

WEST BERKSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE

HALF YEARLY REPORT APRIL 2014 to SEPTEMBER 2014

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 in the past six months. June Kemp continues in the role of Team Manager and Keith Langley as Assistant Team Manager. We also have an agency worker in the role of Assistant Team Manager. Ananda Bodenstein is Post Adoption Support Worker and we currently have an agency worker in the role of Family Finder for children for whom the care plan is adoption.

The team has suffered a significant amount of sickness in the past six months with five social workers/family support workers being off work with health related issues. We also have two workers who are currently on maternity leave. It has therefore been necessary to engage agency staff to cover the gaps in the service.

In the forthcoming months we are losing four posts to the new shared adoption service which goes active on 1st December 2014. These posts consist of one Assistant Team Manager, two full time social workers and a part time admin post. We will also have a vacancy post for a senior social worker practitioner as Amanda Cornwall has handed in her resignation.

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 although we have been addressing this through training and mentoring with more experienced staff members. This will no longer be a requirement of the team with the new adoption shared service being managed and located outside of the current service.

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 01/04/2014 and 30/09/2014

Over the past six months:

- Six children have been to Adoption Panel or the Agency Decision Maker for best interests. Of these six children, all six 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 four months.
- Four children have been matched with adopters.
- Three adopters have been approved and we have five currently in assessment. Three adopters withdrew during the process
- One West Berkshire child was placed with another local authority's adopters and one child was placed with West Berkshire Adopters.
- Two adoption orders were granted in respect of West Berkshire children.
- Two 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. And three are still in assessment..
- Nine SGO orders have been granted with seven cases still progressing.

As of 30th September 2014 the Family Placement Team was actively family finding for 46 children where permanence is the plan. Five children have been referred for adoption within the past six months making a total of 18 children where adoption is

being 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 have a parallel plan with regards to an SGO or reunification home.

There are currently 28 children where the plan for permanence is to remain with their current foster carers or long term foster care.

In total nine children were granted SGOs with seven cases still in progression.

As part of the Berkshire Consortium rolling programme we completed one adoption information day and one adoption preparation group in the last six months.

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

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 permanence)
- 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 six months PACT has received two enquiries and 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. No placements have been made with West Berkshire adopters.

PACT continues to provide a 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 six months 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 14 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 21 children.

The number of adults receiving a service in relation to access to birth records and intermediary services was 20 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. Nine Special Guardianship applications were completed in the last six months. We also have seven children where the plan is a Special Guardianship order currently in assessment. The adoption agency is responsible to offer support to 30 Special Guardianship arrangements; we are actively engaging with four Special Guardianship arrangements and continue to offer advice on an ad hoc basis for another six arrangements.

A Special Guardianship allowance is being paid in respect of 42 children which is an increase in 26% from the previous year.

In-family adoptions

During the past six months there were two 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 three in-family adoption assessments being undertaken and five 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

There have been no complaints in the last six months.

Summary of the past six months

This has again been a busy half year in terms of all aspects of adoption with assessments and family finding for adoption being progressed in a timely way. However the new timescales for adoptions assessment has been challenging with stage one (two months) being delayed due to processes outside of our control such as DBS checks and medical checks. Stage two time scales (four months) are equally challenging and although we are able to achieve panel within four months this does not allow for the time required for panel approval and ratification.

Family finding activities over the past six months has included 46 children. Those being considered for adoption are aged between one to eight years. There are four sibling groups of two and one sibling group of four where the plan is for each of the children to be placed separately.

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.

Those being considered for long term fostering are aged between five and sixteen years old. We have seven sibling groups of two, one sibling group of three and one sibling group of six. Not all of the sibling groups will be placed together.

There continues to be a significant increase in the numbers of children being considered for Special Guardianship Orders and we are still seeing an increase in the use of this order, with nine already being secured so far this 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.

Challenges of the year ahead

The number of children in care continues to rise and stands at 68,840 as of 31st March 2014, an increase of 1% compared to March 2013 and an increase of 7% compared to March 2010. The number of looked after children has increased steadily over the past five years and it is now higher than any point since 1985.

There were 5,050 looked after children adopted during the year ending 31st March 2014, an increase of 26% from 2013 and an increase of 58% from 2010. Although the number of looked after children adopted fell between 2010 and 2011, the number of these adoptions has since increased and is now at its highest point since the start of the current collection in 1992. There were 3,580 looked after children placed for adoption at 31st March 2014 representing 5% of all looked after children. The number placed for adoption has increased by 42% from 2010. At the end of March 2014, 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. It wants Local Authorities to encourage more people to adopt and to reduce the time it takes for children to be placed with a loving family. Proposed changes to adoption legislation have altered the landscape in adoption to the extent that agencies are now in a position to consider how services should be organised and to examine the most efficient and cost effective way to provide services for the growing number of children with an adoption plan.

As an Adoption Agency we need to encourage people to come forward to adopt and recognise that prospective adopters are important while ensuring they feel valued, respected and supported. In response to the Government's proposals we reviewed how we could manage the adoption services.

We needed better customer focus, to improve our performance to ensure customer satisfaction and outcomes for adopters and children needing adoptive families. We needed to be able to meet customer demand and provide a quality service.

There are insufficient adopters, both nationally and within the consortium, to meet the needs of children with an adoption plan. Older children are now considered to be those over two years old and it remains a challenge to find adoptive families for older children, black and ethnic minority children, sibling groups and those with additional needs. The majority of applicants who wish to adopt and voluntarily approach

agencies are white heterosexual couples, those who have adopted before or are unable to have their own children and most of these applicants wish to adopt young children. There are few applicants from same sex couples, older people (over 50) and single people, black and ethnic minority people and people who have already parented birth children.

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

- Consideration of mandatory powers to compel local authorities to outsource their adoption recruitment
- Suggesting that there be fewer organisations recruiting and assessing adopters on a greater scale
- Encouraging local authorities to join together on a regional basis to deliver improvement in recruitment

Individual agencies in Berkshire have relatively small numbers of children to place for adoption and while it is possible to recruit from outside the agency boundaries this will never fulfil the need for all children so there will always be a need to turn to neighbouring authorities or voluntary agencies.

The changes in adoption that are being introduced will test establishment resources and while there have been elements of the service working well together there will be considerable pressure to provide a more flexible and responsive service in the future.

West Berkshire, Wokingham, Bracknell and The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead have, following executive approval, established a shared adoption service under a joint arrangement enabling the four agencies to work together in providing services for adoption. This will include the recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and supervision of adopters as well as family finding. The new service will be going live on 1st December 2014.

Challenges within the field of adoption are set to continue and the government agenda is forcing local authorities to consider bolder and more innovative ways of meeting these challenges. The move in relation to how West Berkshire delivers their adoption services will help to address the Government drive for adoption.

Other local authorities have combined services to good effect and have now provided examples of what shared services can achieve. The Tri Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea has seen a reduction in costs by combining their fostering and adoption services. More recently St Helen's, Warrington and Wigan Borough Councils combined their adoption services and established a shared service, WWISH, hosted by Wigan under a joint arrangement. The service took a year to establish and has been operating for 12 months. They have seen a sizeable increase in recruitment from 25 adopters to 48 adopters in this time and are increasingly able to place children within their own resources. It is anticipated that they too will ultimately realise a cost saving for the three local authorities.

Combined services are consistent with the government agenda in promoting innovation, new enterprise, specialism and working together to achieve excellence in service provision and better outcomes for service customers. Additionally they are

recommended as a way forward in *Further Action on Adoption*. Berkshire already has a history of joint arrangements with a solid infrastructure and a proven track record. There are already sound mechanisms for monitoring and oversight of such arrangements by the agencies. Use of the current joint arrangement structure reduces the risk of dependency on an external provider with the possibilities of escalating costs and lack of control. The agencies remain in control of the service and can set the agenda and can change or review it when required.

Situating adoption within a specialised area ensures that priority can be given to this work in a way that is not possible within multi functional family placement teams. Additionally, joint arrangements work in a way that is different from those services situated at the heart of the local authority. They engender a service culture, operating in a way more akin to a small business.

The shared service will increase the pool of adopters and speed up the adoption process with greater placement choice and better matching of need reducing delay and its detrimental impact on children, enabling the service to achieve timely placements and associated improved outcomes. A shared service attains a higher profile and identity, there is the opportunity for shared branding, shared advertising, information, training and events and single point of referral and as a consequence this is likely to attract more publicity and consequently more adopters.

There will be the opportunity to develop staff expertise and to learn from a greater number of experienced staff members. Concurrency and early placement (fostering to adopt) is a specialised area of work which requires a degree of experience and this will be more easily introduced in a combined service as it will be beneficial to have a team with expertise in this area.

June Kemp
10th October 2014.