

WEST BERKSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT 2013-14

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 has had a number of changes in the team. June Kemp continues in the role of Team Manager and Keith Langley as Assistant Team Manager. Although we successfully recruited a new Assistant Team Manager and appointed Amanda Cornwall who was previously a social worker in the team she made the decision to stand down and return to a social work post. Amanda is now a senior practitioner within the team. We currently have an agency worker as a temporary Assistant Team Manager. This means we have a full complement in terms of management cover.

Mary Heslin has retired as the Post Adoption Support Worker and this position has been filled by Ananda Bodenstein who previously held the role of family finder. We

currently have an agency worker in the role of Family Finder for children for whom the care plan is adoption. We have one social worker and one family support worker on maternity leave. Two social workers have left the team in the past year. One moved on to a private fostering agency and the other to a neighbouring local authority. We currently have one agency worker in a social work post. We also have one social worker and one family support worker who plan to be off work for a significant period due to health issues.

All social work staff within the Family Placement Team who undertake adoption work hold a professional social work qualification and are registered with the HCPC. The level of experienced staff in adoption has reduced but we are addressing this through training and mentoring with more experienced staff members to extend the team's knowledge base and understanding of adoption.

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 31/03/2014

This has again been a busy year in terms of all aspects of adoption and we have met our target in relation to the approval of 10 adopters.

Over the last year:

- Eight children have been to Adoption Panel or the Agency Decision Maker for best interests. Of these eight children, all eight 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 two months.
- Seven children have been matched with adopters.
- Ten adopters have been approved.
- Three West Berkshire children were placed with other local authorities' adopters and four children were placed with West Berkshire Adopters.
- Six 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.
- There were no adoptions broken down/ disrupted with West Berkshire adopters or West Berkshire children.
- Five in-family adoption assessments were completed with two waiting for their applications to be submitted to court.

- Twelve SGO orders have been granted with seven cases still in proceedings.

In total 63 children have been referred to the Family Placement team for permanence. 19 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. Two children had a parallel plan with regards to an SGO. In total 12 children were granted SGOs with seven cases still in proceedings. 32 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 one adoption information day and one adoption preparation group in the year.

We are currently assessing 10 families for adoption who will be presented to adoption panel for approval over the next six months. There are further 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 2013.

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 inter-country adoption is appropriate for them.

In the past year PACT has received three enquiries and sent out two information packs. No initial visits have been undertaken, no applications have been received and there are no approved adopters waiting for a placement. No placements have been made with West Berkshire adopters. PACT is continuing to oversee 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 adopted adults 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 BACCS, a Berkshire Consortium resource 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 74 families on the post adoption database with 61 of these families receiving information about events. Of these families approximately 15 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 10 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. Twelve Special Guardianship applications were completed this year and the adoption agency is supporting two Special Guardianship arrangements; we continue to offer advice on an ad hoc basis for another six arrangements.

A Special Guardianship allowance is being paid in respect of 34 children.

In-family adoptions

During the past year there were five in-family adoption assessments completed. 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 six 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

One complaint has been received over the past year. This was from an adoptive parent in relation to post adoption support. The couple was visited by a Service Manager, followed by a response letter which led to no further action. There have been no complaints received in regarding to any West Berkshire adopters.

Summary of the past year

The six Adoption Teams from West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Slough, Maidenhead and Windsor and Bracknell, hosted their first ever Adoption Activity Day on Saturday 15th February in conjunction with BAAF. An Adoption Activity Day is a 'fun' activity day that enables prospective adopters to directly meet a range of children waiting to be adopted in a prepared, supported, safe and fun environment. Such days have been running successfully in the USA for more than 30 years and in the USA they have a match success rate of around 30%. This is higher than any other form of family finding.

At a time when an increasing number of children are waiting to be adopted and the Government is reviewing the effectiveness of existing services, it reflects well on an agency to keep itself involved in the most current family finding methods. The Department for Education announced that adoption activity days would be part of the government's adoption reform agenda: *Pilot Activity Days have proved very successful, finding families for almost one in five children and evidence suggests they could be particularly successful in matching harder to place children.*

On the day 21 adopters expressed an interest in one or more of the children who attended the day. This included children from across the age range of those attending, from the tiniest to the oldest, and children from all six of the host authorities. Six West Berkshire children attended. This included male twins aged four, one seven year old boy and three female siblings aged five, three and two where the plan is for them to be placed separately. Out of the six children who attended the two year old received three expressions of interest, and the seven year old received one expression of interest. The three year old also received one enquiry. One West Berkshire child was matched following the day. Five West Berkshire adopters attended; this included one single carer and two couples.

Early indicators are that while not all of the children who attended the day received any specific interest in terms of follow up from the adopters attending, all the children appeared to have a very enjoyable day and many of the older children (who were more aware of the purpose of the day and therefore more potentially open to feeling rebuffed if no 'match' is identified for them from the day) are likely to have benefitted from realising that other children are in the same position as themselves. Overall feedback reported that there was a 19% positive outcome for matches.

Adoption Activity Days are expected to prove to be a cost effective means of family finding, particularly when costs are shared with other local agencies. A second day is planned to take place in October this 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 two years (as identified by BAAF) 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 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 twelve orders being granted last year which is an increase of over 50% from the previous year. 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 have had an impact on the management of enquiries and assessments; however, we have employed agency workers to manage this better.

Timescales for children are being adhered to and all the children placed with their adoptive parents have been adopted within one year.

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 number of children in care continues to rise and stands at 68,000. At the end of March 2013, there were over 4,600 children waiting to move in with a new family. The Government has worked towards simplifying the adoption system to encourage more people to adopt and make sure children are placed swiftly with a family where this is in their best interests.

Our biggest challenge is to ensure that the adoption system works consistently well for children and adopters irrespective of where they live or what stage they have reached in the adoption process. The move to shorten assessment timescales to a total of six months for the majority of prospective adopters is challenging. We need to ensure that sufficient thought is given to how we can make the new system work well in practice and in the best interests of prospective adopters and children. It is likely that some assessments will need to take longer than six months depending on the individual circumstances of some prospective adopters and we will continue to ensure that assessments are robust and thorough. Another challenge will be the recruitment of people who positively want to adopt the children who we know wait longer. There is a chronic shortage of adopters for children in sibling groups, disabled children and older children. We also need to ensure that we invest in adoption support so that the necessary support is always there when needed.

Another challenge is the Children and Families Bill which takes forward the Coalition Government's commitments to improve services for vulnerable children and support strong families. It underpins wider reforms to ensure that all children and young people can succeed, no matter what their background. The Bill plans to reform the systems for adoption and supports the reforms set out in *An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay* by promoting 'fostering for adoption' so that children are placed sooner with the families that are likely to adopt them; ensuring that searching for a perfect or partial ethnic match does not become a barrier to finding a child a parent; improving support for adoptive families and creating a new power for Ministers to drive an increase in adopter recruitment by requiring outsourcing if necessary.

Fostering for Adoption, is one of a range of new measures from the Department for Education to improve adoption; this allows those who want to adopt children to foster them while they are waiting for the court to decide if adoption is the right plan for the child. This will provide continuity of care for the child, as they would not have to be placed with temporary foster carers. We plan to implement 'Fostering for Adoption' with the aim of ensuring more children can live with their potential permanent carers at the earliest possible stage of the adoption process.

The Government continues to 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 608 days. Our current timescale is 518 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 182 days. Our current timescale is 91 days. West Berkshire is already achieving the required targets.

The six unitary 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 being considered in relation to establishing a shared adoption service under a joint arrangement with four of the agencies working 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.

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. The plans for a shared adoption service is picking up momentum and regular meeting are taking place to progress the arrangements. The project managers are working towards the service starting in September/October but this will be dependent on a number of factors and executive agreement.

The year ahead is likely to be a challenging one as indicated above as we continue to implement the changes as a result of the Government's reform of adoption services.

June Kemp
Team Manager

31 March 2014