

**BRACKNELL FOREST ADOPTION SERVICE
ANNUAL REPORT**

1st April 2016 - 31st March 2017

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This end of year report provides details of adoption activity from 1st April 2016 - 31st March 2017 and the plans for development of the Adoption Service up to 31st March 2018.
- 1.2 This report should be read in conjunction with the Adopt Berkshire Annual report 2016-17 (appendix 1) and the Adopt Berkshire Statement of Purpose 2016-17 (appendix 2) and the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service Annual Report 2016-17. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context in which Bracknell Forest Council works together with Adopt Berkshire as an Adoption Agency
- 1.3 Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) works in partnership under a year service level agreement 14 with Adopt Berkshire, who provides an Adoption Agency Service. This service covers the recruitment of adopters as well as family finding for children who have a plan of adoption. The post adoption service requirements remain the responsibility of BFC and its remit falls within the responsibility of the Family Placement Team. The remit also covers post order requirements to families who have children subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).

2. Adoption Inspection - Ofsted

- 2.1 Bracknell Forest Adoption Agency was last inspected by Ofsted in May 2017. The outcome is awaited at the time of writing of this report.

The previous inspection in December 2012 identified areas of strength in the adoption service and concluded that many areas of the service were good or outstanding. However the timescales required for placing children identified as in need of adoption, and the length of time that some assessments of prospective foster carers took to become approved adopters did not meet the requirements set out in the regulations. The numbers of children and prospective adopters involved were very small (both under five) so the impact on percentage figures of those who did not meet the criteria was significant. A copy of the inspection report is available on the Bracknell Forest Council website as well as the OFSTED website. Four recommendations were made which were all appropriately addressed and resolved within the year. Consideration of a shared service with partner adoption agencies followed this and led to the creation of Adopt Berkshire which would be a larger scale adoption agency able to focus entirely on adoption.

The changes in the OFSTED inspection programme mean that the Adoption Service is now inspected as part of the overall Children's Social Care inspection. As part of that inspection the Adoption element will receive an individual grading against the framework. OFSTED's report is due to be published on 14 July 2017

Annex 1

3. Adopt Berkshire

3.1 Adopt Berkshire continue to undertake responsibilities for adoption functions. Four of the Berkshire unitary authorities - Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham - joined to offer one adoption service called Adopt Berkshire. The host authority is the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. This collaborative service commenced on 1st December 2014.

The functions of the Adopt Berkshire Service include:

- 3.2
- Recruiting and assessing a pool of adopters as part of the Berkshire Consortium and presenting them to Adoption Panel for approval.
 - Presenting reports to the Adoption Panel and the Agency Decision Maker on the prospective match of Bracknell Forest children with adopters or other Local Authority children with Bracknell Forest adopters.
 - Supporting Bracknell Forest adopters throughout the adoption process until Adoption Orders are made.
 - Completing in-family adoptions.
 - Sign posting prospective adopters of children from overseas to the service provided by the InterCountry Adoption Centre.
 - Providing all preparation training for prospective adopters.
 - Provide a family finding service for all children who have a plan for adoption.

Other Functions are as follows and remain the responsibility of Bracknell Forest:

- Presenting reports to the Agency Decision Maker for children who are looked after and who have adoption as their care plan.
- Providing post adoption support to any adoptive families living in Bracknell Forest and for three years following the making of an adoption order for those children who have been placed by Bracknell Forest.
- Providing support to families where children have been made the subject of a Special Guardianship Order by Bracknell Forest and of families who live within Bracknell Forest, 3 years after the granting of a Special Guardianship Order.
- Providing counselling for adopted adults.
- Providing mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members.

3.3 The other functions are provided through the arrangements with the other five Berkshire Unitary Authorities acting as a Consortium and also through the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS), hosted by the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead who also maintain the Adoption Panel. The annual report by the BAAS is attached for reference (appendix 3)

The Family Placement Team

3.4 During this twelve month period the team has remained stable. Rosanne Turner has remained in post as Team Manager. The Assistant Team Manager, Eszter Kovacs, has been on maternity leave since June 2016, and her post has been covered by Sam Howard, a social worker in the team. Sam's post has been covered on a contract basis. One team member moved to the Duty Team in order to obtain frontline experience, and was permanently replaced by a social worker from the Duty Team.

Annex 1

4. Summary of Bracknell Forest Activity

4.1 For the twelve month period 1st April 2016 - 31st March 2017:

- Six children had plans for adoption at some stage in 2016-17.
- Three children were placed with adopters.
- Six children had Placement Orders made.
- Four children had Adoption Orders granted.
- Five children were placed with adopters awaiting the granting of an Adoption Order.
- No child was placed for adoption from overseas.
- There were no disruptions for a child who Bracknell Forest or Adopt Berkshire placed with prospective adopters.
- Bracknell Forest placed one child under a Foster to Adopt arrangement.

4.2 Adoption Scorecard and performance

4.2.1 The Adoption Scorecards were introduced as part of a new approach to address delays in the adoption system, set out in 'An action plan for adoption: tackling delay' (March 2012). There are 152 Local Authorities included as part of this analysis. The scorecard identifies various timeframes related to adoption and benchmarks this against other Local Authorities.

4.2.2 The last adoption scorecard published was in 2016, and is based on data from 2012-15. Therefore only data submitted by Bracknell Forest Council up until March 2015 is included within this 3 year analysis and trend. This is therefore very much a look back on how we have historically performed and we are able to benchmark ourselves against other Local Authorities.

4.2.3 The average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, for children who have been adopted, had decreased from 630 days in the previous scorecard to 593 days. This number was higher than desired but contextualised by the fact that it was a small cohort and two of the children were a school aged sibling group, in addition to children who have complex histories and additional needs. Section 14 of the Adopt Berkshire annual report for 2016-17 shows a significant decrease to 210 days for the 3 children placed in this period.

4.2.4 It is worth noting that there has been a reduction nationally in the number of younger children achieving legal permanence through adoption. There has continued to be a drive to approve adopters which has led to adopters giving consideration to children who are older and potentially with additional needs who have been in care for a longer period. It is therefore one hypothesis that the benchmarking figures in relation to the above will have shifted in the opposite direction and children may appear to have waited longer to achieve permanence through adoption. However, this does not tell the full story as there is evidence in Bracknell Forest that we have continued with adoption plans for children with additional needs and robust family finding has meant that children have found their forever family and desired outcomes achieved.

4.2.5 Post Adoption

Prior to the creation of the new Adopt Berkshire adoption service it was agreed that the post-adoption service would remain within the Family Placement team. It is provided by an experienced social worker with support from a Family Worker.

Annex 1

4.3 The functions of the Post Adoption Service include:

- a) Providing post adoption support, advice, training to any adoptive families, living in Bracknell Forest and for three years following the making of an adoption order, for those children who have been placed by Bracknell Forest.
- b) Sign posting prospective adopters of children from overseas to the service provided by the Inter Country Adoption Centre in Barnet.
- c) Providing access to adoption records, counselling for adopted adults.
- d) Providing intermediation service for adopted adults.
- e) Providing advice and information as well as signposting for birth relatives of family members.
- f) Providing advice, support and training to families who have a Special Guardianship Order in the Bracknell Forest area and for three years following the making of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO), as well as providing ongoing support for those who live in the Bracknell Forest area 3 years post order.
- g) Direct work with children and families requiring therapeutic intervention.
- h) Provision of children's groups 'SPLAT' and monthly group for families with under 5's.
- i) Advice and support to BFC social workers and family finders in supporting future plans for children requiring adoption/SGO and completing their support plans; transition to new homes; advice regarding Life Books and Later Life Letters; therapeutic support for children and families.
- j) Joint work providing therapeutic support to families via the Berkshire Adoption Advice and Consultation Service (BAACS).
- k) Applications to the Adoption Support Fund.

5. Summary of Post Adoption Activity

5.1 For the year 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017:

There were no disruptions for a child who Bracknell Forest placed with prospective adopters. There have also been no disruptions of children who are living in the Bracknell Forest area who are 3 years post adoption order, and for whom Bracknell Forest now holds responsibility.

- 5.2 Post adoption services include the counselling of adopted adults and mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members and requests for these services have continued to increase following the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The service continues to provide information and support to a wide and varied population. Post Adoption services range from low level provision such as newsletters

Annex 1

and support groups to more specialised or individual services, such as financial support; support over contact; direct work; therapeutic provision and liaison with schools. Where further specialist services are required the post adoption support worker can signpost adopters to the most suitable resource, such as CAMHS, the Post Adoption Centre and other provision.

- 5.3 During the year, seventeen new requests for a service have been received from adults in relation to access to birth records or mediation. Some cases can be quite complex and the agency continues to offer advice and support to these clients.
- 5.4 Eight adults received a service as a birth relative. Most of these were seeking advice and support around tracing or contact with relatives who have been adopted (now adults) or a relative who is currently a child who has been adopted.
- 5.5 Approximately 70 children and families have received a post adoption support service involving social work support from Bracknell Forest during this period and 34 remain open, including 24 who are in receipt of the Adoption Support Fund. Some families are given a high level of support to prevent adoption breakdown. The work in this area is steady with increased emphasis on the need to support new placements of children. Five have received support pre-Order, and this has included home visits and attendance at meetings, such as the child's review. The authority works with adoptive families to support placements and whilst this may on occasions require individual work the general approach is to work with the family as a whole.
- 5.6 On-going liaison and support for two families from other local authorities (OLA) living in the Bracknell area either pre order, or pre the end of the 3 year support provision, is currently in place. This provides a proactive approach to adoptive families within the area, who may be in difficulty.
- 5.7 Twelve Special Guardianship Order families have requested and received a service to support them caring for their children.
- 5.8 Support to social workers for children who have plans for adoption and SGO is a significant role for the post adoption social worker. Advising on support plans, providing advice for families and workers to support a smooth transition pre-order has been an important factor in securing / supporting plans for older children.
- 5.9 The details of adoptive and SGO families, who are not directly receiving a service, are held on the post order database and these receive invites to training, groups and events.
- 5.10 Adoption allowances are being paid in respect of 20 children due to their specific needs and to 49 children who have a Special Guardianship Order in place. Following the increase in the number of Special Guardianship Orders in recent years there has been a sharp increase in the number of Special Guardianship allowances being paid to families.
- 5.11 Joint work with the social workers for two children where there have been safeguarding concerns have taken place. This has included child protection issues.
- 5.12 The post-adoption worker continues to take a central role with the Berkshire Adoption Advice and Consultation Service (BAACS) which is a collaboration between a clinical psychologist and the post-adoption workers from Bracknell Forest and Wokingham. The costs are shared between the Berkshire authorities. There continues to be a steady number of referrals to this service.

Annex 1

- 5.13 The service is keen where possible to frontload support to families and some of the work involves securing therapy for parents of older children pre-order, which has been a key part of this service and supported the successful placements of children.
- 5.14 The post adoption worker continues to work with schools and the Behaviour Support Team (BST) as and when required to address any issues that arise for children who have been adopted. This service is universally provided to any child who is known to be adopted. Prior to an adoption order, the child is Looked After so the school will invariably be aware of the change of status when the adoption order is granted. However, families who move into the area may choose not to identify the child as adopted and will only seek support if or when it is required. This work is also available to SGO families. The Pupil Premium is now available for schools to use to support Adopted children and those subject to a Special Guardianship Order and schools sometimes require support with this.
- 5.15 Support is also provided in signposting families to independent educational support via the Parent Participation Service. Additional support is given in the form of reports for requests for children seeking to achieve an Education, Health and Care Plan, alongside support at SEN reviews when requested.
- 5.16 Section 6 of the Children and Families Act 2014, inserts a new Section 4B into the Adoption and Children Act 2002 that places a duty on local authorities to provide information to adoptive parents and potential adoptive parents regarding the support services available in the local authority's area. A duty is also placed on local authorities to provide details of all other responsibilities and services offered such as the right to request a needs assessment, under this and other relevant legislation.
- 5.17 The Family Placement Team is involved in the preparation of reports for court in respect of Special Guardianship applications along with the child's social worker (where the child is looked after), and in the provision of Special Guardianship support services once the Order has been granted.

6. Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

- 6.1 In January 2013 the Department of Education published a report 'Further Action for Adoption - Finding more loving homes' which set out further proposals for attracting adopters and to improving the support to adoptive families. This led to the Adoption Support Fund being prototyped by 10 Local Authorities to generate sustainable improvement to the assessment and therapeutic support to adoptive families. In essence it was felt that some families who were in need of extensive therapeutic support in order to adopt some children with complex needs were either being put off or not receiving the support required as the services were often costly. The DfE wished to remove this barrier and in March 2015, with refined funding criteria, the Adoption Support Fund was set up and available to all 152 Local Authorities. In 2016 it was also made available to children of Intercountry adoptions and on Special Guardianship Orders who had been in LA care prior to the making of the Order. A cap of £5000 per child per annum was introduced in 2016.
- 6.2 Local Authorities can apply for funding for families following completion of an assessment and identification of a therapeutic support package for children and/or their adoptive families.
- 6.3 All of the applications made by Bracknell Forest to date have been successful, and at the end of March 2017, 26 children were in receipt of funding for therapeutic services.

Annex 1

In addition some of these children have had updated assessments and further applications for funding.

7. Intercountry Adoption Arrangements

7.1 Bracknell Forest has a Service Level Agreement with the InterCountry Adoption Centre to provide an adoption service for those seeking to adopt from overseas. The Centre provides prospective intercountry 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. The Centre assesses prospective adopters, who will be presented to their 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. For a variety of reasons the demand for intercountry adoptions has fallen in recent years.

8. Special Guardianship

8.1 The Family Placement Team is involved in the preparation of reports for court in Special Guardianship applications along with the child's social worker (where the child is looked after), and in the provision of Special Guardianship support services once the order has been granted. Alongside this the Family Placement Team endeavours to carry out joint initial home visits with the children's social workers where a family identifies themselves as potential families to care permanently for children as Special Guardians.

8.2 In this reporting period, forty Special Guardianship assessments were requested, which was a significant increase on previous years and reflects the increase in Care Proceedings and the courts requirement that any potentially suitable family members are assessed. Of the forty started, eight ceased at different stages, eg applicants' withdrew. Two were not recommended following assessment. Seventeen Special Guardianship Orders were granted during this year. A number of the Orders made included Supervision Orders or Child in Need plans, to provide support to the child and family in the early stages of the placement. The Post Adoption service provides ongoing services as requested.

9. Developments 2016 - 2017

9.1 As a result of the national focus on adoption, Bracknell Forest has continued to work towards ensuring the imposed changes to regulations and legislation are adhered to. The aim of these changes has been to reduce potential barriers and reduce delay in approving families as adopters and thereby increasing the placements available for children waiting.

9.2 The Adoption Support Fund has been well utilised throughout the year, including for second time applications for children and families with ongoing therapeutic support needs, and has resulted in the provision of support packages that have helped to stabilise placements and improve outcomes for children.

10. Strengths and Plans for 2017-18

10.1 - Securing placements for adoption of older children and children with additional needs.

Annex 1

- Effective use of the Adoption support fund for therapeutic support for families of children placed for adoption and adopted.
 - Effective liaison between BFC and Adopt Berkshire include an early warning system to enable searches to be undertaken for children earlier and a reduction in delay.
 - High quality Child Permanence Reports, matching reports and adoption support plans for children.
 - Skilled workforce to be able to deliver adoption support to families.
 - Regular reviews of permanency plans for children to ensure they have the appropriate plan and there is minimal delay in achieving permanence through the appropriate means.
 - Adopters receive Restorative Parenting training to support them to provide consistent parenting.
- 10.2 The Department for Education published 'Adoption - A vision for change' in March 2016. Within this document there is a 4 year plan to improve the timeliness of placements and outcomes for children. There are plans for future legislative changes to ensure that quality and stability of care are prioritised and properly considered. The report makes clear the vision for all Local Authorities and adoption agencies to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) by 2020. The RAA development fund of £14m has been made available between 2016-18 to support the implementation. There will also be support from a centrally procured delivery partner to assist, challenge and coach the RAA. The Department of Education has been very clear that the consortia arrangements that exist between a number of adoption agencies and may include shared training, preparation groups, information events and panels does not constitute a RAA and the requirement is for there to be genuine innovation and collaboration.
- 10.3 Bracknell Forest has been progressive in relation to the regionalisation agenda having collaborated with Wokingham, West Berkshire and Windsor and Maidenhead to form Adopt Berkshire. However, as the request is to seek further regionalisation, a project board was created for the Thames Valley area, and is well underway in the establishment of Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) in December 2017. ATV will be hosted by Oxfordshire, and is a shared service model between seven local authorities (Bracknell Forest, Oxfordshire, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, Swindon and Reading) in partnership with two Voluntary Adoption Agencies (PACT and Barnardos).
- 10.4 ATV will provide adoption, post adoption and Special Guardianship support services across the geographical area of the participating local authorities. It aims to deliver better outcomes for children and adopters whilst also reducing costs through economies of scale for the local authorities participating. Adopt Thames Valley is being developed with the support of the Department for Education, who have also provided grant funding for the set up.
- 10.5 The key benefits of the Adopt Thames Valley Model are:
- a) improved outcomes for children through the availability of a larger pool of adopters;
 - b) improved ability to place harder to place children for adoption (e.g. older children, children with disabilities, sibling groups and BME children);
 - c) improved experience for adopters through quicker matches with children who need placements;
 - d) better value for local authorities through economies of scale in the recruitment and assessment process for adopters;
 - e) potential savings for local authorities through placing children with adopters more quickly (i.e. saving foster care costs);

Annex 1

f) improved adoption and Special Guardianship support services across a wider geographical area.

11. Training and Development

The team has continued to learn and share the procedures and skills related to post adoption and Special Guardianship. Specialist knowledge in the team includes Attachment and Loss, Theraplay and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) Level One. The team also provides and delivers training to carers, which is open to adopters and Special Guardians.

12 Complaints / Allegations / Compliments

No complaints or allegations have been received in respect of adoption and post adoption support in the 12 month period. However we have received a number of compliments regarding the service, the support provided, the experience and skill of the post adoption social worker, and the support groups provided for adopted children and their parents.

13 Summary

- 13.1 2016-17 has seen a number of successes in relation to the timely placement of children for adoption, and the number of Special Guardianship Orders made to provide permanence for children.
- 13.2 Given the government's regionalisation agenda, the adoption service provided by Adopt Berkshire will change significantly with the establishment of Adopt Thames Valley later this year, with the aim of making the adoption system more efficient with shared resources.
- 13.3 The post adoption element of the service, which has remained with Bracknell Forest Council to date, is ever increasing in terms of volume of work, and will also undergo change with the move of both post adoption and Special Guardianship support to Adopt Thames Valley in December 2017.
- 13.4 There continues to be a decline in plans for adoption, usually in favour of Special Guardianship at the direction of the courts.
- 13.5 This year has seen the close working relationship between BFC and Adopt Berkshire continue. This includes monthly meetings where there is discussion regarding the progress of family finding for children who are the subject of a Placement Order and also early identification of children who may have a plan of adoption. This ensures that there is minimum delay and that children are placed for adoption as soon as possible.
- 13.6 Overall, demands on this area of the Family Placement Team have increased over the past year, with an increase in the number of children coming into LA care and the requirements to reduce timescales for children across the range of services. Close monitoring and tracking of the service has been on-going and processes arising from changes in regulations and legislation are already embedded in team practice. In all of this however, we remain ever mindful that the needs of children are paramount and that the quality of assessments and matching of children to the right family remains the priority.

Annex 1

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Date: 30th May 2017