

BRACKNELL FOREST ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT

1st April 2017 - 31st March 2018

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This end of year report provides details of adoption activity from 1st April 2017 - 31st March 2018 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 Thames Valley Annual Report 2017-18 (Appendix 1), the Adopt Thames Valley Statement of Purpose 2017-18 (appendix 2) and the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service Annual Report 2017-18. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context in which Bracknell Forest Council works together with Adopt Thames Valley as an Adoption Agency.
- 1.3 Since 1st December 2017 Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) has worked in partnership, under a service level agreement, with Adopt Thames Valley. Adopt Thames Valley provides a regional Adoption Agency Service which covers the recruitment of adopters, family finding for children who have a plan of adoption and the post adoption service. The Special Guardianship service currently remains the responsibility of Bracknell Forest Council.
- 1.4 Bracknell Forest Council ensures that children are put first in the adoption process. The focus remains primarily for children to achieve legal permanence where possible.

2. Adoption Inspection - Ofsted

- 2.1 Bracknell Forest Adoption Agency was last inspected by Ofsted in April/May 2017, as part of the Single Inspection of Children's services. The overall grading for Children's Services was Good, with a grading of Outstanding for Children Looked After and Achieving Permanence, including Adoption Performance.

3. Adopt Berkshire and Adopt Thames Valley

- 3.1 Adopt Berkshire continued to undertake responsibilities for adoption functions until December 2017, when they became part of Adopt Thames Valley. Adopt Thames Valley is a regional adoption agency (RAA) which is a partnership of seven local authorities and three voluntary adoption agencies, working together to recruit and support a range of adoptive families, finding families for children both locally and nationally. The regional agency is led by Oxfordshire LA, and in addition to Bracknell Forest, includes West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, Reading and Swindon. The voluntary agencies are Barnardos, PACT and the Cornerstone Partnership.
- 3.2 Lorna Hunt, Chief Officer chairs the regional meetings with Adopt Thames Valley and this is a key role in relation to governance on behalf of the RAA. It is acknowledged that there have been some initial teething troubles in the formation of the RAA particularly in relation to the numbers of children with plans for adoption coming into

the RAA but here are robust plans in place to manage this to ensure there is equality for all.

3.3 The functions of the Adopt Thames Valley Service include:

- Recruiting and assessing a pool of adopters 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.
- 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 counselling for adopted adults.
- Providing mediation services for both adopted adults and birth family members.

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 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.

4. The Family Placement Team

4.1 During this twelve month period the team has remained stable. Rosanne Turner has remained in post as Team Manager, and two Assistant Team Managers, Eszter Kovacs (part-time) and Sam Howard remain in post. There are 5 Social Workers in post, and one locum Social Worker covering a vacancy. The team also has 3 Family Workers and a Recruitment and Publicity Officer for Fostering. The post adoption Social Worker moved to Adopt Thames Valley in December 2017, and continues to manage Bracknell post adoption work.

5. Summary of Bracknell Forest Activity

5.1 For the twelve month period 1st April 2017 - 31st March 2018:

- 9 children had plans for adoption at some stage in 2017-18.
- 3 children were placed with adopters.
- 6 children had Placement Orders made.

- 2 children had Adoption Orders granted.
- 5 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/Adopt Thames Valley placed with prospective adopters.
- Bracknell Forest placed 1 child under a Foster to Adopt arrangement.

Adoption Scorecard and performance

- 5.2 The Adoption Scorecards were introduced as part of an 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.
- 5.3 The last adoption scorecard published was in 2017, and is based on data from 2013-16. Therefore only data submitted by Bracknell Forest Council up until March 2016 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.
- 5.4 It is acknowledged that the data shows that children may wait longer to be adopted. However, this is because of the local authority's desire to put children first and ensure the right outcomes for children are achieved. This is reflected in the letter received from Nadhim Zahawi MP, Secretary of State for Children and Families in May 2018 (Annex 4). However, attention should be drawn to Annex 5 which is the response from Nikki Edwards, Director of Children and Young People and Learning who provides a robust response and clarity that adoption remains a priority even for children for older children with complex needs. The priority should always remain the right plan for each child to be prioritised.

OFSTED INSPECTION

- 5.6 The adoption service was inspected as part of the single inspection framework in May 2018 with the report published in July 2018. Adoption functions were graded as 'Outstanding' during this inspection. The report stated the following, *'The Local Authority is absolutely dedicated to pursuing adoption for children, including those for whom it is considered harder to find adoptive placements...As a consequence of effective family finding and the quality of post adoption support, there have been no adoption disruptions in the two years preceding the inspection.'*

6. Post Adoption

Prior to the setting up of the regional adoption agency, the post adoption service remained within the Family Placement team. It was provided by an experienced Social Worker with support from a Family Worker. This Social Worker has now moved to Adopt Thames Valley, and the post adoption services are provided by the regional adoption service. This has benefits for adoptive families and adopted adults in relation to a wider pool of shared resources such as training and support groups.

The functions of the Post Adoption Service include:

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- 6.1
- a) Providing post adoption support, advice and 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 InterCountry Adoption Centre in Barnet.
 - c) Providing access to adoption records and counselling for adopted adults.
 - d) Providing intermediary service for adopted adults.
 - e) Providing advice and information as well as signposting for birth relatives of family members.
 - 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 regarding future plans for children requiring adoption and their support plans; transition to their new homes; advice regarding Life Journey Books and Later Life Letters; therapeutic support for children and families.
 - k) Applications to the Adoption Support Fund.

7. Adoption Support Fund (ASF)

- 7.1 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 establishment of the Adoption Support Fund 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 were 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.
- 7.2 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.
- 7.3 All of the applications made by Bracknell Forest to date have been successful, and at the end of March 2018, 29 children were in receipt of funding for therapeutic services. In addition some of these children have had updated assessments and further applications for funding.

8. InterCountry Adoption Arrangements

- 8.1 The InterCountry Adoption Centre provides 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.

9. Developments 2017 - 2018

- 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. We work closely with Adopt Thames Valley to track children with plans for adoption, to ensure these are progressed without unnecessary delay.
- 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.
- 9.3 The most significant development was the successful move from Adopt Berkshire to the larger regional agency Adopt Thames Valley, which is detailed earlier in the report. This gives children the benefit of a wider pool of prospective adopters, and prospective adopters, adoptive families and adopted adults the benefits of a wider, shared pool of resources.

10 Plans for 2018-19

- 10.1 Adoption remains high on the government agenda. The government is committed to putting in place processes and support to Adoption Agencies with the primary purpose of speeding up the adoption process for children.
- 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 was 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.
- 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 was to seek further regionalisation, Adopt Thames Valley (ATV) was established in December 2017. ATV is hosted by Oxfordshire, and is a shared service 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 provides 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 was developed with the support of the Department for Education, who have also provided grant funding for the set up.
- 10.5 Over the year there is a need to continue to refine the Adopt Thames Valley model in order to ensure effective outcomes are achieved for children with a plan for adoption and children can achieve legal permanence within a timeframe that is appropriate for each child. One area that the OFSTED inspection did highlight was the variable quality of Life Journey Books created for children with a plan of adoption. As a result an action plan was put in place to address this. As a result these books are now undertaken in greater co production with adopters and signed off by team managers to ensure quality.
- 10.6 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);
 - f) improved adoption and Special Guardianship support services across a wider geographical area.

11 Complaints / Allegations / Compliments

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 prior to the transfer to Adopt Thames Valley. No complaints or allegations have been received in respect of adoption and post adoption support in the 12 month period.

12 Summary

- 12.1 2017-18 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.
- 12.2 Given the government's regionalisation agenda, the adoption service provided by Adopt Berkshire will change significantly with the establishment of Adopt Thames Valley in December 2017, with the aim of making the adoption system more efficient with shared resources.
- 12.3 The post adoption element of the service is also now part of Adopt Thames Valley, providing adopters and adopted adults with a wider range of services and access to shared expertise and resources.

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- 12.4 There continues to be a decline in plans for adoption, usually in favour of Special Guardianship at the direction of the courts.
- 12.5 This year has seen a close working relationship develop between BFC and Adopt Thames Valley. This includes monthly meetings to discuss and track 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.
- 12.6 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.

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Family Placement Team

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Looked After Children

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