

# ADOPT BERKSHIRE

## Adoption Agency Annual Report 2014/2015



Working Together...  
...Creating Families

## Adoption Agency Annual Report 2014/2015

This document should be read in conjunction with the Adopt Berkshire Statement of Purpose 2015/16.

### Introduction:

The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead, Wokingham Borough Council, Bracknell Forest Council and West Berkshire Borough Council joined their Adoption services on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2014 to provide a dedicated service for adoption across the four local authorities. The shared adoption service is Adopt Berkshire. A service agreement, service specification and three year budget agreement are in place for the service.

The main priorities of Adopt Berkshire are:

- To achieve the placement of children in care for whom adoption is the Care Plan, with appropriate approved adopters, matched according to the children's specific needs and circumstances and within appropriate timescales.
- To recruit, prepare and assess adoptive applicants who are likely to be able to meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally and nationally.

The needs of the children requiring placement are the agency's paramount consideration.

In addition Adopt Berkshire manages a Notified Adoption Service on behalf of the four contributing authorities.

Adopt Berkshire is hosted by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, but the main office base is situated within Wokingham Borough. A Management Board has been established and includes a senior management representative at second tier, Assistant Director level, from each of the contributing authorities. The Board will meet quarterly and Terms of Reference for the Management Board are in place, with clear expectations regarding its purpose and agenda setting for the service.

### Legislation, Regulations and Guidance:

There is a range of Legislation, Regulations and Guidance, which influence the working of Adoption Agencies. These include:

- The National Minimum Standards for adoption (2011);
- The Adoption Act 2002 and Adoption Statutory Guidance 2011;
- The Care Standards Act 2000;
- The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 and supporting statutory guidance and regulations;
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and accompanying statutory guidance;
- The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 (amended 2011).

The key requirements of all Local Authority Adoption Services are that:

- The focus is firmly on the needs of the child, whose needs will be paramount in all decisions relating to adoption;
- Highly skilled professionals lead a quality service delivered to National Minimum Standards (revised in February 2011);

- A permanency plan is identified for all children in care within 4 months of them coming into Local Authority care. (This may be a return home, or any of a range of different placement options, one of which is adoption);
- Focused effort goes into finding permanent families for all children in care waiting to be adopted;
- A range of potential adopters are welcomed and assessed efficiently in an open and fair way;
- Children and their adoptive families have easy access to adoption support services.

In terms of providing Adoption Support Services:

- At the current time The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead, Wokingham Borough Council, Bracknell Forest Council and West Berkshire Borough Council all continue to provide post adoption services ‘in-house’; this includes provision of birth records counselling for adopted adults and support, where appropriate, to birth parents and others affected by adoption (Adoption and Children Act 2002). The provision of post adoption support services is not within the remit of Adopt Berkshire.
- Placing authorities have a responsibility to provide support services to the children that they place for adoption and to their adoptive families until three years after any adoption order is granted.
- Local authorities have a duty to provide an Assessment of Need for post adoption support services for any adopted child, his/her adopters and/or other members of the adoptive family who live within the local authority’s area, at any stage that support is requested, and while there is not a presumption that an assessment will automatically lead to the provision of services, local authorities are required to ‘act reasonably’ in the light of any assessments undertaken.
- Financial support to adoptive placements does not have to be agreed at the time of placement for it to be paid during the child’s later childhood. Placing authorities are required to consider agreeing the payment of an adoption allowance or one-off or periodic payments to meet particular financial needs predicted at the time of placement, and adopters can approach the placing authority at any time prior to or during the three years following the legal adoption of a child to request financial support. Once a child has been adopted for three years his/her adopters can approach the local authority in whose area they live at any time until the adopted child reaches the age of 18 years, to request financial support. If approached the responsible authority is required to complete an Assessment of Need and to then ‘act reasonably’ in the light of this.

### **The National Minimum Standards – Adoption:**

The Adoption National Minimum Standards came into force in April 2003 and were updated in April 2011. Local authority adoption agencies are expected to fully comply with the Minimum Standards which cover all areas of an agency’s responsibilities and function. (The Standards can be viewed on [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)).

Adopt Berkshire’s Statement of Purpose and procedures are fully compliant with both the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (revised February 2011) and the revised Adoption National Minimum Standards.

### **The Current Government Review of Adoption:**

The profile of adoption has continued to be raised in the public arena throughout the past year.

The Children and Families Act 2014 (given royal assent on the 13th March 2014) introduced a number of reforms relating to adoption, intended to enable positive change to all areas of the adoption process and to prevent delay for children. The key areas related to adoption include:

- The Act requires local authorities to consider placing children with family and friends carers in the first instance but if this is not appropriate then attempts must be made to place a child in a Fostering for Adoption arrangement with approved adopters;
- It repeals the requirement that ‘due consideration’ is given to children’s racial, religious, cultural or linguistic background when matching them with adopters in an attempt to reduce the time that black and minority ethnic children wait for an adoptive placement;
- From April 2015 adopters can share parental leave around their child’s placement and adoption leave and pay will reflect the entitlements available to birth parents. Since 30 June 2014 flexible leave requests have been extended to all employees with a duty on an employer to consider requests in a ‘reasonable’ manner;
- Adoption agencies are required to inform adoptive parents about the adoption support services available locally, their right to request an assessment for adoption support and the support the council is required to provide;
- Since April 2014, schools in England have received additional funding through the Pupil Premium Plus for children adopted from care on or after 2005;
- Since April 2014 the Public Law Outline, introduced in July 2013, has come into full effect to reduce the duration of Care Proceedings.

### **Consortium Arrangement:**

Separate to the creation of Adopt Berkshire, the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead, Wokingham Borough Council, Bracknell Forest Council and West Berkshire Borough Council all continue to be part of a formal Adoption Consortium arrangement with each other and with Reading Borough Council and Slough Borough Council. This arrangement enables the six local authorities to provide a range of services in line with current requirements on local authorities, that it would otherwise be difficult for any of the authorities to provide cost-effectively, due to the low level of demand.

As part of the Consortium arrangement each of the Berkshire Unitary Authorities contribute to the funding of the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service, which is hosted by the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead.

The Service provides a number of joint resources for the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities, including:

- Managing and servicing the Authorities’ Adoption Panel;
- Managing the Berkshire Information Exchange and the Post Adoption Direct Contact Service between adoptive families and birth families;
- Providing specialist advice and assistance to staff in the six Unitary Authorities on complex adoption matters;
- Assistance with training of staff, adopters and panel members;
- Administration and servicing for the closed children’s records and adoption records;
- Hosting the Birth Relative Service (providing independent counselling for birth parents and relatives when children are to be placed for adoption).

The Service Leader for the Adoption Advisory Service also holds the role of Service Leader for Adopt Berkshire, which ensures a dovetailed service for the local authorities which are part of both services. The role of the Advisory Service and the wider Consortium Arrangement has remained unchanged by the formation of Adopt Berkshire.

**Statement of Purpose and Recruitment Plan**

Adopt Berkshire has a Statement of Purpose and a written plan relating to the recruitment of adoptive parents which is compliant with all current legislation, regulations, standards and best practice guidance. This is available to all four contributing authorities and their Members and to all Service Users who engage with the Service. The Statement of Purpose will be reviewed two yearly while the Recruitment Plan will be reviewed annually.

**Data on Children Looked After in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014 the Department of Education released Children in Care statistics for the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014; making the following observations about the national picture of adoption for children:

- The number of Children in Care was continuing to rise:  
There were 68,840 Children in Care at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, an increase of 1% compared to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013 and an increase of 7% compared to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010. The numbers have increased steadily over the past 5 years.
- More children had started to be looked after :  
There were 30,430 children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, an increase of 5% from 2013 and an increase of 8% from 2010.
- More children had ceased to be looked after:  
There were also 30,430 children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, an increase of 6% from 2013 and an increase of 20% from 2010.
- Adoptions were still increasing:  
There were 5,050 Children in Care adopted during the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, an increase of 26% from 2013 and an increase of 58% from 2010. Although the number of Children in Care who were adopted fell between 2010 and 2011, the number of these adoptions had since increased and was at its highest point since the start of the current data collection in 1992.

Statistical information covering the year April 2014 – March 2015 will be available at the end of September 2015 and will be reported in the next half-yearly report (October 2015), however it is known that nationally the number of children available for adoption has fallen considerably during the last 12 months.

**Comparative Data for the Adopt Berkshire Unitary Authorities – 1st April 2014 / 31st March 2015:**

**Children for Placement**

Children for Placement	Bracknell	RBWM	West Berkshire	Wokingham
------------------------	-----------	------	----------------	-----------

<b>Number of new Placement Orders 2014/2015</b>	7	4 (+ 1 parental consent)	10	2
<b>Number of new ADM (Child for Placement) decisions since 1st April 2014</b>	6 (+ 1 relinquished and 2 Placement Order not agreed)	4 (+1 relinquished and 1 Placement Order not agreed)	10	1
<b>Children matched in 2014/15 - average no of days between Placement Order and formal match</b>	452 (8 children) (+ 1 relinquished infant placed)	295 (8 children) (+ 1 relinquished infant placed)	194 (6 children)	170 (3 children)
<b>Average no of days between entering care and placement 2014/2015 (using FfA placement date if applicable)</b>	712 (8 children incl. 1 relinquished)	591 (9 children incl. 1 relinquished)	498 (6 children)	511 (3 children) (1 High Court appeal)
<b>Children with a Placement Order waiting matching (31<sup>st</sup> March 2015)</b>	10 (4 requiring PO rescinding)	0	11 (3 requiring PO rescinding)	1
<b>No of children adopted since 1st April 2014</b>	2	7	5	4

### Prospective Adopters

<b>Prospective Adopters</b>	<b>Bracknell</b>	<b>RBWM</b>	<b>West Berkshire</b>	<b>Wokingham</b>	<b>Adopt Berkshire</b>
<b>Number of new RoI received (units)</b>	6	2	4	3	22
<b>Number of new adopters approved(units)*</b>	8	9	11	13	-
<b>Average length of time</b>	31.8	39.0	47.8	38.5	-

<b>between application and approval (weeks)</b>					
<b>Percentage of decisions made within 6 months of application</b>	37.5%	11.0%	0%	15.0%	-

\*Note this attributes all approved adopters approved prior to the 31<sup>st</sup> March to the Authority who started the application with them

### The Adoption Scorecard:

The Adoption Scorecard is produced by the Children, Young People and Families Directorate of the DfE. It is issued on an annual basis and shows the performance of all Local Authority Adoption Agencies over the previous three years. The first Scorecards were issued in 2011 and the information gathered has since been refined. The current target timescales are that all local authorities should:

- Achieve ‘matching’ for children who have a Care Plan for adoption, within 121 days of receiving Court Authority to place the child for adoption;
- Place children who have a Care Plan for adoption with their prospective adoptive families within 487 days of the child being received into local authority care;
- Complete the preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters within 26 weeks of accepting their application.

Adopt Berkshire is streamlining the previous procedures operated within the contributing authorities in order to ensure that target timescales are more regularly achieved. Early indicators are that this is proving successful and that children on referral to the service are being matched to prospective adopters more quickly than was previously the case. Future six monthly reports on the service will include detailed analysis of the timescales achieved in both matching children in care to their prospective adoptive families and in preparing and assessing prospective adopters applying to the service to be approved to adopt.

### The Inspection of Local Authority Adoption Agencies:

Adoption Services are now inspected as part of OFSTED’s new Single Inspection Framework for Child Protection and Looked After Children which was introduced in September 2013 and which also includes inspection of local authorities’ fostering and adoption functions. Adoption Agency work is given a separate judgment within the wider inspection framework.

The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead and West Berkshire Councils’ Children’s Services were both subject to OFSTED Inspections in March 2015. Bracknell Forest Borough Council and Wokingham Borough Council’s Children’s Services Inspections are both due.

### Adoption Support Services:

As detailed above, the provision of post adoption support services is not within the remit of Adopt Berkshire, rather each of the four contributing authorities continue to manage their own Adoption Support services ‘in-house’ at the current time. Given this this will be reported on elsewhere.

It should be noted that the Current Government Review of Adoption is likely to result in increased demands on local authorities to provide high standard comprehensive adoption support services, The Expert Working Group that reported in 2012 identified adoption support as one of the most important areas for reform and a new statutory duty has been placed on local authorities to inform prospective



and approved adopters of their rights and entitlements to adoption support. Adopted children are now entitled to the same priority in terms of school admissions as Looked After Children and since September 2014 they have been eligible for free early years education from two years of age.

The government is also proposing to put more choice into the hands of adoptive parents by piloting personal budgets for adoption support in a number of local authority areas. Where local authorities have agreed to provide adoption support, personal budgets will enable adoptive parents to exercise more choice and control over the type of support provided and the provider of that support. The proposal is that legislation will be introduced to allow a full role-out of personal budgets for adoption support in due course.

In recognition of the increasing demand for post adoption support services the government is in the process of setting up a new Adoption Support Fund which will accept applications from the 1st May 2015. The fund is being established because many families need some kind of support following adoption and too many have in the past struggled to get the help that they have needed. The Fund will be available for children up to and including the age of 18 (or 25 with a Statement of Special Educational Needs or Education Health & Care Plan) who have been adopted from local authority care in England or adopted from Wales but living in England. Full details of the fund can be accessed at: [www.first4adoption.org.uk](http://www.first4adoption.org.uk)

Local authorities will be able to submit applications for funding before an Adoption Order, so that any package of support from the time of placement can be continued once the Adoption Order is made. To access the Fund, a child's prospective or legal adopters will need to have an Assessment of Need for Adoption Support completed by the responsible local authority (the local authority that placed the child up until three years after the granting of the adoption order, and thereafter the local authority where the child is living).

Where the assessment identifies that therapeutic services would be beneficial, the local authority can apply to the Fund which, where the required criteria are met, will then release funding to the local authority. The Fund will provide money for a range of therapeutic services geared towards:

- Improved relationships with friends, family members, teachers and school staff;
- Improved engagement with learning;
- Improved emotional regulation and behaviour management;
- Improved confidence and ability to enjoy a positive family life and social relationships.

To achieve these outcomes the Fund will pay for a range of therapeutic support and services.

Each local authority is responsible for administering and reviewing its own Adoption Allowance Scheme in line with legislative requirements.

### **Complaints:**

Adopt Berkshire has a number of systems in place to actively seek feedback from Service Users (these are detailed in the Adopt Berkshire Statement of Purpose). In the four months, 01.12.2014 – 31.03.2015 no formal complaints were received in respect of any aspect of the Adoption Service.

### **Challenges and priorities for the year ahead:**

- The Service is committed to consolidating new ways of working aimed at:
  - Reducing the average time that children wait to achieve adoptive placements (target for 2014/15 – 75% of children not deemed to be 'hard to place' to be 'matched' within 121 days of receiving Court authority to place);



- Speeding up the recruitment of prospective adopters (target for 2014/15 – 75% of prospective adopters’ assessments to be completed within 26 weeks);
- Increasing the use of Fostering for Adoption, particularly in respect of the placement of very young children and ensuring that it is considered for all children who have an adoption plan.
- Adopt Berkshire is the pilot agency for the Cornerstone Partnership which is funded by the Department for Education. Adopt Berkshire will continue to work with the Cornerstone Partnership, developing collaborative ways of working with experienced adoptive parents in order to:
  - improve the experience of adopters,
  - speed up the placement of children for adoption,
  - ensure the stability of adoptive placements,
 and,
  - reduce the demands on social work hours.

This will be achieved through Cornerstone:

- supporting the recruitment of prospective adopters for older children and those considered more difficult to place,
- providing mentoring support to prospective and approved adopters,
- providing specialist post approval / pre-placement training based on a didactic developmental parenting perspective.

The contribution that the Cornerstone Project makes to the services being provided will be fully evaluated during the coming year.

- The national target for the average number of days between children entering care and being placed for adoption has this year been reduced to 487 days. Adopt Berkshire will support the four contributing authorities in achieving early permanency planning which will enable them to achieve this revised timescale for at least the majority of children who have an adoption plan;
- Adopt Berkshire will devise new ‘How To’ Guides aimed at supporting social workers in managing the adoption process.

### **Conclusion:**

It must be acknowledged that the landscape of adoption has changed during the past twelve months with a fall in the number of children who are available for adoption. This is the result of a legislative interpretation by the judiciary of the government adoption agenda and has resulted in a 46% drop in the number of children available for adoption across the country. As a result of this there are now far more adopters available for young children and positively Adopt Berkshire has many adopters who will consider Fostering for Adoption for young infants.

The challenge in the coming months will be to increase recruitment of prospective adopters for older children, sibling groups, those from a black and minority ethnic background and those with additional needs. A new project called Diligent Family Finding will be introduced to support the early identification of families for these children. Additionally, in a ground breaking initiative, supported by the Department for Education, Adopt Berkshire will (as detailed above) be working closely with the

Cornerstone Partnership to improve the recruitment of prospective adopters and the support and training of approved and waiting adopter.

Whether the number of children with a plan for adoption will continue to fall or will begin to rise, is not known but Adopt Berkshire will be in a good position to respond in a timely manner to requests for adoptive placements and will continue to develop services and consolidate working relationships with the four local authorities for whom it offers the service.

**Hilary Loades,  
Team Manager,  
Adopt Berkshire**

**Alyson Graham  
Service Leader,  
Adopt Berkshire**

**11 May 2015**