

WEST BERKSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2010-11

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. When, following a thorough assessment, (and oversight of the court in the majority of cases) it has been concluded that this is unlikely to be achievable within a time-span that is appropriate for the child(ren) then adoption will be 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 been stable in complement over the past year although there have been some changes; June Kemp previously Assistant Team Manager has been promoted to Team Manager in the past year and Fiona Crute, previously a social worker in the team has been promoted to Assistant Team Manager. Bonnie Horne, Post Adoption Support Worker has left the team, and Mary Heslin, already a social worker, within the team has taken over this role.

Ananda Bodenstein has taken over the lead responsibility for family finding. We have successfully recruited to the 3 vacant posts and have a new social worker joining the team in June.

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

The adoption service was inspected in February 2011 when it was rated as "outstanding". West Berkshire is the only LA in the SE region to have this rating and only one of seven nationally

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 01/04/2010 and 31/03/2011

This has again been a busy year in terms of all aspects of adoption.

Over the last year:-

- 16 children have been to panel for best interests
- 5 children have been matched with adopters
- 3 adopters have been approved
- 6 adoption orders have been granted
- 2 inter-country adoption orders have been granted adoption from overseas (Russia)
- 1 step family adoption has been completed
- 4 children from other local authorities have been placed with West Berkshire approved adopters
- 6 adoption orders have been granted on children placed from other local authorities with Berkshire adopters
- 2 Special Guardianship Orders were granted in respect of a sibling pair

In total 21 children have had 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. At least 3 children who have had a plan for adoption will be or have returned home or moved to extended family members. This is testament to the local authority ensuring that adoption is only used as the plan where there is no opportunity for a child to return home.

We have completed 2 adoption information days and 1 adoption preparation group, as part of our consortium arrangement.

We are currently assessing 9 families for adoption who will be presented to adoption panel for approval over the next few months. There are a further 2 families where applications are outstanding.

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 6 Berkshire authorities:-

- Manages and administers the 2 Berkshire adoption panels - the West Adoption Panel which includes West Berkshire, Reading and Wokingham and the East Berkshire panel which includes Slough, Bracknell and Windsor and Maidenhead
- Recruits & 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 inter country adoption is appropriate for them. In the past year PACT has received 211 enquiries, 53 initial interviews were completed, 19 applications received and 19 adopters approved. There are currently 84 approved adopters waiting for inter country adoption placements. PACT will then assess prospective adopters, who will be presented to the PACT adoption panel for consideration of their application. Post Adoption support is however provided by the local authority in the area in which the adopter resides. As noted above 2 families have been matched with children in the West Berkshire area. West Berkshire Council have processed the adoption under English law for these adoptions and continues to supervise the placements.

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. During the past year there has been a change of post adoption support social worker, this worker is a very experienced social worker and has moved to this role from within the team. She is assisted by a family support worker with specific knowledge and skills in the area of family support and intervention.

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 range from low level support such as regular newsletters and support groups to specific services which include financial support, support with contact and more direct services such as therapeutic support and support with education. Where more specialist services are required the post adoption support worker can "signpost" adopters to the most suitable resource for support, such as CAMHS.

In addition, we have recently developed a consultation service with Dr Baker, Consultant Psychiatrist for social workers, foster carers and adopters. Dr Baker's services include assessment and support and this can lead to direct work for families who are experiencing difficulties with looked after children or children placed for adoption.

Adopters' support groups include an element of training and this can include training for both the adopters and the adopters' children. There are also activities which involve adopters and their children working together on task centred activities such as the Lasham Activity Centre where families can enjoy such activities as "bushcraft" and supporting each other on the climbing wall! In addition adopters arrange many of their own social events offering informal support to each other. Activities for adopters and their children generally occur outside of office hours to encourage attendance. A support group for children under the age of 5 has been introduced. 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 111 families on the post adoption database with 75 of these families receiving regular invites to training, groups and events. Of these families approximately 6 will at any time be receiving a post adoption support service involving social work support, sometimes at quite a high level to prevent 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 19 children.

The number of adults receiving a service in relation to access to birth records and intermediary services was 14 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. 1 Special Guardianship application was completed this year and the adoption agency is supporting another 8 Special Guardianship arrangements; 2 currently receive a high level of support and 6 low levels of support.

In-family adoptions

During the past year 1 in-family adoption assessment has been completed and adoption order granted. 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 3 in family adoption assessments being undertaken and 2 are on the waiting list for allocation.

Complaints

1 complaint has been received in respect of an adopted child over the last year. This was resolved at stage one.

Conclusion

The adoption service has seen a steady increase in work over the period of 2010/11, particularly in relation to the number of children referred through to our team for family finding and the numbers of families requiring specific support post adoption. In addition West Berkshire adopters are taking a high number of children who are either older or in sibling groups where the potential for requiring post adoption services is higher due to the needs of the young people.

Requests for access to records and intermediary services are high and this is having an impact on resources. We have had adoptees speak at adoption support groups about their experiences of adoption and this has been well received by adopters and professionals alike.

Low level Post Adoption services are well established within the service and run effectively. As there have been no adoption disruptions in the last year this would suggest that the support offered by the department is effective.

There is good liaison between the locality teams and the adoption team and the quality of reports to adoption panel is good. Timescales within adoption are generally being adhered to and most children are being placed within 6 months of the Best Interest decision. Where they are not this is due to the specific needs of the children and/or legal complications. There is currently some delay in cases being heard by the courts which is increasing the length of time that children are in foster care when they could be placed within adoptive families.

Special Guardianship is continuing to be considered as a viable alternative option to children remaining in care and it is anticipated that this will continue.

Over the past year we have developed the following areas:-

- The work around adopted children is now fully integrated into the LACES team. This is the Looked After Children Education Service. The team offers support and focus on education related issues in adoptive placements. The LACES team provide training to schools and graduate trainee teachers on issues affecting adoption.
- There are currently 2 members of staff who have had training in Theraplay, a technique that is designed to help adopters to promote attachments with children. This may be used at the point of placement or if a family needed additional support after a child is in placement. A need for this may be identified at the point of matching or by the child's social worker or supervising social worker in the early stages of a placement.

Looking ahead there are plans for PACT to introduce a new post adoption clinic for all adopters within the consortium with their psychologist one day a month.

The Adoption Service was delighted to receive the rating of Outstanding by Ofsted in February 2011 which is testament to the efficient and effective way of working by The Family Placement Team.