contact arrangements between adoptive families and birth families
- Provides specialist training on adoption issues and advice and assistance on complex adoption matters for staff in the six unitary authorities
- Provides specialist counselling for adults seeking access to birth records
- Administers and provides a social work service to the closed looked after children's records and adoption records
- Provides independent support for birth family members when the plan for children is adoption
- Funds and provides support to specific adoption initiatives

The consortium arrangement enables adoptive placements to be made available at reduced cost to member agencies and also enhances opportunities for joint training, adoption support and for developing and improving practice.

In addition to the Adoption Panel activity the following resources have been available to the unitary authorities via the consortium:-

- Training for staff, panel members, adopters and their families
- Post-adoption support forum
- The Berkshire adoption exchange (this enables adopters to meet social workers and discuss children needing placement)
- Life appreciation days and disruption meetings
- The birth parent service
- The indirect contact service (Letterbox Exchange)
- The direct contact service
- Adoption and birth records workshops
- Birth mothers' group
- Birth fathers' group (this is a new development)
- Adoptive fathers' group
- Adopters' newsletter
- Adoption support handbook for workers
- Adopted children's group
- Membership of Adoption UK
- Adopters' conference
- Storage of and access to children's records

A detailed overview of the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service and its activities can be found in the BAAS Annual report for 2010-2011 which will be published shortly.

Inter-country Adoption Arrangements

West Berkshire has a contract with a local voluntary agency PACT (Parents and Children Together) for that agency to provide an adoption service for those seeking to adopt from overseas. This service is currently renewed on an annual basis. PACT provides prospective inter country adopters with information about the overseas adoption process, including an enquiry service so that prospective adopters can make an informed decision as to whether intercountry adoption is appropriate for them.

Placements made: 2 (one from Russia and one from Thailand)
Private fostering: 1 (for the child placed from Thailand)

In the past year PACT has sent out one information pack. No initial visits have been undertaken, no applications have been received and there are no approved adopters waiting for a placement. Two placements have been made with West Berkshire adopters, one with a child from Russia and one with child from Thailand. PACTS are also overseeing a Private Fostering arrangement for a child placed from Thailand.

PACT continues to provide the Berkshire Adoption Consortium Consultation Service. This service is available to adoptive families across Berkshire. The aim of the service is to provide consultation to parents experiencing difficulties within their adoptive family. The project has been developed jointly between Berkshire Adoption Consortium members and Parents and Children together PACT.

Post-adoption Support Services

During the past year there has been a focus on the continued development of post-adoption services for adoptive parents living in West Berkshire, their children and relatives.

Post adoption services also include the counselling of adopted adults and intermediary services for both adopted adults and birth family members and requests for these services have continued to increase significantly following the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This service continues to provide support to a very wide and varied population and includes clients who are in their 60s and 70s.

Post Adoption services continue to offer counselling, advice and information, family fun days, training and mediation regarding contact issues. More direct services such as therapeutic support and support with education are also available. The post adoption team may “signpost” to other specialist services, eg CAMHS, Occupational Therapy, including a consultation service with Dr Chinene Kimber-Bidlot, Parenting Specialist, for social workers and adopters, which can aid assessment and direct work with children and their carers.

Family fun days facilitate the relationship between professionals and carers and between the carers and can lead to carers arranging their own social events and giving informal support to each other. Activities for carers and their children generally occur outside of office hours to encourage attendance. A toddlers’ group was introduced and the organisation of this has been taken over by the carers themselves. Attendance at this group is varied but will continue to run as it provides support to new adopters and enables sharing of experiences.

There are 70 families on the post adoption database with 61 of these families receiving information about events. Of these families approximately 19 are receiving some level of post adoption support services. Those receiving high level support are to prevent an adoption breakdown. The authority works with adoptive families to support placements and whilst this may on occasions require individual work the authority’s ethos is to work with the family as a whole.

Adoption allowances are being paid in respect of 20 children.

The number of adults receiving a service in relation to access to birth records and intermediary services was 19 this year. Several of these cases are quite complex and the agency continues to support people who have only recently found out that they are adopted, often with quite devastating feelings of loss for the adoptees.

Special Guardianship

The adoption service is involved in the preparation of reports for court in Special Guardianship applications along with the locality social workers (where the child is looked after) and in the provision of Special Guardian support services once the order has been granted. The support of Special Guardians is similar to that of adopters. Five Special Guardianship applications were completed this year and the adoption agency is supporting another fourteen Special Guardianship arrangements. Many of these are new arrangements and receiving low level support. One family is, however, receiving high level support.

A Special Guardianship allowance is being paid in respect of 20 children.

In-family adoptions

During the past year there were four in-family adoption assessments completed with two waiting for their applications to be submitted to court. Two are currently in the court arena. This is an area which relates primarily to the preparation of reports to court following an application to adopt a specific child who is already living within a family who wish to change their legal status in order to acquire parental responsibility for the child. The child is not 'looked after'.

Due to competing priorities this work is managed via a "waiting list". There are currently three in-family adoption assessments being undertaken and three are on the waiting list for allocation. The waiting list is regularly reviewed by the management team and assessments are allocated when a social worker becomes available.

Complaints

Three complaints have been received over the past year. One complaint was from a Special Guardian in relation to amendments made to the Special Guardianship support plan which was resolved. Two complaints were received from the same prospective adopters; the couple withdrew their initial complaint whilst they had access to their old records, following this they made a new complaint regarding the decision not to take their adoption enquiry forward. The complaint was not upheld.

Summary of the past year

Throughout the year we have seen a change in the age group of children referred for adoption; we are currently family finding for 17 children between the ages of 0 to seven years of age. Eight of these children are in the process of being considering a Special Guardianship Order and nine are being considered for adoption. Older children are now considered to be those over three years and it remains a challenge to find adopters for older children, black and minority children, sibling groups and those with additional needs. All of the children referred for adoption have had had a

difficult start in life having experienced abuse and neglect, or the effects of parental drug misuse while in the womb.

There has been a significant increase in the numbers of children being considered for Special Guardianship Orders and it is seen as a viable alternative option to children remaining in care; there has been an increase in the use of this order, with five orders being granted last year, with eight currently in assessment. Special Guardianship is being used to provide a long-term care option which is similar to Adoption but allows the child or children to retain a legal relationship with the birth family that an adoption order would sever. It has features that relate to both Residence and Adoption Orders.

Enquiries from potential adopters in the West Berkshire area have remained consistent. Staffing changes could have had an impact on the management of assessments, however, we have employed sessional workers to ensure that this did not happen

Timescales within adoption are being adhered to and all the children placed have been adopted within one year of being placed.

We are continuing to develop skills and knowledge amongst all the team in the area of adoption and we are achieving this by using the skills and knowledge of team members already in place, by providing appropriate training for workers, and by recruiting social workers with the necessary skills in adoption or who have transferable skills.

Challenges of the year ahead

The year ahead is likely to be a challenging one as indicated above there will be significant changes as a result of the Government's reform of adoption services. 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay', was published in March 2012 and as indicated in the title this is aimed at reducing the time that it takes for children to move into their adoptive placements as well as reducing the time that it takes to assess prospective adopters.

We have seen the introduction of the new National Gateway First4Adoption which is operated by Coram and Adoption UK. This will provide prospective adopters with a central point of contact where they can get clear advice and information about adoption. This went live in January 2013. In the first days of operation the service received 158 calls, 70% of these calls were from first-time enquiries about adoption, 11% of those calls were from people experiencing difficulties with the adoption process and 4% of the calls were from adopters asking how they could help and contribute to the service.

The Government plans to introduce a two stage process aimed at speeding up the assessment and training of prospective adopters. Stage one will have a two month initial training and preparation stage which will be adopter led. Stage two will have a four month assessment stage which will be led by the assessing social worker.

Other changes include Fast tracking second time adopters, Swifter use of the Adoption Register, Legislation to reduce delays in achieving a perfect ethnic match, Fostering to Adopt placing children with adopters prior to a court decision.

On 24th January the Government published Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes which further details plans to speed up the adoption process by increasing the number of available adopters as follows:

- Compel Local Authorities to outsource their adoption recruitment
- Fewer organisation recruiting and assessing adopters on a greater scale
- Encourage Local Authorities to join together to deliver improvements in recruitment.
- Requesting the submission of alternative proposals
- Provision of a one-off £150 million Adoption Reform Grant, £50 million of which will be ring fenced to help address adopter recruitment
- Investment of £1 million to support recruitment of adopters by voluntary agencies
- Dissemination of information on adopter recruitment from the National Recruitment Forum
- Encouraging more pragmatism in matching and use of Adoption Activity Days
- Introduction of an Adoption Passport for adopters from April 2013 that will place a statutory duty on local authorities to inform adopters of their rights
- The piloting and subsequent introduction of personal budgets for adoption support

The government will measure improvements in tackling delay through performance scorecards. The scorecard highlights key indicators for children in need of adoption and will assess how quickly children are placed,

The first scorecard indicator relates to the overall experience of a child who is adopted. It measures the average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with their adoptive family. The threshold is set at 639 days. Our current timescale is 531 days

The second scorecard indicator measures the length of time between the court giving permission by virtue of a Placement Order for a child to be placed for adoption and the child being matched with an adoptive family. This will allow the Department for Education to act quickly if a large number of children seem to be “stuck” in the system. This threshold is set at 213 days. Our current timescale is 107 days. West Berkshire is already achieving the required targets.

The third scorecard indicator is the percentage of children who wait less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family. (The Government does not have measures for this target.)

Central to the Government's adoption reform programme is an expectation that more adoptive families will be recruited and that the time children wait to be adopted will be reduced. Local authorities and the voluntary sector are being challenged by the

Department for Education to reconsider how services should be organised and to examine the most efficient and cost effective way of providing services for the growing number of children with an adoption plan.

The 6 unitarily authorities within the Berkshire Consortium have a good reputation in the field of adoption and the most recent OFSTED reports are testament to this. A proposal from the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service is already being considered in relation to establish a shared adoption service under a joint arrangement for agencies to work together in providing recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and supervision of adopters. This would include a team of family finders and a team of assessing social workers, who would recruit, prepare, train and assess prospective adopters. The decision would need to be made whether this arrangement could be accommodated by less than 6 local authorities. There are options to site this within the existing BAAS arrangement or to establish this within one of the other local authorities who could act as host.

A shared adoption service will aim to recruit sufficient adopters for all the children who are referred and would aim for 100% of those children to be placed in a timely way. Most adopters are keen to have a child placed from within the consortium and it is only if there are ensuing delays that they seek a placement from the adoption register. Early access to information about children who need to be placed and consistent contact from a family finding team would retain many adopters for use by consortium agencies.

June Kemp
Team Manager

31 March 2013

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Section 1

Part II: STATEMENT OF PURPOSE 2013/14

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CONTEXT

West Berkshire District Council through the power delegated to the Director of Communities Services, undertakes to provide a comprehensive adoption service. It seeks to operate within the requirements of:-

- The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (and accompanying regulations and guidance) (Amendment 2011)
- The Children Act 1989 (and accompanying regulations and guidance)
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child
- The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 (and accompanying regulations and guidance)
- The Care Standards Act 2000 and
- The Adoption National Minimum Standards 2011
- The Intercountry Adoption (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003
- National Care Standards Commission (Fees and Frequency of Inspection (Adoption Agencies) Regulations 2003 – England
- National Care Standards Commission (Registration) (Amendment) Regulations 2003
- Children Act 2004
- The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005
- The Adoption Agency Regulations 2011
- The Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005
- The 1976 Adoption Act – Section 14
- Family Procedure (Adoption) Rules 2005
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (and associated child protection guidance)

- The Framework for the Assessment of children in need and their families
- Other relevant legislation and regulations and guidance

1 THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE ADOPTION SERVICE

The Adoption Service is provided by the Family Placement Team of West Berkshire District Council. Other services provided by the Family Placement Team are:

- Post-adoption support services
- Special Guardianship services
- The Fostering Service
- Private Fostering services
- Supported accommodation (lodgings)
- Identification and oversight of placements with Independent Fostering Providers

The vision of the team is:-

That West Berkshire will be regarded as having one of the best family placement teams in the country, offering a range of high quality and innovative services that provide safe and stable placements for children and young people. This will be achieved by a skilled, dedicated and motivated team of staff, carers and adopters working together, in partnership with a range of service providers, to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and their families. The Family Placement Team will be a valuable source of specialist knowledge within Children's Services. It will continually evaluate effectiveness and involve users and carers in planning and development to make sure the highest standards are maintained.

The core values of the team are:-

- The child's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of the adoption process
- Promoting equality and valuing diversity underpins all our practice
- Work is undertaken to achieve the highest professional standards possible

- In determining a child's future through adoption the adoption service will work in partnership with the child, those with parental responsibility, prospective adopters and adoptive families

West Berkshire Council seeks to promote the upbringing of children by their birth families in accordance with the spirit and provision of the Children Act 1989. When it is not appropriate for a child to remain in the care of his/her birth family, a range of other permanency options will be considered, one of which is adoption. When adoption is being considered as part of the child's Care Plan, the Adoption Service undertakes to find a permanent alternative family. This family will give the child the opportunity of a secure and stable environment, taking into account the child's specific needs and circumstances. Where there is a plan for permanency for a child who is looked after the council's first consideration for a child under the age of 10 will be adoption.

The service is committed to ensuring that the adoption services provided for children and their families value diversity and promote equality. Each child and their family will have access to services which recognise and address their needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality. The service seeks to ensure that all children are placed with adopters who provide an environment that respects and preserves each child's unique history and enhances the child's confidence and feelings of self worth.

The aims of the Adoption Service are:-

- To ensure that all children in West Berkshire who require permanency by adoption are provided with an adoptive family who can meet all their identified needs and offer a secure, stable and loving environment throughout their childhood, into adolescence and beyond
- To ensure that there are sufficient numbers of adoptive families approved by West Berkshire to meet the needs of the children requiring adoption
- To ensure that a high standard of post placement support is provided for all West Berkshire children placed with adoptive families and children placed with adopters living in West Berkshire, to ensure the maximum success of the placement
- To ensure that there are effective and reliable systems in place for recording, managing and storing information about children placed for adoption and all those affected by the adoption process

The objectives of the Adoption Service are:

- To prepare and assess prospective adoptive applicants applying to the Service who are likely to meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally and nationally.
- To achieve the placement of the children being looked after by West Berkshire Council for whom adoption is part of their Care Plan, with appropriate prospective adoptive families within timescales appropriate to the needs of each child.
- To support approved and waiting adopters in achieving the placement of appropriately matched children.
- To provide a high standard of post placement support to the children placed for adoption by the agency and to their prospective or legal adopters during the pre adoption period and for the first three years post adoption.
- To provide a high standard of post adoption support to all children placed with adopters approved by, and/or living in, West Berkshire where the qualifying requirements for support are met.
- To provide a range of adoption support services in line with the authority's responsibilities under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 and Section 14 of the Adoption Act 1976, in order to minimise the risk of disruption. These support services will look at adoptive families holistically.
- To fulfil the authority's duty under the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 to provide or arrange to provide an intercountry adoption service.
- To provide post adoption support services to adults affected by adoption, including birth family members.
- To provide Schedule 2 counselling services to adopted adults in line with legislation.
- To provide effective and efficient systems for recording and storing information about West Berkshire children placed for adoption, their birth families and others affected by the adoption process.

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service

The Adoption Service operates as part of the Berkshire Local Authority Adoption Agencies Consortium together with the other five unitary authority adoption agencies in Berkshire: Wokingham, Reading, Windsor and Maidenhead, Slough and Bracknell Forest. Catholic Children's Society (Reading) is also an honorary member. The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS) is a joint arrangement set up in 1998 and funded proportionately by all six unitary authorities in order to provide a range of resources relating to adoption for the individual unitary authorities.

The Advisory Service currently comprises a Service Manager, an Adoption Consultant, a Project Worker, a Letterbox Co-ordinator, a Records Officer one day per week, (based at Darwin Close in Reading) and administrative staff.

The original Contract of Quality Standards set out for the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service was as follows:-

- Manage and service the two Berkshire Panels (including attendance by adoption applicants)
- Recruit and train Adoption Panel members
- Provide professional and administrative support for the two Adoption Panels
- Manage the Berkshire Letter Box service which facilitates the exchange of information between adoptive families and birth families
- Provide specialist training on adoption issues for staff in the six Unitary Authorities
- Provide specialist advice and assistance on complex adoption matters to staff in the six unitary authorities
- Provide specialist counselling for adults seeking access to birth records
- Administer the closed children's records and adoption records
- Provide a social work service to the closed children's records and adoption records

These original areas of responsibility have been maintained and many have been further developed, particularly in the light of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

In addition the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service now:-

- Manages the 'Berkshire Adoption Exchange' – twice yearly events that bring together social workers from across the region in an effort to achieve the matching of children with approved adopters
- Facilitates 'Life Appreciation' meetings for children being placed by the Berkshire Unitary Authorities
- In the event of placement breakdown, chairs disruption meetings for children placed by the Berkshire Unitary Authorities
- Co-ordinates development of some pan-Berkshire Adoption Support Services to which all teams have access eg Birth Mothers' Support Group, Birth Fathers' Support Group and Birth Records Workshops
- Supervises direct contact arrangements that are set-up for children placed with adoptive families (pre and post Order)
- Facilitates the Berkshire Adoption Agencies Post Adoption Forum
- Organises the adopters' conference
- Hosts a birth parent project (aim – to offer both integrated independent approaches alongside consistent support and information to significant birth family members when adoption has been formally identified as the plan for a child)

The Adoption Panels for East and West Berkshire are shared with Reading Borough Council, Wokingham District Council, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Council, Bracknell Forest Council and Slough Borough Council.

Post placement and post adoption services

The Adoption Service is committed to providing post placement support services to all West Berkshire Council approved adopters who achieve the placement of a child(ren). Where children are placed from another local authority this will be at an advice level initially, and will include support in working with the placing authority.

The Adoption Service is similarly committed to providing Post Adoption services for all those living in the West Berkshire area whose lives have been affected by adoption, recognising the lifelong implications of adoption for adopters, adopted children, birth relatives and adult adoptees.

The Adoption Service is also committed to providing a counselling and support service to:-

- Any person directly affected by adoption who requires counselling or support
- Adopted persons requiring access to birth records
- Persons requiring information as to the use of the Adoption Contact Register, in particular adopted persons, birth parents and other relatives
- Adults seeking to establish contact with birth family members separated via adoption and requesting an Intermediary Service

Intercountry Adoption

The Adoption Service is committed to fulfilling its duty under The Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999, to provide, or arrange to provide, an Intercountry Adoption Service. The Service, by arrangement with Parents and Children Together Adoption Agency (PACT Reading), delegates to that Agency the work of providing counselling and services to applicants wishing to adopt from abroad. This service is reviewed on an annual basis.

2 NAME AND ADDRESS OF NOMINATED MANAGER:

June Kemp
Family Placement Team Manager
West Berkshire Council
Family Placement Team
West Street House
West Street, Newbury
Berkshire, RG14 1BZ

The nominated manager reports to Sandra Dopson, Children's Services Manager. The Adoption Service Decision Maker is the Head of Children's Services.

3 QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE OF MANAGER

Certificate in Social Services
PQ1
Practice Teaching Award
ILM level 3

In the process of completing ILM level 5

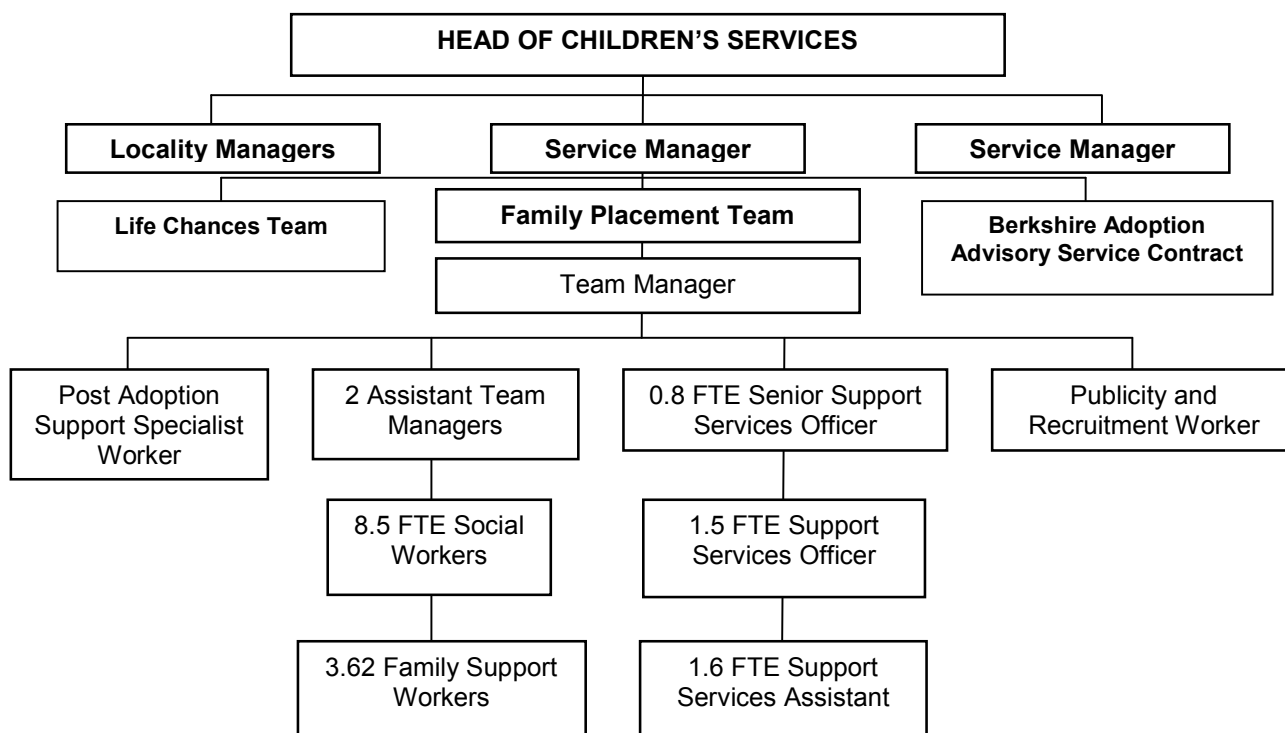
4 STAFFING OF THE ADOPTION AGENCY

The full establishment of the Family Placement Team is:

- 1 Team Manager
- 2 Assistant Team Managers
- 1 Specialist Post Adoption Support Social Worker
- 8.5 FTE Family Placement Social Workers
- 3.62 FTE Family Support Workers
- 1 Publicity and Recruitment Worker
- 4.09 FTE Support Services Staff

All members of the team work across both the Adoption and the Fostering Services and other Family Placement Team responsibilities. All Social Workers within the Family Placement Team who undertake adoption work hold a professional social work qualification ie CQSW, CSS, DipSw, and are registered by the GSCC. They all have a good understanding of adoption issues and regularly attend additional training events to maintain and extend their knowledge base.

The Organisational Structure of the Adoption Service



5 MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF SERVICES PROVIDED

The Adoption Service recognises the importance of systems being in place to monitor and evaluate the provision of services to ensure that the services provided are effective and the quality is of an appropriate standard. The Service is committed to seeking feedback from all users of the Service including users of the post-adoption support services in order to inform future provision.

The Authority is currently reorganising its adoption support services to include two major social events, more specific training after the preparation group and more direct work before and after matching. In line with this, systems are in place to seek and monitor feed-back on the services provided to adoptive parents, adopted children, adult adoptees, and birth parents and relatives.

Feedback from the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service provides annual information about the feedback received from the birth parents/relatives and adopters to whom it provides services on behalf of West Berkshire District Council's Adoption Agency. Feedback can additionally be sought in relation to a specific case and/or will be provided on specific issues arising if there appear to be reasons for concern about the nature or quality of any service offered or provided.

Feedback from prospective applicants and adoptive parents

Feedback from prospective applicants is obtained at various stages during the assessment process:

- Following attendance at the initial information session
- Following an initial visit
- Following attendance at the preparation training group (three days)
- During the Second Opinion Visit at the conclusion of the home study assessment.
- Following approval at Adoption Panel
- Following the placement of a child with the adopters
- Following the granting of an Adoption Order

Adoptive parents attend Adoption Panel both at the time of their initial approval and when being matched with a child/ren.

All applicants receive a visit from the Team Manager or one of the Assistant Team Managers at the end of the home study process, prior to their application being considered by the Authority's Adoption Panel. This interview (known as a Second Opinion) serves a number of purposes, one of which is to invite applicants to share their views about how the preparation/assessment process has been managed by the Authority and experienced by them. This process whilst not a statutory requirement has been recognised by OFSTED as an example of good practice in the Adoption Agency.

Post approval reviews are also undertaken with all approved and waiting adopters in line with the regulations.

Reviews take place:-

- Whenever the agency considers it necessary
- Not more than one year following approval
- At intervals of not more than one year until a child is placed with the prospective adopters or the period of time for which approval was originally given expires, or they formally withdraw from the adoption process

Reviews are carried out by the Family Placement Team Manager or Assistant Team Manager and involve a meeting with the prospective adopters. The views of the prospective adopters are always elicited and taken into account. If the prospective adopters wish to continue to be approved to adopt, a review report is compiled which is shared with them and they have the opportunity to comment on its contents.

After the Adoption Order has been made, the Post Adoption Support Plan which is developed for the Adoption Panel at the time of matching the child and prospective family is reviewed annually. This annual review is conducted by the post adoption support worker and feedback on the post adoption services delivered is gathered at this time.

Feedback from birth parents

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service has a designated staff member who undertakes Birth Parent Counselling on behalf of the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities, thus removing the role from staff who have any level of involvement in placing the child(ren). This separation of roles appears to have assisted a number of the birth parents of children that the Authority has placed for adoption in accessing appropriate counselling and support.

When the Birth Parents' Project Worker has concluded her involvement, birth parents are asked to give their views on the service that they have received via a questionnaire.

Where birth parents are able to engage with the Authority or with the Birth Parent Project at the stage that plans are being made to place their child(ren) for adoption, their thoughts and wishes are proactively sought, both in terms of the adoption plan and in terms of the type of family they would wish their child(ren) to be placed in. This information is included in the Child Placement Report which should be signed by the birth family.

Except where birth parents sever all links with the Agency, contact is maintained with birth parents until the adoption of their child(ren) is legally concluded.

The Birth Parent Project Worker re-contacts all birth parents with whom she has been engaged once the legal adoption of their child(ren) has been concluded in order to advise them of the Adoption Support Services available for birth parents both locally and nationally. This provides a further forum for obtaining feedback on services provided which is then formally recorded/monitored.

Adoption inspection

An Ofsted inspection was completed in February 2011. The outcome of this inspection was “Outstanding.”

Evaluating and responding to feedback

Where a shortfall in services is identified or an expression of dissatisfaction about a service is received by the Authority, this is referred to/checked out by the relevant Team Manager in the first instance (including where necessary liaison with external agencies/organisations) and where it is reasonable for the Authority to do so, action will be taken to address the issue.

Where the expression of dissatisfaction constitutes a ‘complaint’ the matter will be referred to the Authority’s Complaints Officer (see section 8 below).

Statistical information is maintained on feedback from Service Users.

6 PROCEDURES IN RELATION TO PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS

Recruitment of adopters

In January 2013 the Government published Further Action on Adoption: *Finding More Loving Homes* which further details plans to speed up the adoption process by increasing the number of adopters.

As a result there are a number of changes that the Family Placement Team will need to implement over the next year in order to comply with and improve this process. Our team along with the other Berkshire unitaries and BAAS will be looking at the best way to do this.

The Berkshire Consortium of unitaries continues to work closely together to deliver information sessions, preparation training and providing each other with

prospective adopters who live outside of the immediate local authority area from whence the children originate.

The Adoption Service has always been mindful of the period of time that children with special placement needs may wait for placements. In order to prevent 'undue delay' in placing such children, the Service has always pursued specific initiatives in order to attract interest from appropriate families. Where children are unlikely to be able to be linked via the Berkshire Adoption Consortium, agreement is sought at an early stage for these children to be featured in national journals and publications, and fliers detailing the child(ren)'s specific placement needs are sent to other agencies.

All enquiries from prospective adopters are welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval and the subsequent matching and placing process. The authority's information pack is reviewed on an annual basis.

The Agency is part of the Berkshire Adoption Consortium which for the purposes of recruitment and training involves the areas of Bracknell, Wokingham, Windsor and Maidenhead and Slough. These authorities jointly run Information Days for adopters ensuring that there is a session every two months. Prospective adopters are invited to attend these sessions which last for a day to find out about adoption. If after these sessions they wish to proceed with an application they have a visit from a manager in the Family Placement Team who will make a decision at this time as to whether to invite the prospective adopters to attend the adoption preparation group. The prospective adopters are provided with an application form at this time. Once the application is received the agency will make a decision based on its criteria and priorities at the time, as well as the prospective adopters' application to accept or not accept the application.

All adopters are required to have an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check (formerly Criminal Records Bureau check) and references are completed in respect of their employment and character.

Applications from prospective adopters will be prioritised from applicants who appear to have the potential to meet the parenting needs of:-

- Children who are likely to display significant emotional or behavioural difficulties
- Children from minority ethnic groups

- Children who are significantly developmentally delayed and who may require educational support
- Children who have identified health or medical problems and who are likely to need a significant level of ongoing health/medical care
- Children who have an identified physical or learning disability
- Children whose background histories include having a parent diagnosed as having significant mental health difficulties
- Children aged five years or over
- Sibling groups of two or more children where the eldest child is aged five years or over

All applicants will be expected to be able to accept the placement of children with complex histories and children who have incomplete background and/or health information.

Preparation of applicants

All prospective adoptive applicants are required to attend a preparation group. The material used is designed to provide prospective applicants with information about the adoption process, information on children both within Berkshire and nationally who need adoptive parents, and about the potential issues involved in raising adopted children. It was revised in 2005 in the light of new training material which became available from British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). The purpose of the group is to enable people to make an informed decision as to whether or not to make an application and to prepare applicants for the home study process and the adoption task.

The Adoption Service works in co-operation with three other Berkshire Unitary Authorities regarding preparation groups, each area giving priority to those applicants most able to meet the needs of children requiring placement. All prospective applicants are given the opportunity to meet with existing adopters during the preparation groups.

Assessment of applicants

Applicants wishing to be assessed by the Adoption Service as prospective adopters are invited to make a full application after being provided with the necessary information upon which to make a decision to proceed. DBS (formerly

CRB) checks are taken up after receiving a completed application form. They do not need to be completed prior to attending an Information session.

The Adoption Service will prioritise applications that are more likely to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption. If the Service deems an application as being unlikely to succeed, this is acknowledged to the applicants at an early stage and the reasons for this explained.

The Adoption Service's decision as to whether or not to proceed with an application will be based on:-

- The minimum legal and Service criteria
- The Service's priority areas for recruitment applicable at the time

The Service seeks to offer an assessment and approval process that is comprehensive, thorough and fair. Consideration will be given to all the areas of the applicants' lives, detailed within the BAAF Prospective Adopter's Report (PAR). The 'home study' assessment is usually undertaken by a family placement social worker, with a 'second opinion' being provided by one of the managers in the team. Applicants are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets their health and developmental needs – physical, emotional, intellectual and social.

While the Adoption Service does not subscribe to the pure model of competency based assessments, prospective adopters are assisted, through both the preparation groups and the home study process to provide evidence to support their application. This helps to consider/identify the competences and strengths that they have, and those that they will need to develop, if they are to be able to provide for both a child's short and longer term needs.

A range of status, health and statutory checks as well as personal references are taken up on all prospective adoptive applicants in line with the requirements of the Adoption National Minimum Standards. All information provided by prospective adopters is verified where possible in line with good practice.

Prospective adopters are kept informed of their progress throughout. The Adoption Service seeks to balance the need to give applicants time to consider and adjust to new information and ideas and in some cases to demonstrate a capacity to change, whilst avoiding unnecessary delays. Wherever possible the Service seeks to present the applicants to the Service's adoption panel for consideration within eight months of receiving their completed application.

Enquiries from foster carers about adopting a child in their care will be welcomed in the same way as any other enquiry. Foster carers who are interested in adopting children in their care will be entitled to the same preparation and information as other prospective adopters. Foster carers who wish to be approved as agency adopters must complete the same preparation and assessment as any other adoptive applicant. It is expected that such an application would be discussed in full with the appropriate supervising social worker. Generally it is expected that such an application would not be considered where a child had been in placement for less than a year (this is the period of time that courts consider appropriate before they will consider an application from a foster carer to adopt).

All prospective adopters receive a copy of both their assessment report and the second opinion report, at least 10 days before the Adoption Panel that will consider their application and they are invited to send their views in writing to the agency if they wish to do so. These views are incorporated into the report that is presented to the panel.

At the current time the Adoption Service delegates the preparation and assessment of Intercountry Adoption applicants to a local voluntary adoption agency. Please see section 1 above. The contract in place with this agency is reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that the work undertaken is in line with the requirements of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 and the Intercountry Adoption Agency (Hague Convention) Regulations 2003 and accompanying guidance.

Approval processes

The Government's Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay proposes changes to the adoption process by the introduction of a two stage process aimed at speeding up the assessment and training of prospective adopters. Discussions are taking place to consider how services can be shared/developed within the Berkshire Consortium to meet the Government requirements.

All prospective adoptive applicants seeking approval will have their application presented to the Adoption Service's Adoption Panel for consideration. The Service shares a joint Adoption Panel with Wokingham District and Reading Borough Councils (in accordance with Regulation 3.5 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005). The composition of the Panel is in line with Regulations and is held monthly. Additional Panels are arranged if needed. The overall functioning of the Adoption Panel is managed by the professional adviser (Senior Adoption Consultant, Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service).

Panel members and the Adoption Service's decision maker are supplied with copies of all the reports to be considered by the panel on each agenda item, in the week prior to the panel meeting. The supervising social worker for the applicants or, in her/his absence, her/his family placement line manager will be present when an application is considered to answer the panel's questions and assist them in reaching a decision. Applicants are given the opportunity to attend the panel at which their application is to be heard. Adopters are also able to attend the panel which hears the match between themselves and a child/ren.

The recommendation of the panel is conveyed to the applicants verbally on the day of panel by the Panel Chair and to the Adoption Service Decision Maker by Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service within 24 hours (draft minutes will be forwarded within four working days). The Decision Maker reaches the final decision in relation to any application within seven days of the panel meeting.

The Adoption Service Decision Maker will convey their decision in writing (e-mail, fax or memo) to the applicants' supervising social worker and the Family Placement Team Manager. The Team Manager ensures that letters confirming the Service's decision are sent to the adoptive applicants. In the event of an application being deferred or turned down, prospective adopters are informed of their right to make representation. This can be either to their own agency or to the Independent Review Mechanism operated by BAAF.

Adopters are reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that they remain suitable to adopt and relates only to the placement of children from within the UK and does not cover placement of children from abroad. Adopters are not approved for a specific age range but must meet the general criteria for adoption. Panel may give advice as to the age range and numbers of children they consider most suitable for the adopters.

All approved adopters are firstly considered for the placement of a child(ren) via the Berkshire Adoption Consortium. However, if a suitable placement is not identified within the first three months of the applicants' approval, approved adopters will, subject to their agreement, be made available for consideration by other placing agencies via the National Adoption Register. This is a national database, operated by BAAF, and contains information both about children waiting to be placed for adoption and approved prospective adopters who are waiting for a match.

Approved applicants whose range of approval suggests that they are unlikely to be 'matched' to a child(ren) via the consortium within the first three months of their approval will be referred to the register at an earlier stage to be 'made live' (subject to the agreement of the other member agencies).

Support to prospective adopters

Approved adopters are given clear information about the matching, introduction and placement process. All approved and waiting adopters have a named supervising social worker who will provide regular support throughout the post approval period. This social worker will assist applicants in considering the specific placement needs and issues relevant to children awaiting placement and will objectively evaluate whether it is appropriate to pursue possible matches.

Where information about a child(ren) is complex or requires specialist knowledge to evaluate its implications the Adoption Service will seek to ensure that the prospective adopters have access to people who can help them to clarify and explore the implications of the information and thus to make an informed decision about whether or not to proceed. The Agency makes arrangements for adopters to meet with the Medical Adviser prior to the match at panel as well as the current foster carer of the child, ensuring that the adopters receive all the information that they need prior to the matching panel, in addition to the comprehensive written information that they also receive.

The Adoption Service will assess the risks there may be to the adoptive family in pursuing any identified match, alert the prospective adopters to any risks and give advice on these. The Service will advise and support adoptive parents in preparing children within their household or wider network for the impending placement and adoption.

Where adopters do not directly reflect the ethnicity or heritage of the child to be placed, the Adoption Service will provide advice, training and support aimed at enabling the prospective adopters to promote the child's racial and ethnic identity in a way that is likely to lead to a positive self-image, knowledge about and connection to their origins. The Service will seek to assist adopters to understand the need for, and to develop, strategies to help the child address racism or other forms of discrimination.

The Adoption Service will ensure that adoptive parents are informed, prior to a placement, about support services that are available within the area and how they might access these services, should they or the child require specialist support after the Adoption Order has been made. The Service will also ensure that prospective adopters are aware of what (if any) Adoption Allowances may be payable in respect of the child and the process by which the payment of this allowance will be reviewed. The Service will ensure that adopters are aware of any benefits to which they or the child might be entitled and how they might claim them.

Following the placement of a child, all prospective adopters approved by the Adoption Service will continue to receive supervising social worker support from an identified social worker within the Family Placement Team, until such time as the legal adoption is concluded.

It is the expectation of the Adoption Service that all children placed with West Berkshire Council approved adopters will have a named social worker who will be responsible for supervising the child's welfare and supporting her/him within the placement. Support will be made available to the adoptive parents to help them to establish an open acknowledgement of the child's adoptive situation within the family.

The Adoption Service will encourage adopters to formally sign up to any plan for direct or indirect contact with birth family members if this was agreed at the time of placement and will support them in facilitating these arrangements. The Service will provide advice and support to the prospective adopters on progressing the application to adopt to the appropriate court at the appropriate time. (The Service will negotiate whether the court application fee is to be met by the applicants or by the placing agency.)

The Adoption Service recognises that timely and effective support will help to avoid placement breakdowns. However, the complexity of children's needs, the impact of any neglect or maltreatment and the interaction with the adoptive parents' patterns and ways of managing these difficulties, may threaten placements, whatever services have been made available.

Should a placement experience difficulties, whatever the level of severity, the Service will seek to ensure that:-

- Separate support is available to the prospective adopters and the child
- The child's welfare remains the first consideration
- The review process in respect of the placement acknowledges the difficulties within the placement and identifies/agrees interventions and supports, focused on achieving a positive outcome for the child
- The possibility of placement breakdown is acknowledged and planned appropriately
- If a disruption occurs, a disruption meeting is held, chaired by the BAAS, in order to assist the responsible agency in gathering as much information as possible to assist with planning for the child's future

7 POST ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

The Agency recognises that the Adoption and Children Act 2002 places a duty on every Local Authority to establish and maintain a service designed to meet the needs in relation to adoption of:-

- Children who have been or may be adopted
- The birth relatives of such children (ie relatives within the meaning of Section 14.4 (1) of the Act)
- Any person with whom the adopted child has a relationship which appears to the Local Authority to be beneficial to the welfare of the child
- Persons who have adopted or may adopt a child
- Any children of such persons (whether by birth or adoption)

In addition, 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 and places duties on Local Authorities to carry out assessments of need for Adoption Support Services and having carried out an assessment to decide whether to provide any services. Moreover, Local Authorities must act reasonably in deciding whether to provide Adoption Support Services following an assessment, although there is an assumption that an assessment of need for a service will not automatically result in the provision of that service.

While the Agency recognises the lifelong implications of adoption for adopters, adopted children, birth relatives and adult adoptees, in reaching any decision as to what services to provide the Authority will take into account both the circumstances of each individual case and the resources that are available locally.

West Berkshire District Council is committed to providing the full range of Adoption Support Services that Local Authorities are required by Regulations to provide, following an assessment. These services are:-

- Financial support (ASR 3.1.a)
- Services to enable groups of adoptive children, adoptive parents and natural parents or former guardians or an adoptive child to discuss matters relating to adoption (ASR 3.1.b)

- Assistance, including mediation services, in relation to contact between an adoptive child and a natural parent, natural sibling, former guardian or a related person of the adoptive child (ASR 3.1.c)
- Therapeutic services for adoptive children (ASR 3.1.d)
- Assistance for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of the relationship between an adoptive child and his adoptive parent, including training for adoptive parents to meet any special needs of the child; and respite care (ASR 3.1.e)
- Assistance where disruption of an adoptive placement or adoption arrangement following the making of an adoption order has occurred, or is in danger of occurring, making arrangements for the provision of mediation services and organising and running meetings to discuss disruptions (ASR 3.1.f)
- Counselling, advice and information

While the Council seeks to ensure provision of the full range of services, the Authority may make arrangements for the services to be provided by others; either other Local Authorities within the Berkshire Consortium, the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service, Voluntary Adoption Agencies or independent providers of adoption services.

The Authority's full range of Adoption Support Services is not available to those involved in adoptions by a step-parent or intercountry adopter. In these cases, services provided are limited to counselling, advice and information.

The Authority is committed to providing Adoption Support Services as part of an overall integrated service for all child(ren) and families who are engaged with the Children's Services and in the context of the local Preventive Strategy, recognising that while there are some services that are specific to adoption, it is essential that adopted child(ren) and their families also have access to mainstream services available to child(ren) and families with particular needs.

The Agency is also committed to providing counselling and support service to:-

- Any person directly affected by adoption who requires counselling or support
- Adopted persons requiring access to birth records

- Persons requiring information as to the use of the Adoption Contact Register, in particular adopted persons, birth parents and other relatives
- Adults seeking to establish contact with birth family members separated via adoption and requesting an Intermediary Service

Adult adoptees

The Local Authority is responsible for providing a birth records counselling service to adult adoptees living in the area, providing, on request, advice and counselling about their adoptions, together with any information that is available from adoption records. In the case of persons adopted before 12th November 1975, the Agency provides counselling in line with relevant legal requirements before sharing any information available. Counselling is also provided for adult adoptees adopted after that date if this is requested and the Agency encourages adoptees to make use of this service.

Where an adult adoptee who does not live in the West Berkshire District Council area is seeking information from his/her adoption records and West Berkshire District Council is the Appropriate Adoption Agency, advice and counselling about the process is provided and the Authority co-operates in providing information from its records to any Adoption Support Agency involved or to the Local Authority in whose area the adoptee lives, in order to facilitate him/her accessing his/her adoption records.

When the Agency is approached by another Adoption Agency seeking information from the adoption case records for an adoptee who remains under the age of 18 the Agency will only release information if there are clear reasons to suggest that this would be in keeping with the best interests of the young person and with the consent of the adoptive parent(s).

If an adoptee is seeking to trace a birth relative(s) he/she is informed that the Agency is not able to provide a 'tracing' service, however, if he/she is able to provide the name and address of the person whom he/she wishes to contact the agency will, where staffing permits, provide an intermediary service. Alternatively the Agency will provide details of other agencies and organisations that provide tracing and/or intermediary services or that might be able to offer additional support appropriate to the individual's needs. All adoptees are provided with details of the Adoption Contact Register and advised as to how they might access it.

Intermediary services for birth relatives

Where a birth parent, sibling or grandparent of an adopted person lives within the West Berkshire District Council Area and is wishing to establish contact with his/her birth child/sibling/grand-child he/she is offered a counselling interview.

The Agency is not generally in a position to undertake tracing on behalf of birth relatives and is not able to provide any identifying information in relation to an adopted person to birth family members, even if the person seeking contact was a sibling and was also adopted him/herself. Birth relatives are provided with a list of Registered Adoption Support Agencies and encouraged to make use of the Adoption Contact Register operated by the Registrar General.

The Agency only routinely provides intermediary services where the following criteria are met:

- The birth relative lives within the West Berkshire District Council Area
- The birth relative is able to provide the name and address of the person with whom they wish to make contact
- The birth relative is able to provide evidence of their relationship to the adoptee
- The adopted person is over the age of 18 and lives within the West Berkshire District Council Area

All birth relatives seeking to achieve a reunion are advised to become members of NORCAP.

If the Agency is acting as an intermediary, if contact with the adopted person is established and if he/she wishes to have contact with his/her birth relative(s) all parties are offered support prior to and following any reunion. While the Agency is acting as an intermediary, support will be made available to any involved party if their circumstances suggest that this would be helpful.

8 THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

All prospective adopters engaging with the Adoption Service and all birth parents of children for whom the Service is planning adoption are provided with written information about complaints procedures, including contact details for accessing the Complaints and Public Information Manager for Children and Young People's Services. All young people, for whom there is an adoption plan and who are of an

appropriate age and understanding are likewise informed of the complaints procedures and of the role of West Berkshire Council's Children's Rights Officer, and how they can contact her/him should they wish to do so.

Other service users are also provided with details of the complaints process on engagement.

The Family Placement Team Manager monitors all complaints received in respect of any aspect of the work undertaken by the Family Placement Team.

9 DETAILS OF THE REGISTRATION AUTHORITY

Ofsted
Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

Tel 08456 404045

**June Kemp
Team Manager
Family Placement Team
31 March 2013**

Individual Executive Member Decision

Title of Report:	Annual Report and Statement of Purpose of the West Berkshire Fostering Service
Report to be considered by:	Individual Executive Member Decision
Date on which Decision is to be taken:	5 August 2013
Forward Plan Ref:	ID2699 and ID2700

Purpose of Report: To report on the work of the adoption team and to enable Members to scrutinise the operation of the Fostering Service.

Recommended Action: To agree report.

Reason for decision to be taken: To comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2003. The department has a statutory responsibility to report on the work of the Fostering service to Elected Members on a six monthly basis and also to agree the Statement of Purpose for this service.

Other options considered: N/A

Key background documentation: N/A

Portfolio Member Details	
Name & Telephone No.:	Councillor Irene Neill - Tel (0118) 971 2671
E-mail Address:	ineill@westberks.gov.uk

Contact Officer Details	
Name:	June Kemp
Job Title:	Team Manager
Tel. No.:	01635 503103
E-mail Address:	jkemp@westberks.gov.uk

Implications

Policy:	The report is in line with the Council's policies regarding Looked After Children
Financial:	None
Personnel:	N/A
Legal/Procurement:	The report complies with the legal requirements of the Care Standards Act
Property:	N/A
Risk Management:	N/A

Is this item relevant to equality?	Please tick relevant boxes	Yes	No
Does the policy affect service users, employees or the wider community and:			
• Is it likely to affect people with particular protected characteristics differently?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Is it a major policy, significantly affecting how functions are delivered?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Will the policy have a significant impact on how other organisations operate in terms of equality?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Does the policy relate to functions that engagement has identified as being important to people with particular protected characteristics?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
• Does the policy relate to an area with known inequalities?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Outcome (Where one or more 'Yes' boxes are ticked, the item is relevant to equality)			
Relevant to equality - Complete an EIA available at www.westberks.gov.uk/eia			<input type="checkbox"/>
Not relevant to equality			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Consultation Responses

Members:

Leader of Council:	Councillor Gordon Lundie
Overview & Scrutiny Management Commission Chairman:	Councillor Brian Bedwell
Ward Members:	All Members
Opposition Spokesperson:	Councillor David Allen

Local Stakeholders:

Officers Consulted:

Trade Union:

Is this item subject to call-in?	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No: <input type="checkbox"/>
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Supporting Information

1. Background

- 1.1 This report has been produced in line with the Fostering Services Regulations.
- 1.2 This is circulated on an annual basis to inform the Council of the team's activities regarding the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers.

2. Equalities Impact Assessment Outcomes

- 2.1 There is no decision to be made and therefore no Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 As this report meets the exception criteria set out in the Individual Decision making protocol this decision can be made by the Portfolio Holder under delegated authority.

Appendices

Appendix A – West Berkshire Fostering Service Annual Report – April 2012 to March 2013

Appendix B – Fostering Service Statement of Purpose 2013-2014

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WEST BERKSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE

Annual Report – April 2012 to March 2013

Introduction

Membership of panels and their functions in respect of approving, reviewing and terminating approvals are now set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Children Act Guidance Volume 4 Fostering Services 2011. Fostering panels have a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of foster care for children.

The Fostering Panel has various functions, including responsibility for approving foster carers and the numbers and ages of children they are approved for. Approval can be as follows: Short Term, Long Term/Specific Respite, Relief Care, Short Breaks Care, Mother and Baby Placements, Supported Lodging, Emergency Placements as well as Temporary Approvals. Panel oversees the foster carers' first reviews and any subsequent reviews that may need panel's consideration. Panel also has a role in permanency planning where long term fostering is considered the best option.

The panel has continued to meet on a monthly basis, usually on the second Thursday morning of each month. Eleven panels were held throughout the year dealing with a variety of business with one Training/Business panel taking place.

Panel Membership

Panel membership this year has been as follows:

Name	Role	Start date	Resignation Date
Ros Whittaker	Independent Panel Chair	Oct 2008	Continuing
Gwen Mason	Elected Councillor Rep	July 1012	Continuing
Sue Tarrant	Fostering Service Rep	June 2012	Continuing
Clare Minchin	Children and Families (inc Disabled Children) Rep	May 2003	Continuing
Sarah Holderness	Children and Families Rep	Feb 2011	Continuing
Maxine Slade	Education Service Rep		Continuing
Waheeda Soomro	Community and Diversity Rep (Independent)	Oct 2009	Continuing
Charlotte Inglis	Care Leaver	Oct 2012	
June Kemp	Panel Adviser	Oct 2009	Continuing
Helen Benn	Panel Administrator	Feb 2003	Continuing

There is no requirement for the fostering panel to have a fixed membership, although the ability of the panel to function cohesively and with a level of consistency must be taken into account. This is best achieved by having core membership. The new guidance and regulations allow panel members to

remain on the panel with no maximum or minimum tenure. This will enable those panel members who choose to remain on the panel the opportunity to do so. Panel members are drawn from a 'central list' maintained by the fostering service of people who have the appropriate qualifications and/or skills to serve as panel members. All panel members receive annual appraisals.

The panel membership continues to meet the requirements of the Fostering Regulations 2002 and 2011. Changes to panel procedures are now in place to meet the new Fostering Service National Minimum Standards 2011.

A social work representative resigned from the panel in November 2012. We have a panel member who is able to provide ethnicity and diversity expertise. We also have a panel member with care experience. Recruitment to the panel is ongoing with an emphasis on recruiting an independent and health member.

All panel members approach the task conscientiously, studying the papers in advance and preparing thoroughly for the meetings. The proceedings are ably chaired by Ros Whittaker and excellently organised and recorded by Helen Benn.

Panel members attended one business meeting this year and panel members generally attend one training session once a year. Panel members also have the opportunity to access social care training and attend lunchtime seminars or conferences run by the department.

PANEL BUSINESS

Summary of Panel Recommendations (April 12 to March 13)

There have been 11 panel meetings this year.

Fostering Panel Business	
Cases Heard	
Short term approval	7
Short Breaks approval	0
Full Approval Family Friends/Connected Person	3
Temporary Approval of Connected Person	13
Temporary Approval that went on to SGO	5
Temporary Approval with an SGO in progress	3
Temporary Approval arrangements that ended	2
Temporary Approval extensions	4
Long Term Matches non Kinship	7
Long Term Connected Person	3
First or Subsequent Reviews	19
Changes of Approval	7
Temporary Change of Approval	2
Issues of Concern/CP	1
Updates	12
Private Fostering Arrangements	2

Relief Carers	1
Approved for specific child	1
Safeguarding and Support	0
Exemptions	3
Qualifying Determinations	9
Cases Deferred	0
Resignations	4
Applicants not approved	0
Representations	1
Total Number of newly approved carers	14
Total number of temporary approval of connected persons reported	13
Total number of items considered	111

Summary of Foster Carer Resignations and De-registrations (April 12 to March 13)

Number of Resignations and De-registrations	9	
Temporary approval placements became permanent	5	Special Guardianship Orders granted
Change in carers' circumstances	4	Separation/resigned to devote time to family

Total of Approved Fostering Households <i>(NB: several households approved for more than one group) Total number of placements managed by the Fostering Service</i>	84	
Type of placement	Available	In use
Number of short term placements	90	62
• Short term placements on hold		11
Number of family friends and connected persons placements	20	20
Number of long term placements (non kinship)	23	23
Number of short breaks placements	12	12
Number of supported lodgings placements	1	1
Mother and baby placements	1	1
Relief care placements	12	12
Total	159	142

Additional Information

- Carers are often approved for one or a sibling group of two or three children. We currently have 23 fostering household who are able to take a sibling group of two children, twenty of which are in use. We also have seven households who are able to take up to three children, three of which are full. Where carers are not full this is usually due to discrepancy in the “fit” between carers’ availability and the needs of

children already placed. We also have three carers who are currently on hold due to their family circumstances.

- We have seven fostering household on hold who provide 11 placements. This is generally due to a change in the personal circumstances of the carers. Although it can also be used to secure a placement for a child who is likely to come into care.
- The number of children requiring fostering placement has continued to increase. This significant increase is putting a lot of pressure on placement availability and this will put additional pressure on current placements.
- At the time of writing this report there is one foster carer with a temporary change to their terms of approval.
- There have been no complaints made by a foster carer in this period
- There has been one issue of concern regarding the conduct of one foster carer. The investigation concluded that the carer's behaviour fell short of the expected conduct appropriate to their role as an approved foster carer.
- There was one allegation regarding foster carers that met the threshold to be investigated by the Local Authority Designated Officer. This was unsubstantiated.

Fostering Reviews

The foster carer's annual review of approval addresses all relevant aspects of the Minimum Fostering Standards and Regulations. The reviews are chaired by the off-line Family Placement Assistant Team Manager to give increased independence and scrutiny to the process. All the completed reviews are further scrutinised by the Team Manager who monitors compliance with the regulations via both monthly spreadsheets and scrutiny of the overall report before final sign off.

The total number of foster carers' reviews completed this year is 51, 30 of which were completed within 13 months and nine of which were first reviews. Five took place within 14 months and three within 15 months. Where there was a delay these related to specific issues within the foster care household which needed to be resolved in order to offer a meaningful review eg change of household composition, medical issues and addressing issues of concern.

Outcome of OFSTED inspection of the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service is inspected by Ofsted. The most recent inspection, in January 2011, rated the overall effectiveness of the service as "Good". The outcome for Children and Young People was "Outstanding" and we were rated "Good" for the Quality of the Service, Safeguarding Children and Young People, Leadership and Management.

To improve the quality and standard of care further Ofsted made the following recommendations:

Children have prompt access to doctors and other health professionals, including specialist services (in conjunction with the responsible authority), when they need these services. Standard 6.4

In the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider takes into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed. Standard 10.6

Foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers). For foster carers who were approved as such before April 2008, the Standards are attained by April 2011 (or by April 2012 for family and friends foster carers). Fostering households may use the same evidence workbook. Standard 20.3

Support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. Standard 20.8

The inspection report is available upon request from the Family Placement Team. It is also available on the Ofsted website.

Steps have already been taken to ensure that the above recommendations are addressed.

WEST BERKSHIRE CHILDREN'S SERVICES DATA

Number of Children Looked After by West Berkshire (as at 31 March 2013)

Total number of Looked after Children	145	
Total number of Looked After Children placed with West Berkshire carers	94	This does not include short breaks, relief care, supported lodgings, adult placements or children placed from another local authority using our placements.
Males	55	
Females	39	
Percentage aged 9 and over	64%	
Percentage from black and minority ethnic groups	8.5 %	

Number in West Berkshire placements	94	
Number placed with independent fostering agency carers	21	Two of these are young people are UASC, one has a disability.
Number placed with other local authority carers	2	
Number in fostering placements	89	

Summary of relevant Indicators data for March 2013

- Percentage of looked after children with three or more placement moves in the last year is 3.7%.
- Percentage of children adopted (and Special Guardianship Orders) from the Authority in the last year is 8.6% (PAF C23).

Short Breaks Care

The authority has eight carers approved specifically for short breaks care for children with disabilities as well as four foster carers who offer short breaks care in addition to foster care.

Recruitment

Recruitment of foster carers has, this year, been targeted at those able to consider taking placements of children across all age ranges and across varying timescales with specific consideration to the availability of placement choice. In particular a specific campaign of radio advertisements aimed at recruiting long term carers for older children requiring stable placements has been used to good effect. The use of an online web enquiry form together with targeted advertising promotions has continued to be highly successful in producing a regular level of enquiries for filtering into the preparation and assessment training processes.

Short Breaks Care – we have continued our publicity and advertising activity for specific Short Breaks radio advertisements across West Berkshire. The revamped web site resources (including an on-line response form) and targeted newspaper advertisements for information events are specifically aimed at including Short Breaks Carers. Short Breaks Care is an integral part of the overall Fostering Advertising and Promotional Plan for the period and the foreseeable future and continues to produce a regular number of enquiries.

Recruitment activity has also been used to produce enquiries for Supportive Lodgings Placement Hosts in conjunction with our service provider Step by Step. This has involved minimal extra effort and cost but has greatly added to the number of hosts available to add to the leaving care and vulnerable young person accommodation options.

Advertising continues to be targeted throughout West Berkshire with particular attention paid to the different requirements of the eastern and central/west

regions of the area. Specific radio and press advertising for the eastern region has been run with Reading based resources; this campaign ran until the end of March 2012 and continued through to the end of March 2013.

During the later part of the 2012/2013 year activity aimed at generating a county wide collaboration on recruitment activities and resources was started and is anticipated to start producing results from May 2012 onwards. These activities and resources are planned to be supplemental to, rather than replace, existing recruitment plans and activities.

In the past year (April 2012 to March 2013) 115 fostering enquiries were received with 57 information packs sent out. During that period 22 prospective foster carers requested an initial visit and 16 took place. 5 who requested a visit that didn't take place either withdrew or failed to respond. 12 carers were assessed and subsequently approved

Three fostering preparation groups were organised over the year and we held three recruitment information evenings.

The average time taken for a fostering assessment, from formal application to approval following consideration by Fostering Panel, is approximately six months which compares favourably nationally.

Currently there are no foster carers from ethnic backgrounds other than white European. There is a need to recruit foster carers to meet the needs of separated children who are currently arriving from areas such as Afghanistan. We engage with members of the local Black and Minority Ethnic Forum who provide mentors for foster carers who look after children who are a different ethnicity from themselves.

The Fostering Service operates an equal opportunities policy in relation to all its work with carers, children and their families. Matching procedures attempt first to meet as many of a child's needs as possible and second to identify any unmet needs and to put in place measures to address any shortfall in provision. Carers are strongly encouraged to attend training on valuing diversity and there has also been specific training for male carers. As part of preparation for the foster carers' annual reviews we always seek the views of the foster carers, the children in placement, their parents, and foster carers' own children, regarding the service provided by the Fostering Service and ways that the Service can improve further.

Performance of the team is monitored in a variety of ways, via departmental management information (The Red Book), via team generated spreadsheets and databases which are updated and circulated on a monthly basis, through staff supervision and regular file audits, in addition to the foster carers' annual reviews mentioned above.

Placement Factors

Our placement stability figures continue to be exceptionally good.

We are continuing to concert our efforts on keeping all young people needing placements 'in house' and living close to where their birth families live but this

is becoming increasingly challenging given the number of children and young people requiring placements. Our use of independent fostering providers is steadily increasing.

The Temporary Approval of Connected Persons has increased, many of which are progressing on to a Special Guardianship Orders. Five Special Guardianship Orders have been granted with eight still in proceedings.

Parent and child placements are continuing to be considered a safe setting for both mother and baby to assess and support them in care. We now have a policy and procedures to meet the requirement of these placements.

Fostering Support

The Life Chances Team of workers from different disciplines (education, education welfare, educational psychology, youth work, health and early intervention) continues to have a key impact both on the recruitment of more locally based carers for formerly 'hard to place' young people. This multi-agency team focuses on improving the life chances of looked after and adopted children and has collectively been very successful in supporting both the young people and their foster carers.

The Life Chances Team focuses on the needs of the looked after child and is a very important aspect of the fostering services support strategy. All carers have direct access to members of this team.

We have recently launched a home study handbook for foster carers who are in the assessment stage of the process.

We currently run a mentoring scheme for foster carers in the east and west of the area. The purpose of this group is to support carers who are situated out of the immediate areas.

We are introducing induction training for newly approved foster carers and setting up workshops for carers to complete their CWDC standards.

We have an established working relationship with the West Berkshire Foster Carers' Association and use this as a forum for consultation and working collaboratively to develop the service.

Foster carers are involved with the preparation training and where possible we link new carers at an early stage with more experienced foster carers.

Panel continues to seek and receive feedback from panel users, both carers and staff, on the panel process and how it is experienced by users, together with suggestions for improvement.

The general feedback is good in relation to the quality of information provided about panel; applicants felt welcomed and they felt that questions were relevant and important issues were considered. Applicants are also invited to make positive suggestions on how fostering applications are processed or how the panel process can be improved.

Summary

Foster carers play an extremely important role, providing much needed support and security for often very vulnerable children and enabling their successful transition into independent adult life. Fostering is a challenging role and requires skills and dedication. We want to encourage more people to become foster carers and make sure that they have the support and skills to meet the varied and complex needs of looked after children.

The Children's Minister, Edward Timpson, has written to foster carers about the valuable role they play in supporting the children they care for, and sets out what the Government will be doing to support them over the coming year which includes:

- The recruitment and retention of foster carers
- The assessment and approval of foster carers
- Giving better support to foster carers, children and their families when children return home from care
- Increasing the status, security and stability of long term foster care
- Training and support for foster carers and the social workers who work with them and their foster children.

The fostering panel continues to have a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of foster carers for children. The panel also has responsibility for making decisions about approval and terms of approval and assessing the continuing ability of foster carers and their household to meet the complex needs of children. The Fostering Service has an efficient and effective fostering panel that ensures that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers, in line with the overriding objective to promote and safeguard the welfare of Looked After Children.

This has been another busy year for the Family Placement Team in terms of placements. There has been an increase in the number of siblings requiring foster care, an increase in Connected Persons Assessments, and a significant increase in the number of older children needing long term placements as well as referrals for family finding for adoption. The team has worked hard to keep young people in local, in-house placements thereby enabling them to maintain the links with their families and communities.

June Kemp
Family Placement Team Manager
Fostering Panel Adviser

31 March 2013

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WEST BERKSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

FOSTERING SERVICE

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE 2013 – 2014

Aims and Objectives of the Fostering Service

The West Berkshire Fostering Service is run in accordance with the National Minimum Standards which are underpinned by the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and 2011 and the National Care Standards Act 2000. Statutory Guidance for Fostering Services – Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review sets out the wider context for local authorities as providers and commissioners of fostering services. It also strives to follow the best practice guidance outlined in the UK National Standards for Foster Care and Code of Practice (1999).

The Fostering Service exists to provide high quality locally based substitute family care, on either a short or long term basis; to meet the needs of looked after children and young people who are unable to live with their birth parents. The service also supports some children within their families of origin by providing regular periods of family-based short breaks care.

The service is committed to ensuring that the foster care services provided for children and young people and their families value diversity and promote equality. Each child and their family will have access to services which recognise and address their needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture, disability and sexuality. The service seeks to ensure that foster carers provide care that respects and preserves each child's unique history and enhances the child's confidence and feelings of self worth.

The service aims to provide (either directly or via work with partner agencies) services which meet the individual needs of Looked After Children, as identified through the assessment, care planning, pathway planning and reviewing processes. This includes the identification and provision of necessary additional services and support eg education, health, psychotherapeutic and youth work services. The service aims to maximise young people's life chances by providing them with positive childhood experiences and the opportunity to reach their full potential as they move towards adulthood. This work is supported by the new Care Planning, Placement and Case Review regulations that came into force on 1st April 2011.

The service is committed to consulting with children, young people, their parents, foster carers and carers' birth children, and to ensuring that the views of all relevant parties are taken into account in both individual care planning and in service development. Wherever possible people within the child or young person's network of family and friends are assessed and supported in the same way as stranger foster carers.

The service regards foster carers as members of the professional care team. It is committed to providing foster carers with the support and training necessary to enable them to offer high quality care to all children and young people who are in receipt of family placement services. The service endorses the Foster Carers' Charter putting foster carers at the heart of arrangements for looked after children.

The Family Placement Team

The Fostering Service is provided by the Family Placement Team of West Berkshire District Council.

Other services provided by the Family Placement Team are:

- The Adoption service
- Post-adoption support services
- Special Guardianship services
- Private fostering services
- Identification and oversight of placements with Independent Fostering Providers

The vision of the team is:

That West Berkshire will be regarded as having one of the best Family Placement Teams in the country, offering a range of high quality and innovative services that provide safe and stable placements for children and young people. This will be achieved by a skilled, dedicated and motivated team of staff and carers working together, in partnership with a range of service providers, to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and young people. The Family Placement Team will be a valuable source of specialist knowledge within Children's Services. It will continually evaluate effectiveness and involve users and carers in planning and development to make sure the highest standards are maintained.

The core values of the team are:

- The needs of the children and young people are always paramount
- Promoting equality and valuing diversity underpins all our practice
- Work is undertaken to achieve the highest professional standards
- To work in partnership with children, birth families and other professionals involved with the care of the children

Services and Facilities provided by the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service currently offers:

Planned and emergency foster care for individual children and sibling groups of all ages, including specialist care for disabled children, across the full range of short and long term placements, and relief care when necessary for established placements.

Planned and emergency family and friends foster care for individual children and siblings of all ages across the full range of long and short term placements.

Family based day and overnight short breaks care for children and young people and their families including specialist care to meet the needs of disabled children.

Parent and Child Placements.

The Fostering Service supports this by providing:

Close links with the Department's children and families' teams to ensure integrated planning and provision of services for individual service users and effective service development work.

Skilled staff with the knowledge and experience to help ensure that the service provided is safe and appropriate for all potential service users.

Appropriately trained and experienced social work and support staff to provide all foster carers' with a named supervising social worker. These social workers provide ongoing supervision, support, information and advice to foster carers. They also promote foster carers' training and professional development needs.

A proactive recruitment and retention strategy for foster carers that seeks to maximise the number and range of foster carers available locally and thus ensure that there is appropriate local placement choice wherever possible so that children are able to remain close to their home areas.

An effectively administered payments scheme that covers the financial costs of caring for children and young people.

A training programme for all new and existing foster carers, including the NVQ social care programme, an on-line diploma programme for experienced foster carers and an on-line short course programme designed to enable foster carers to meet the relevant CWDC standards for all foster carers. Foster carers are also encouraged to complete the CWDC standards both as part of the initial approval and in the form of ongoing assessment.

The assessments of prospective foster carers that are in line with national standards, including preparatory training in groups and individual assessments of prospective foster carers and their households.

A properly constituted fostering panel with an independent chairperson, administered in line with regulatory requirements. This panel, which meets at least monthly, considers and makes recommendations to the agency decision maker about:

- the approval of all new fostering applicants including family and friends foster care and the approval of connected people;
- first reviews after approval;
- requests for changes to the approval status of existing foster carers;
- matches of children and foster carers for long term fostering placements;
- allegations, complaints and issues of serious concern relating to foster carers;
- Panel also offers advice in relation to safeguarding arrangements to support approved foster carers;
- it also considers the acceptance of private fostering arrangements.

Management and Staffing Structure – 2013

The Manager of the Fostering Service is the Family Placement Team Manager, June Kemp, who reports to the Children’s Services Manager, Sandra Dopson.

The Agency Decision Maker is the Head of Children and Young People’s Services, Mark Evans.

All members of the team work across both the Adoption and the Fostering Services and have other Family Placement Team responsibilities. All Social Workers within the Family Placement Team hold a professional social work qualification ie CQSW, CSS, Dip Sw, Social work degree and are registered by the HCPC. In addition to this they have a good understanding of fostering issues and regularly attend additional training events to maintain and extend their knowledge base.

The full establishment of the Family Placement Team is:

1	Team Manager
2	Assistant Team Managers
1	Specialist Post-adoption support social worker
8.5 FTE	Family Placement Social Workers
3.62 FTE	Family Support Workers
1	Publicity and Recruitment Worker
4.09 FTE	Support Services Staff

Staffing Position as at March 2013

Position	Name	FT/PT
Team Manager	June Kemp	FT
Assistant Team Managers	Keith Langley	FT
	Amanda Cornwall	PT
Social Workers	Lucy Hughes	FT
	Peter Field	PT
	Sharon Hemmings	FT
	Susan Tarrant	FT
Maternity Leave	Selina Beety	FT
Adoption Leave	Trudi Vickery	PT
Secondment	Dawn Cox	FT
Secondment	Jia Sidique	PT
Post-adoption Support Social Worker	Mary Heslin	FT
Family Placement Support Workers	Alex Wickens	PT
	Andy Blackwood	FT
	Ann Athawes	PT
	Vera Lizunova	FT
Publicity and Recruitment Worker	John North	FT
Snr Support Services Officer	Helen Benn	PT
Support Services Officers	Andrea Martin	PT
	Amy Wheeler	PT
	Alexandra Steward	PT
Support Services Assistant	Karen Hugo	PT
	Linda Burry	PT

Complaints

All foster carers and looked after children and young people and their parents are encouraged to make effective representations about any aspect of the fostering service. They are provided with written information about complaint procedures, including contact details for the Complaints and Public Information Manager for Children and Young People's Services. All complaints and their outcomes are monitored by both the Complaints Manager and the Family Placement Team Manager.

The Children's Guide to the Fostering Service is given to all children and young people at the start of their placement and foster carers also have copies. This includes contact details for the Complaints Manager, the Rights for You service and Ofsted. The West Berkshire Independent Visitor's Scheme is available to all looked after children and young people at their own or their social worker's request.

Evaluation

The Fostering Service is inspected by Ofsted. The most recent inspection, in January 2011, rated the overall effectiveness of the service as "Good". The outcome for Children and Young People was "Outstanding" and we were rated "Good" for the

Quality of the Service, Safeguarding Children and Young People, Leadership and Management.

Recruitment of Foster Carers

The Fostering Service has a recruitment and retention strategy designed to maximise capacity, retain foster carers, meet current identified needs, plan for future projected requirements and place children and young people locally wherever possible. This strategy is reviewed annually.

There is a Publicity and Recruitment Worker within the team who has specific responsibility for raising local awareness of the on-going need for foster carers and supported accommodation (lodgings) carers and developing and implementing a targeted recruitment strategy. In particular this focuses on the placement of children and young people aged 11 years and over for whom there is currently a shortage of short and long term placements.

Additionally, in line with the Department's broader strategy of maintaining children and young people within their birth family networks whenever possible, the fostering service works to promote and enable the use of families and friends carers wherever appropriate. To achieve this the fostering service takes into account the pre-existing relationships inherent in family and friends fostering arrangements and recognises the particular contribution that family and friends foster carers can make. These factors are taken into account in the assessment process whilst ensuring adherence to the fostering minimum standards and that care planning, placement and review regulations are maintained.

Approval of Foster Carers

The approval process for foster carers meets the requirements of the National Minimum Standards and Regulations for Fostering Services 2011.

Assessments of foster carers follow the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering Prospective Foster Carers format. The assessment and approval process involves and considers all members of the applicant's household plus significant others (eg birth children living elsewhere) as appropriate.

A range of employment, health and personal references are obtained and verified regarding the applicant's suitability as a foster carer and enhanced DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) and other government and local authority checks are made. Personal references are obtained and referees are interviewed.

A report is prepared by the assessing Social Worker, with recommendations on the applicant's suitability to be a foster carer(s) and whether s/he should be approved for named children only, or more generally for between one and three children or four if siblings within a particular age range, sex, area of need etc having regard to her/his assessed abilities, experience and the accommodation available.

Applicants are provided with a copy of the non-confidential sections (ie everything except the references) of the assessment reports before they are submitted to the

Fostering Panel and have the opportunity to make written comments if they wish to do so. The Panel provides information leaflets for new applicants and existing carers whose approval is being considered by Panel, including details of panel membership and processes.

The West Berkshire Fostering Panel considers every application that is presented to it. All applicant(s) are encouraged to attend the Fostering Panel meeting that considers their application, and are informed of the Panel's recommendation and Head of Service's decision both verbally and in writing. A copy of the relevant extract from the Panel minutes is sent to all applicants and carers. A Foster Care Agreement is drawn up and signed with all foster carers both at initial approval and following any changes to their approval.

Training of Foster Carers

The Department arranges and provides training for all foster carers in order to promote the development of foster carers' skills and knowledge, to help them meet the needs of the children and young people placed in their care.

A training programme for foster carers is provided to cover both the basic requirements of new carers, pre- and post-approval, and further training to develop and extend the skills of experienced foster carers, and to address their specific needs relevant to certain situations. This training programme is reviewed annually and foster carers are asked, via contact with their supervising social workers and via the review process, to identify training which they would like the agency to incorporate into its annual programme. There are financial incentives in order to encourage attendance. Wherever possible, training is provided for staff and foster carers together so that learning and understanding is mutually enhanced. Individual training needs are met as far as is practicable within existing budgets. Attendance on this training programme is monitored by supervising social workers via the review process.

Discussion of a foster carer's future training needs forms a key part of the foster carer annual review. Where there are two adults in one household applying or approved as joint carers, both must successfully complete all mandatory training. There is a clear expectation that foster carers will regularly attend training sessions.

CWDC, the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care are being implemented by the service. We do, however, need to be more robust in ensuring that foster carers meet this requirement. The Standards are accompanied by a Guide for Foster Carers, a Workbook and Guidance for Managers, Supervising Social Workers and Trainers. The fostering team is implementing the standards and has developed a tool for assessing competency and planning appropriate training for carers in conjunction with an independent contractor.

Support for Foster Carers

Supervision and support for individual foster carers is provided by the allocated Family Placement Team supervising social worker, who visits the foster carer(s) at regular intervals, and additionally when required (visits or telephones) at other times.

Family Placement Team staff liaises closely with placing social workers and their managers. A Foster Placement Agreement is drawn up with all relevant parties at the start of every placement and a safer caring and risk management agreement is also made in relation to all placements. A new placement plan has recently been introduced to cover delegated authority.

A regular newsletter for foster carers is produced and circulated by the Publicity and Recruitment Worker. A telephone support service for all approved foster carers and adopters is provided by members of the team outside of office hours in addition to the Berkshire Emergency Duty Team. Foster carers are also supported by the work of the placing social workers and their managers; and the members of the multi agency Life Chances Team for Looked After Children.

Financial support is provided by the Department through the Fostering Placement Allowance Scheme, details of which are provided separately. All foster carers receive payment at rates that are one and a half times the Fostering Network recommended minimum. Financial assistance for 'child sitting' is provided to enable foster carers to attend training and have occasional evenings out.

All foster carers are automatically enrolled as members of Fostering Network, membership fees being paid by the Department. West Berkshire also actively supports and works in partnership with the local West Berkshire Foster Carers' Association.

Foster carers have access to an out of office hours telephone support service operated by the Family Placement Team, in addition to the services of the Berkshire Emergency Duty Team.

There is support and guidance from Members of the Life Chances Team for Looked After Children and Young People. This is a multi agency team which includes staff whose job is either working full time with Looked After Children or where part of their role is allocated to this work. Membership includes a nurse, teachers, a youth worker, education welfare, an educational psychologist, YOT, CAMHS, Family Resource Service, the Family Placement Team, Connexions, Early Years and the locality teams.

The Department supports 'back up' care to assist carers attending training and meetings.

There is support from and close liaison with the West Berkshire Foster Carers' Association.

Reviewing of Foster Carers

All approved foster carers have annual reviews of their performance, training needs, terms of approval and continued registration of their approval as foster carers and their households.

Reviews of a foster carer's approval take place within the first six months of approval and annually thereafter, unless for some reason it is considered appropriate to hold an earlier review. The supervising social worker visits the carer in preparation for the review, and the views of placing social workers, placed children and their families and

the LAC Reviewing Officer are also sought. Health and safety checks are repeated annually, and DBS (formerly CRB) and medical checks are repeated every three years in accordance with regulatory requirements. All reviews are attended by the foster carer(s) and the supervising social worker, and are chaired by a manager from the Family Placement Team. The review form is completed during the review.

The completed review report is signed by the supervising social worker and the review chair before being passed to the Registered Person for West Berkshire Fostering Service (ie the Family Placement Team Manager) who considers the report and decides whether the foster carer and their household continue to be suitable. The carers are notified in writing of this decision which is attached to the review report and forwarded to the carers to sign and add their comments.

The first review after approval is always considered by the Fostering Panel. Subsequent reviews may be referred to the Fostering Panel at the discretion of the Family Placement Team Manager and as directed by the regulations.

If the Fostering Service is no longer satisfied that a foster carer and/or the fostering household continue to be suitable for fostering the issue is referred for consideration by the Fostering Panel. Following a recommendation by the Fostering Panel to terminate approval, written notice is given to the foster carer(s) that termination of approval is proposed. The foster carer(s) are invited to make representations to the Panel at a subsequent meeting, following which the decision maker, taking into account any recommendation made by the Fostering Panel, makes a decision and written notice is given to the foster carer(s).

Prospective foster carers who are not being recommended for approval and foster carers whose approval is being recommended for termination or variation are able to **either** make representation to the fostering agency **or** the Independent Review Mechanism.

Documentation

The Fostering Service regularly reviews the Fostering Procedures Manual for Staff and the Foster Carers Handbook to take account of updates in practice issues and legislative changes where appropriate. Both meet the requirements of the National Minimum Standards and Regulations for Fostering Services 2011, accurately reflect the statement of purpose and are in line with current expectations of good practice.

The statement of purpose will be made available to all staff working for the Fostering Service; a copy will be given to all approved and prospective foster carers and it will be available upon request to all parents of children and young people looked after by the Fostering Service.

Members are regularly apprised of performance via annual reports at the Corporate Parent Panel where membership includes two foster carers.

Details of the Registration Authority

Ofsted
Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

Tel 08456 404045

June Kemp
Family Placement Team Manager
April 2013