

WEST BERKSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE

HALF YEARLY REPORT APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 2013

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 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 reasonably stable with June Kemp continuing in the role of Team Manager, and with Keith Langley and Amanda Cornwall as Assistant Team Managers. Mary Heslin continues in the role of Post Adoption Support Worker and Ananda Bodenstein 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 have a Family Support Worker who has returned to the team having successfully completed her social worker training. We have one social work due to leave in November resulting in two vacancies, one for a qualified social worker and one for a family support worker.

All social work staff within the Family Placement Team who undertake adoption work hold a professional social work qualification, are registered with the HCPC, 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 01/04/2013 and 31/03/2013

The service plan target for the recruitment of new adopters is 10 for the year end. We have approved four adopters in the last six months and have 10 adopters booked into panel for approval by the end of March 2014 making a prediction of 14 approved adopters in this financial year.

Three children have been to Adoption Panel or the Agency Decision Maker for best interests. All three children’s permanency plans were made at the point of the fourth review. 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 1.6 months.

- Three children have been matched with adopters
- Four adopters have been approved
- One West Berkshire children were placed with other local authorities adopters and two children were placed with West Berkshire Adopters
- Three adoption orders were granted in respect of West Berkshire Children
- Four adoption orders have been granted on children placed from other local authorities with Berkshire adopters
- Two children were placed with West Berkshire adopters from other Local Authorities
- There have been no adoption disruptions
- Three in-family adoption assessments were completed and orders were granted we also have one applications waiting for a court date
- Nine SGO orders have been granted

In total 28 children have been referred to Family Placement team for permanence. 13 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 may be placed for adoption. Two children had a parallel plan with regards to an SGO and one was reunited with their birth parent. In total 9 children

were considered for SGOs with one case still in proceeding. 6 children have remained in long-term placements. In most of these cases these children have been seven years and over, however, one sibling group had a child aged four with two older siblings and the care plan is for them to remain together.

West Berkshire is part of the Berkshire consortium rolling programme for information session and preparation groups. During the year 12 information sessions will take place and 8 preparation groups are also planned.

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 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.

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. The toddlers’ group organised by a group of is still active and they have a core group of adopters attending. The group provides support to new adopters and enables sharing of experiences.

There are 69 families on the post adoption database with all 69 of these families receiving information about events. Of these families approximately 16 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 28 during this period. 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. Nine Special Guardianship orders have been granted since April 2013. The adoption agency is supporting ten Special Guardianship arrangements. Many of these are new arrangements and receiving low level support. One family is, however, receiving high level support. We currently have seven families who are

receiving mediation services in relation to contact one of which is being dealt with by a private law application in court.

A Special Guardianship allowance is being paid in respect of 31 children.

In-family adoptions

In the last six months we have received seven in-family adoption enquiries four of which have yet to request a meeting with a social worker. We have completed three in-family adoption assessments which led to orders being granted. We have one where the assessment is completed and they are waiting for their application to be heard by the court. 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 five in-family adoption assessments being undertaken and four 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

We had one request for access to records from an approved adopter. We have received one complaint which has gone straight to stage two at the adopter's request. This case is currently in the court arena so the stage two complaint has been frozen until the court proceedings are completed.

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 14 children between the ages of 0 to seven years of age. 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 a difficult start in life having experienced abuse and neglect, or the effects of parental drug misuse while in the womb.

There continues to be an 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 nine orders being granted in the past six months, with two children 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.

Medication work with Special Guardians has also increased with seven families receiving this service in relation to contact arrangement with the child's birth family. Once case is in the court arena.

Enquiries from potential adopters in the West Berkshire area have remained consistent. Staffing changes had an impact on the management of assessments;

however, we have employed sessional workers to ensure these are picked up in a timely manner.

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. We are also planning to use external trainers such as The British Association for Fostering and Adoption to training staff in the use of the new prospective adopter's report which has recently been introduced.

The Government have introduced a two stage process aimed at speeding up the assessment and training of prospective adopters. Stage one allows two month for the initial training and preparation which will be adopter led. Stage two allows for four months for the assessment process and approval which will be led by the assessing social worker. We currently have systems in place to meet the new arrangement but envisage that the new timescales will prove to be a challenging.

Other changes include fast tracking second time adopters. Second time adopters are not required to attend an information session or attend an adoption preparation group so they can move speedily into the assessment process.

Swifter use of the Adoption Register all approved adopters are placed in the register within three months of approval unless they are in the process of matching.

Legislation to reduce delays in achieving a perfect ethnic match the needs of the children for a permanent home override the need for a perfect ethnic match.

Fostering to Adopt placing children with adopters prior to a court decision this is an area of practice that we have yet to develop. Fostering to Adopt is being explored within the consortium to identify the best model for Berkshire.

The government measure for improvements in tackling delay through performance scorecards are indicated below;

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 513 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 threshold is set at 213 days. Our current timescale is 118 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 threshold is 58% and we achieve this is 88% of the children in our care.

Challenges ahead

The Governments Action Plan for Adoption 'Finding More Loving Homes' have indicated that there are signs of improvement in the processes for taking children into care, identifying the best long term plan for them, and where necessary obtaining the court order, and this is encouraging. But they bring into focus the outstanding challenge for the adoption system in finding enough adoptive parents.

The Action Plan identified the lack of adopters as a major cause of delays to adoption. New data makes clear that until this challenge is resolved thousands of children will be left waiting longer than they should for adoption. Some of those children will miss out on their chance of a permanent family altogether.

The Action Plan stressed in particular the shortage of adopters willing and able to adopt older children, sibling groups (where it is in their interest to stay together) and those with disabilities and other particular needs. That remains a massive challenge. There is an urgent need to increase the number of adopters to match the number of children awaiting adoption and the complexity of their special needs in order to meet the Government's objectives.

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 in the process of 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.

Berkshire authorities have formed a project group to explore the potential benefits of creating a Berkshire wide shared adoption service. The working group has identified key areas of service planning that will assist in the reduction of adoption waiting times for children across Berkshire. Primarily it will be the increase in adopter families and the focused and targeted approach of a dedicated team of managers and social workers to achieve this. Fostering to Adopt is being explored to identify the best model for Berkshire, and it is agreed that focusing on approved adopter families to encourage them to foster will support a more seamless and shorter transition into adoption placements.

The service also aims to improve the quality of information recorded of children and adopter families, and to improve assessment and training programmes for adopters.

June Kemp
Team Manager

30 September 2013